

Australian Garden

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HISTORY



Marion Halligan reflects
Australian flora in the UK
a NZ gardening partnership

Garden historians will doubtless find many illuminating moments in *Useless beauty*, but some might share my wish for a good editor to smooth their way. Cast as a work of accessible and engaging narrative, this book may have had the potential for a wide audience; as it is, I suspect its many virtues will be confined to a reasonably narrow scholarly audience. This seems to undersell the breadth of the subject and the author's considerable research and analysis that underpins the book.

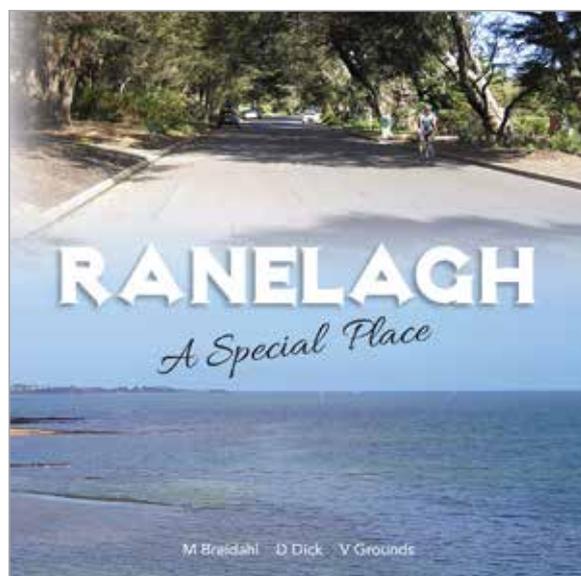
Richard Aitken's latest book *Planting dreams* (2016) is published by NewSouth.

M Braidahl, D Dick and V Grounds (2016)
Ranelagh – a special place

\$45 + \$15 p&p, 200 pp, 200+ illustrations,
available at www.ranelaghpublishinghouse.com

This book tells the story of an early 20th century subdivision in Mount Eliza, Ranelagh Estate on the Mornington Peninsula, designed by Walter Burley Griffin as a seaside holiday destination close to Melbourne and often described as 'the birthplace of Australian modernist architecture'.

Ranelagh Estate is listed on the Victorian Heritage Register and classified by the National Trust of Australia, and is an outstanding example of Griffin's progressive environmental and philosophical ideals. The book has early photographs and documents, maps and walking trails, descriptions of historical events and stories of those who have lived here, built houses and passed through – including the Griffins themselves.

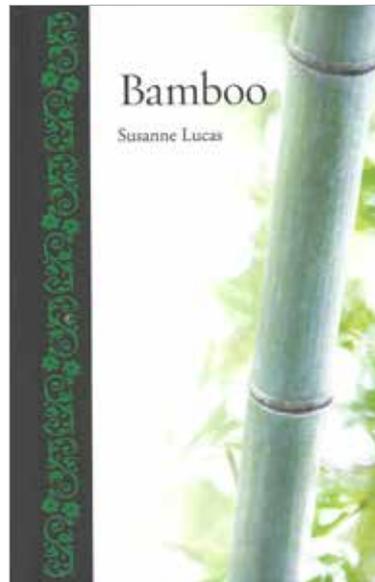
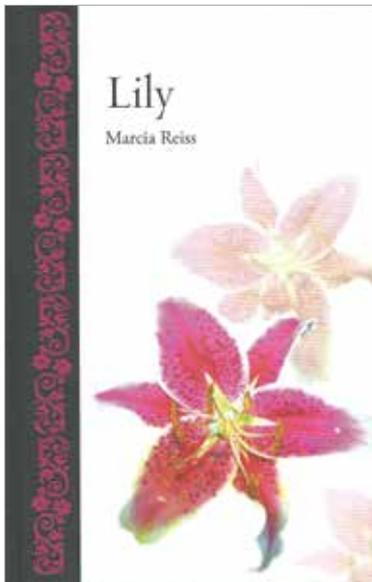


Marcia Reiss *Lily*, Susanne Lucas *Bamboo*,
202 pp and 150 pp, Reaktion Books, London
2013, hardbacks

These two books form part of a series that integrates horticultural and botanical writings on trees, plants and flowers with a much broader historical, social and cultural examination. The richness of these plant 'biographies', the scope of their coverage and the incorporation of fascinating social detail, more than make up for the fact that these books are not actually about how to grow the plants concerned. While neither book is about gardening per se, there is plenty here on gardens. They are worth describing here, even though both are 2013 titles.

