

# THE *Maintenance* OF HERITAGE ASSETS

## INFORMATION SHEET 9.1

# HERITAGE GARDENS AND GROUNDS

### INTRODUCTION

Gardens and grounds require maintenance much more frequently than buildings. They are also different because they contain elements which change with the seasons, grow and die. However the basic maintenance principles are the same for both: understanding what is significant about the place, and taking action to conserve that significance.

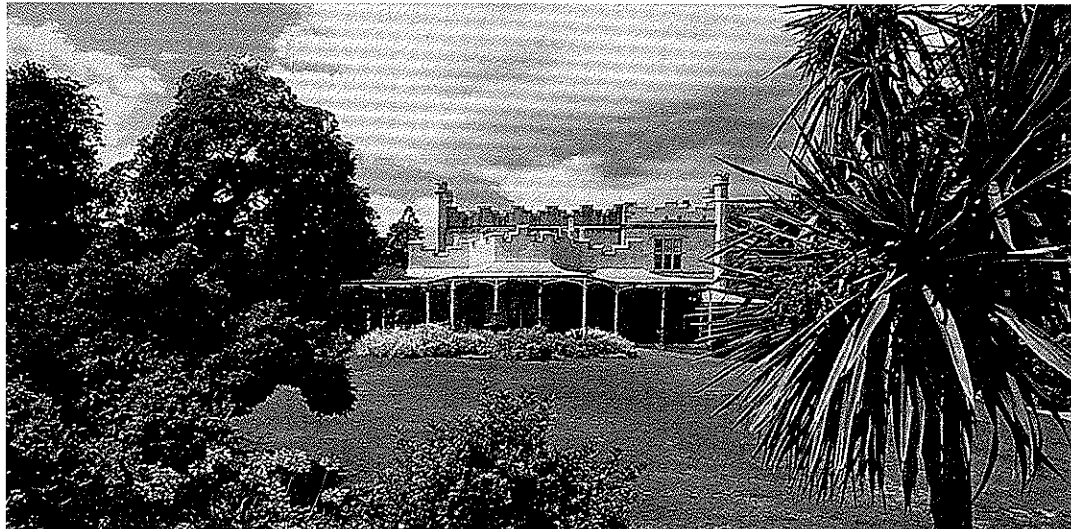
The maintenance of heritage gardens and grounds should be based on good general horticultural practice rather than current fashion. The concept of the original garden and significant subsequent developments should always be respected. The

maintenance program should be designed to ensure that the place is viable into the future.

As with all maintenance, guidelines are no substitute for specialist advice from people experienced in horticulture and heritage landscape conservation.

Conservation management policies for gardens and grounds should be included in any conservation plan for the buildings they surround.

*Vaucluse House in Sydney retains a significant part of its original nineteenth century setting*



*Photograph courtesy of Historic Houses Trust of NSW*

## UNDERSTANDING THE PLACE

Gardens and grounds may be important both in their own right and as settings for heritage buildings. Because landscape elements alter not only with the seasons but also over periods of many years, understanding will seldom come quickly.

This continual change means that the maintenance of a garden must always proceed cautiously, in conjunction with ongoing assessment. For this reason it is important to keep records of the place as it develops and new evidence is found. It is equally important not to remove evidence which helps in understanding or interpreting the site.

## MAJOR PLANTING ELEMENTS

### Mature trees

Many historic gardens feature mature trees planted as avenues, border plantings or specimens. The original design and character of the grounds or garden may be defined by these trees, and correct care of them is essential to maintain the significance of the garden.

Where there are gaps in formal planting, it may be possible to obtain mature specimens of certain species, such as some palms. However, mature replacement trees may have a limited life, and in many cases it is better to plant young trees. This reinvigorates the landscape and extends its life considerably. Replacing a whole avenue of old trees with young ones will have a visual impact of course, but the end result will be better than replacing them one by one.

### Remnant bushland

The grounds of some old estates are significant for surviving indigenous (locally native) species such as eucalyptus and turpentine trees and their shrub understorey. These may be threatened by:

- excessive compaction of surrounding soil
- erosion
- weed and grass invasion
- inappropriate horticultural practices such as 'whipper snipping' or over-fertilising.

Bush conservation and regeneration techniques are available to help the long term survival of these native areas. These techniques include:

- fencing off the area temporarily or permanently to allow natural regeneration
- instituting a weed removal program
- collecting seed and growing stock for replanting.

## Undesirable planting

Heritage gardens should continue to be planted with trees and shrubs which reflect the original species used in the design. The recent popularity of Australian native plants has led to the introduction of species such as *Grevillea* in heritage gardens which were originally planted with exotic species. The original character of the garden may consequently be lost or obscured.

When replacing or adding plantings, select from the range of species originally present in the garden, or at least from species which are similar in form and character and were in use at the time of the original planting. The pattern of planting in beds, rows or hedging should also match the original.

