

# Lismore Rainforest Botanic Gardens



## ... the beginning

### The Vision

*Extract of speech by Laurie Chelsworth at an undated meeting in Lismore in mid 1990s*

When the Steering Committee was working out who should speak about what at this meeting it was suggested that as I started all this, I should speak about my vision of a Rainforest Botanic Gardens.

Well, I have to admit that my vision was of something along the lines of a conventional Botanic Gardens with one novel feature – that they be specifically rainforest plants.

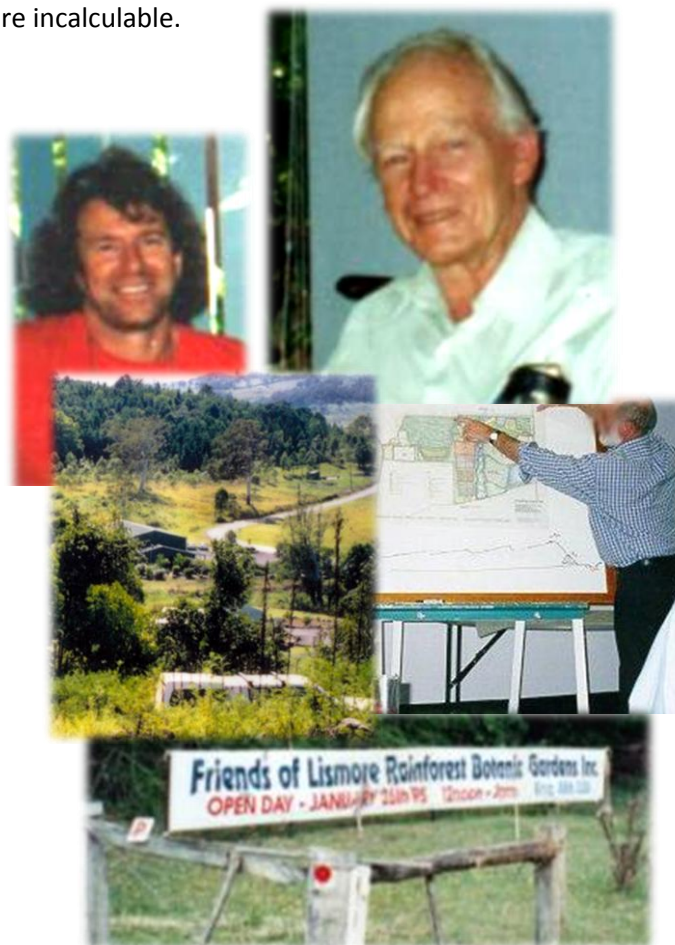
I thought rainforest gardens would be particularly appropriate for this district as it is in about the middle of the range of where rainforests occur from Cape York to Tasmania. We should therefore have the best chance of growing a good selection of species from the entire range.

I found that most Botanic Gardens were of the order of 50 to 100 acres so that was the area I was looking for near Lismore. That was about the extent of my vision.

It probably all started after visiting the Rockhampton Gardens in 1982 – a town of comparable size to Lismore with gardens that a capital city would be proud of. It was time for us to do what Rockhampton has done. My first bright idea was to convert the Lismore Golf Course to botanic gardens. The site itself looked marvelous. It is like a huge amphitheatre and being so close to the town centre it seemed to be idea. I realized that filching the golf course might not be too popular with the golfers but the idea was to provide them with a better course that does not get so boggy in wet weather. This idea came to grief when it was pointed out to me that the boggy black soil was no more suitable for growing rainforest trees than it was for a golf course fairway ..... other sites were examined and in March 1994 a Steering Committee formed .....

It was at this point that the Steering Committee took my very limited vision of a Botanic Gardens and expanded it enormously. The vision now is an entire rainforest ecosystem where people can see all the life of a rainforest, not just the trees....

