



Australian
Garden
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200 years of camellias
in Australia

Catalan modernism in
north Queensland

Miramar Prison Garden's
hippopotamus



Clare Gleeson

The Mt Crawford Prison Garden, Wellington, New Zealand

A place for learning and reflection

Mount Crawford
Prison vegetable
garden, on
Wellington's Miramar
Peninsula, 1950, image
from the Alexander
Turnbull Library,
Wellington

Few gardens are home to a hippopotamus but there is a reason the Miramar Prison Garden is the perfect place for this one. From 1926 until 2012 the garden at Mt Crawford Prison was cultivated by guests of His or Her Majesty, growing food for the prison kitchen as well as those caged in Wellington Zoo – hence the hippo. Now a community garden, reminders of its sombre past are all around those who till the soil there today.

Wellington's new prison

In 1923 when the farmland at Mt Crawford on the Miramar Peninsula was identified as the site for Wellington's new prison, locals strongly opposed the idea, saying they would rather have a park on such a prime site. Despite their protests, a year later the land was cleared and the prison built.

Mt Crawford was one of four New Zealand prisons built by Irish builder, Michael Hawkins, who had learned the masonry trade in California. Hawkins also built Invercargill, Waikeria (near Te Awamutu) and Christchurch Men's Prisons. Mt Crawford was

built with ‘progressive intentions’, which meant combining hard labour with trades training. The the building blocks for the prison were made by local prisoners, including sand from the city’s south coast. Its first wing opened in 1926.

The garden’s extensive greenhouse with cold frames on both sides was constructed at the same time as the prison. The utilitarian stone retaining walls and paths were built by prisoners, as were the ornate pond, fountain and decorative concrete planters. Among the glass, nails, corrugated iron and other rubbish found by the current gardeners were clay bricks with the distinctive and chilling prison arrow pressed into them.

On the opposite side of the road to the prison buildings, the prison garden was not behind walls, so was easy for outsiders to access. In 1936 a Chinese man pleaded guilty through an interpreter to leaving letters, tobacco and opium in the garden for his imprisoned countrymen who worked there. And more recently, a former local confessed, ‘We had so much fun raiding the prison gardens as kids. Sunday was visitor day so we had the fields to ourselves... we ate a fair few tomatoes.’ Today, high in a tree overlooking the garden, is a fort built by a prisoner’s son while he waited for his father to return.

During both world wars conscientious objectors were imprisoned at Mt Crawford and frequently worked in the garden. Ormond Burton, who had been decorated in the First World War, was an outspoken opponent of the next one and, despite his war record, was imprisoned in Mt Crawford. He was working in the prison gardens when the ships carrying the 2nd Echelon left in May 1940. He wrote:

The great ships passed immediately below the prison garden. Some twenty-five years before I had been with the cheering transports that swung out from Mudros to the beaches of Gallipoli where the gallant companies were torn to bloody shreds by the bursting shrapnel and the hail of machine-gun fire. In my mind’s eye I could see the battles that were to come and how the strong and exultant young men who crowded these decks would be broken under the barrages. I found it very moving, as one always must when one senses the willingness of men to suffer and die for a cause that seems to them so right. So, standing in the garden in my prison dress of field grey, I gave the general salute with my long-handled shovel – very reverently!¹

¹ Ormond Burton. *In Prison*. Wellington, 1945, quoted in John Pratt, *The Prison Diary of A C Barrington*, Dunedin, 2016, p. 13



A The greenhouse, 1950, image from the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington
B/C Views of the greenhouse today, photos Clare Gleeson



Left The pond and foundation were made by prisoners



Right Garden beds photos Clare Gleeson

In 2012 the prison was decommissioned and all prisoners were transferred to Rimutaka Prison. Then began the debate as to what was to happen to the prison and the site it occupied. A report by Heritage New Zealand recommended that the prison be designated a historical building because of its social, historical, architectural and technological values. However, the Department of Corrections declared the prison surplus to requirements and tasked Land Information New Zealand (LINZ) with disposal of the property. In 2013 a group of ‘guerrilla gardeners’ battled to save the 13-ha site from wealthy developers and turn it into a public reserve. In 2014 LINZ gave the community garden a lease of .44 ha, a much smaller area than the extensive area the prison’s gardens occupied originally.