Marcia Reiss takes us on a number of interesting excursions into the life and times of the lily. She believes that the genus *Lilium* may have the longest horticultural history of any flower blooming today. The Madonna lily (*L. candidum*) probably pre-dates the Ice Age. Its distinctive trumpet-shaped flower appeared on frescoes at Knossos as far back as c1550 BC, on Minoan pottery, and in Egyptian tombs. It is a key characteristic of ancient Assyrian art. The Arabs incorporated the ideas and techniques of their predecessors (the civilisations of Egypt, Assyria, Persia and Babylon) into their garden culture. Arab botanists documented the bulbs, herbs and flowers collected on their expeditions and that filled the gardens of Arab and Turkish princes. Muslims viewed gardens as a foretaste of Heaven, whereas early Christian ascetics saw Paradise only in Heaven. The most famous surviving Islamic gardens in the West are of course those created by the Moors in Spain: the Alhambra and the Generalife in Granada, dating from the 13th and 14th centuries. Both gardens contain numerous pools and fountains filled with water lilies and lotuses. Like the Arabs, Louis XIV sent explorers across the world to collect exotic lilies, tulips and other bulbs to add to his formal gardens at Versailles.

The lily was not the most popular flower in Britain in the 19th century but after a giant water lily was discovered in British Guiana in 1837, the botanic gardens at Kew (outside London) and Chatsworth (in Derbyshire) raced to cultivate the first flowering specimens. Eventually a specimen of the giant Amazonian water lily (*Victoria amazonica*) was grown by the gardener to the Duke of Devonshire, Joseph Paxton, and a special



greenhouse built at Chatsworth to house it. With plate-like leaves five feet (1.5 metres) in diameter (strong enough to hold Paxton's eight-year-old daughter), the plant became a sensation: it led to a remarkable story of biomimicry and an innovative architectural breakthrough. Paxton was struck by the structure, lightness and strength of these huge leaves and their supporting spines; he mimicked their design in his plan for the grand glasshouse that came to be known as the Crystal Palace, built to house the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry in Hyde Park. In 1851 Paxton created a revolutionary modular structure for the building, a grid of cast iron beams and pillars modelled on the spines of the giant lily pad: it was light but strong enough to support hundreds of large panes of glass and could be assembled off-site and taken apart afterwards.

The great strength of *Lily* is in the chapters covering the lily's many symbolic meanings across cultures and over time. The lily represents many extremes and opposites: sexuality and purity; life and death; seduction and chastity; male and female, pagan and Christian. The lily's sensuality has been captured by William Blake's mythology, Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs and Georgia O'Keefe's paintings, while Puritans were wary of the lily's sensuous fragrance, and Christian art uses lilies to portray purity, chastity and femininity. For the Romans, Greeks and Egyptians, the lily symbolised everlasting life but it can also represent fleeting beauty and death, and is often associated with funerals.

By way of contrast with the emphasis on symbolic meaning in *Lily*, **Susanne Lucas** in *Bamboo* tackles the monumental task of documenting the enormous range of uses we have invented for this supremely valuable

woody plant, thought to be the fastest growing of its kind on earth. Ancient, primitive, and originating in Gondwanaland 55–70 million years ago, bamboo is native to every continent except Antarctica and Europe. With a wide natural distribution, its varieties range from giant vertical skyscrapers to fern-like grassy tufts; it grows in the forests of Brazil, humid lowlands in Indonesia, tropical dry Himalayan regions and temperate regions such as Japan and Korea, and displays what Lucas calls a dazzling diversity. Bamboo is an integral feature of many ecosystems and the social and economic life of numerous communities: it provides food, clothing, medicine, musical instruments and a building material stronger than steel; it stabilises the soil, acts as a bio-filter and as a buffer against noise and undesirable views; it coexists with animals such as the panda, the mountain gorilla, the tortoises of Madagascar. Plant collectors and English gardeners keen on exotica incorporated bamboo into their gardens in the 19th century – the great valley gardens of Cornwall for example, grew bamboos with colourful stems and variegated leaves as a foil for the evergreens around them; in Cévennes a botanical park includes a bamboo labyrinth and groves as tall as 25 metres. In Asian gardens bamboo confers complex symbolism and spiritual significance as well as practical uses.

Each book has a timeline with key moments in the history of the plants; each has useful references to follow up. For the botanists among us, *Bamboo* provides a detailed list of the tribes (the tropical Bambuseae and the temperate woody Arundinarieae) and subtribes of the plant, as well as listing bamboo gardens and arboreta worldwide. *Lily* provides a guide to further reading and contacts for associations specialising in lilies, mail order sources of bulbs, and the names of relevant organisations and websites. As with the other books in this series, *Lily* and *Bamboo* are richly illustrated, contributing greatly to their attractiveness. Describing her struggle to protect her precious lily bulbs from ravenous chipmunks in upstate New York, Marcia Reiss finally triumphed, growing flamboyant tiger lilies as well as modest lilies-of-the-valley, and in so doing realised that she now had 'global history' growing in her garden. The same could be said of anyone who grows bamboo. Both books give us a window onto the rich worldwide stories of remarkable plants.

Dr Maggie Brady is an anthropologist with a keen interest in plants.