It is a bold and ambitious concept. But we believe it is something that will really put Lismore on the map and attract visitors from all over Australia and overseas. The benefits to be gained by all sections of the community are incalculable.



### Getting started

Over the years I had the pleasure of having many conversations with Laurie Chelsworth about his dream of setting up a rainforest botanic gardens somewhere around Lismore. It became very clear to me that this was something Laurie really wanted to create. I knew little about rainforests - or botanic gardens - but was inspired by the idea of creating a rainforest botanic garden which could help people learn to love Australian rainforests, and learn how to care for them. I had some experience in starting organisations, and Laurie knew lots of people who wanted to make this dream happen, so he invited people to the first steering group meeting. Laurie was the chairperson and I volunteered to be the secretary.

The steering group agreed to meet every week. Laurie was in charge of creating the agenda for each meeting, and we would usually speak on the phone between meetings to sort out what we thought should happen next.

Laurie was a very gracious, friendly and organised chairperson, and it was very enjoyable working together with him. He was a very tall man and could only walk slowly, because the nerves that controlled his feet were no longer working properly. He had had to make himself special spring shoes to stop his toes from tripping him up -- a good job for a retired engineer. His car was fitted with hand controls, so he could drive in to Lismore to the meetings. Often I would meet him in the council car park and carry his papers while he slowly and carefully walked on his unreliable feet into the meeting space. *Andrew Willoughby*

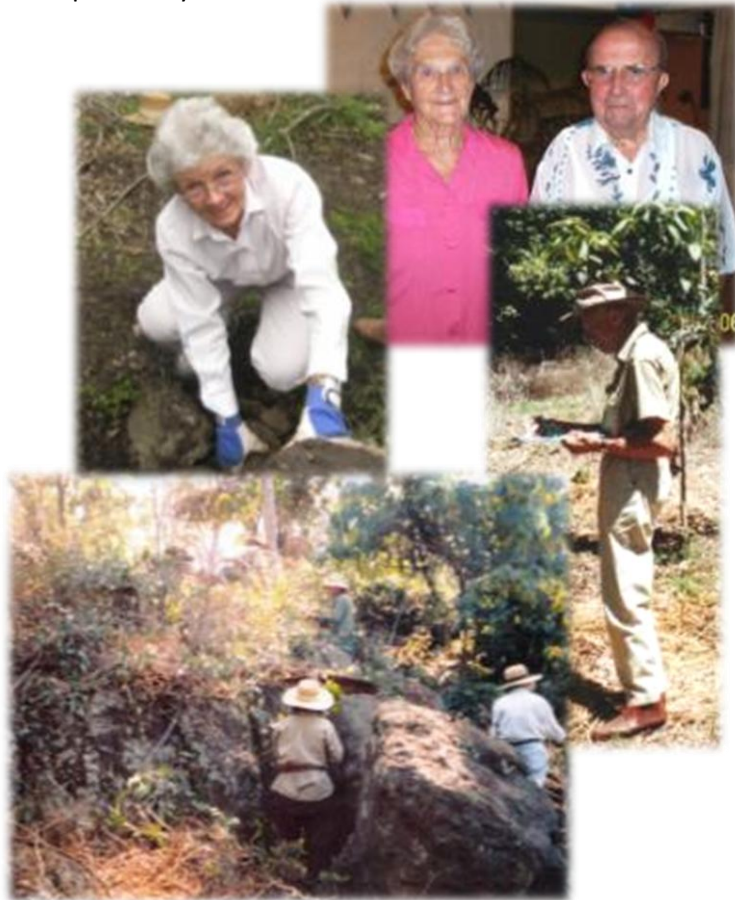
## ***Pursuing the Dream... for many years***

From the early 1990s **Mary Harris's big passion** was the establishment of a world class Rainforest Botanic Gardens for the Lismore Region. She was on the original Steering Committee and, with her husband Bert, travelled vast distances attending conferences, visiting other regional botanic gardens seeking ideas and information, searching locally for a possible site for the Gardens. She prepared grant applications, liaised with Lismore City Council, and other organisations. She was seriously involved in the development of a Vision Statement for the Gardens, the Capability Study and Management Plan. She organised the first weeding/clearing work days from 2000 to 2001. Mary took on the role of Chairperson of the Gardens sub-committee of the LCC Civic Pride Panel, later Management Committee, and chaired it until she retired because of ill health in 2007.