The gardens today

These days a spirit of optimism, not despair, imbues the garden, even though the site’s future remains uncertain: Mt Crawford is close to the city and there are moves afoot to build hundreds of houses on it. The puriri tree at the garden’s centre is loved by both the tui birds and the gardeners who sit under it catching up during a break from their hard labour. Here those who garden the ‘wild garden’, an area of plots without hard boundaries and those favouring the ‘cemetery garden’, an area of regular

redwood-framed garden beds, can compare notes over a cup of tea. As well as individual plots there are communal ones such as the strawberry bed and picking garden. Everyone is encouraged to come to the monthly working bee for the garden’s common areas.

The garden nurtures memories as well as plants. ‘We don’t get a lot of gardening done because we have this constant parade of people through,’ smiles Patty Zais, the garden’s manager. As well as dog walkers, trampers and hopeful foragers, there are visitors with connections to the abandoned prison. Prison guards, families of past prisoners and ex-prisoners all visit.’ I see a lot of people coming back up here to try and reconcile their past,’ Zais observes.

A recent garden visitor was ‘Rambo’ an 80-year-old prison guard who ran the kitchen and was the cheesemaker. (As well as growing food for themselves and the animals in the zoo, the prison gardeners kept pigs and cows and had a dairy.) He told Zais of an Irish prisoner who cried when he tasted the cheese Rambo had made because it tasted just like that back in Ireland.

Zais is the third manager of the garden, founded by John Overton in 2013, after the prison closed. Inspired by memories of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Overton also created a spiral amphitheatre garden within the grounds, which he envisioned



as a meditative walk. When Overton moved south, Murray Robinson took over with two rules – no chemicals and no meetings – quickly adding a third – have fun. Robinson stepped back two years ago but still visits the garden regularly.

Unlike the garden of the past, this garden has a strong community connection. Nearby arborists leave piles of mulch on the roadside for locals to help themselves; the Eastern Bays Scouts come to mulch and weed; and Fulton Hogan, a large construction company, recently sent 12 men for a morning's work to trim, mulch and install a gate donated by Bunnings. The garden is also a community site for composting, with three piles of compost at different stages labelled 'Feed Me', 'Compost Curing' and 'Black Gold'. 'People come up bringing their little box of compost and they feel part of it,' says Izzy Shnaidman, a 'wild gardener' who works his plot with his partner, Annika Kliever.

Prisoners were offered horticultural training as part of their rehabilitation, although their focus became primarily how to grow one, forbidden, crop: yes, marijuana! Education is also part of the garden today. Novice gardeners quickly learn the necessity of watering, weeding and feeding their plants: lessons that are much more apparent in individual plots than in a shared one. 'We learn from each other,' explains Zais, who is

trialling using an old bath to grow raspberries. Another member is teaching the others about crop rotation. Workshops are held regularly. New Zealand history is now a compulsory subject in schools and a class from the local primary school visited recently to learn about the site and to experience the garden.

An unfortunate link between the old and the new gardens is the impact of crime. Because of its isolated location at the top of Mt Crawford, theft is a problem, not just of equipment but of crops. Fortunately, one thing unlikely to be stolen is the hippo. Made of wood it weighs 200kg and had to be cut into pieces and then reassembled after being moved from Wellington Zoo where it had lived previously. In the now peaceful setting of the Miramar Prison Garden, it lives alongside the current gardeners and the ghosts of gardeners past. Hopefully, it will not be disturbed by the march of urbanisation.

One of the gardeners, John Rainforth and his granddaughter Zoe Winthrop astride the hippopotamus in the Miramar Prison Garden, photo Clare Gleeson

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