## Views and vistas

Important views or vistas in a garden can eventually be screened by natural growth of old trees and shrubs, or by inappropriately placed new ones. To reinstate significant views, modify old plantings by thinning or pruning, and remove later intrusive plantings.

## MAINTAINING THE DESIGN

### Landscape features

As well as retaining or replacing original major plantings, the form, materials and detailing of the original landscape design should be conserved. Even if the contents of an old garden bed have changed, the form of the bed should remain.

Don't replace original straight paths or drives with curvilinear paths or drives (or vice versa), or a gravel surface with modern brick paving. Retain and repair old bitumen paths, rather than replacing them with brick or other modern materials.

Don't alter old lawn or garden profiles adjacent to paths. Retain and repair old garden edgings such as tiles; do not re-edge with modern materials such as concrete strips, or inappropriate recycled materials such as old railway sleepers.

In certain cases, modern methods can be used to conserve original elements. Old spade-cut edges to lawns can be preserved using flexible timber or preferably special steel edging fixed beneath the turf level.

When considering landscape design, building maintenance should be taken into account. Gardens and sprinkler systems adjacent to masonry walls can often be the cause of damp problems. The building needs to be carefully investigated to identify all causes of moisture penetration. The removal of gardens and sprinklers or the introduction of adequate drainage can be a lot cheaper than insertion of a damp-proof course.

## Structures and furniture

As a general rule, original garden structures, furniture, fittings and services should be conserved in their original locations. If they must be replaced and the original items are unavailable or unsuitable, a contemporary item may be preferable to a reproduction of an early item which is out of character with the place. In certain cases, reconstruction of original elements may be justified.

## CARE OF LAWNS

A healthy, vigorous sward of grass is the best defence against pests, disease and weeds. Grass requires intensive and continual maintenance throughout the year, including mowing, watering, aerating, fertilising, top dressing, oversowing, weeding and control of pests and diseases.

Although different grass species require different mowing heights, in general older sites are best left with longer grass length especially in areas further from the buildings.

When mowing, take care not to damage brick gutters, edgings, plants or garden ornaments. Avoid mowing grass paths with mowers which are wider than the paths.

The use of brush cutters and whipper snippers by untrained, inexperienced or unsupervised staff can result in damage to garden ornaments and edgings, and destruction of significant plant species.

## CARE OF TREES AND SHRUBS

Pruning of trees and shrubs may be necessary to:

- control size
- improve shape, flowering or fruiting
- remove diseased, dead or dangerous material.

Pruning should not be done as a matter of course, but only after inspection if the need arises. Pruning large trees, especially those of heritage significance, should only be undertaken by a qualified tree surgeon or arborist. Trees should never be lopped back to a stump. Many experienced amateur gardeners will be able to prune small trees and shrubs such as roses.

The use of pruning materials and grass clippings for mulch or compost allows most unwanted bulky material to be recycled on site rather than sent to a tip. These materials also darken quickly to give a traditional dark 'dug earth' look which is often desirable in an old garden. Modern mulches such as wood chips and flake should be used only on areas which are out of sight.

## ANNUAL MAINTENANCE

A proper maintenance program will keep gardens and grounds in good condition at a reasonable cost and avoid the greater expense of major rehabilitation due to years of neglect. The following chart is a guide to a yearly program for maintaining heritage gardens. Naturally, there will be variations from place to place due to climatic factors such as rainfall, frosts, altitude or latitude. There are many reference books containing gardening calendars linked to climatic zones which are readily available.

### Annual grounds maintenance chart

#### September

- Aerate worn lawn areas if necessary
- Gypsum - apply to lawns if necessary
- Lime - apply if lawn soil tests acidic
- Topdress lawn
- Reseed or returf worn areas
- Fertilise lawn/grass areas with organic material such as pelleted poultry manure or use combined topdressing and organic fertiliser

#### October

- Fertilise trees and shrubs
- Lawn weeds - spray with herbicide if excessive (beginning of active growing season)
- Mowing - increase frequency

#### November

- Mowing and watering - gradually increase to full summer program
- Pavements and paths - clear gutters, drains and pits

#### December

- Mowing and watering - weekly
- Disease - check for fungal attack and spray if necessary

#### January

- Mowing and watering - weekly
- Disease - check for fungal attack and spray if necessary

#### February

- Mowing and watering - weekly
- Disease - check for fungal attack and spray if necessary

#### March

- Mowing and watering - gradually tapered off
- Fertilise lawn areas

#### April

- Paths - clear gutters, drains and pits

### May

- Lawn weeds - spray winter weeds (late May)
- Reticulation system - arrange maintenance check with supplier

### June

- Grass maintenance equipment - service and maintenance
- Tree husbandry - staking, protection, replacement

### July

- Grass maintenance equipment - service and maintenance
- Trees - pruning if required
- Site maintenance - repair fences and gates

### August

- Reticulation systems - test prior to warmer months

## FURTHER READING

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