She had a clear vision that a Rainforest Botanic Gardens in the Lismore region would be an invaluable asset for the whole community and, using her organisational and networking skills, kept the project flowing smoothly. She regularly attended work days, very much a hands-on participant. But it was her passion, persistence and dynamism that really drove the manifestation of the Gardens' dream. *FLRBG Newsletter*

**Patricia Wilson and her husband Ross** were foundation members of the Friends and were present when Hazel Hawke planted a tree at the Brockley property on Ballina Road – a proposed Gardens site. It was hoped it would be the first tree in the new Gardens but alas funds for that site could not be raised. Pat was on the early steering committee and went around looking for possible sites and also inspecting established gardens to get ideas that could be applied to the embryonic Lismore Gardens. Sometime in the mid 1990s she and Ross went with Mary and Bert Harris to a conference on the Gold Coast about Botanic Gardens. One of the speakers came

from Bowen where a Botanic Gardens had been successfully established on an old rubbish landfill site. 'Mary and I came back enthused with the idea that we could put the Gardens on some land that needed reclaiming. We were told that there were grants available for projects involving reclamation of waste land. It seemed a good way to go. Land near Wollongbar TAFE, an old dip site, seemed a possible situation but that fell through. However, the idea of a gardens on reclaimed land made the tentative plan to site our Gardens at Lismore Waste Facility seem a real possibility.' *Patricia Wilson*



Calder Chaffey was a plant enthusiast with a great love and knowledge of the subject with a real passion for ferns. He became interested in the possibility of a local botanic gardens, though was concerned about possible 'weeds' from foreign rainforests such as Jacaranda, Camphor Laurel and Rubber Tree - so was pleased when a decision was made for the proposed Lismore Rainforest Botanic Gardens to plant only local rainforest species and associated woodland plants. He was an energetic foundation member of the Friends. He developed a plan for a wetlands garden surrounding the present waste water treatment works. With the removal of the weed trees he foresaw a series of 'rooms' in that area that could withstand, and even benefit from, occasional inundations by the adjacent Wilson River. He also drew up advance plans for our 'Western Paddock' that included a lookout at the highest ridge of the Gardens to take advantage of the sweeping views to the Queensland Border Ranges and south to the edge of the Clarence Valley. Here he advocated eucalypt woodlands from within our provenance zone. When these plans were seen as premature, Calder returned to his love of ferns. It was he who suggested the names of the two watercourses through Stage 1 of the Gardens - Fern Gully because of its ferns and Grandis Creek after the old gnarled *Eucalyptus grandis* growing there. From our first planting in 2002 Calder began to catalogue the co-ordinates of all plantings using a GPS system. With Geoff Walker as his 'chainman' he spent many hours in the young gardens noting the position of every new tree. He set up a database which is still the basis for the information on our plantings. *Geoff Walker*

**Geoff Walker** called the meeting to order at that first public meeting in 1994, introduced Laurie and obtained approval for him to chair meeting.

'To me, those early years were as a wandering in the wilderness for we only had dreams. But we had to be educated about the concept of botanic gardens and individually visited other cities. Bert and Mary Harris went to Gladstone, Dr. Calder Chaffey visited Goondiwindi while I looked at the new gardens in Tamworth and Coffs Harbour. It was obvious that Lismore needed a clear vision. What were the unique features of a Botanic Gardens in this city? In 1994 the Steering Committee commenced to write a Vision Statement with five headings: Scientific Research, Education, Conservation, Recreation and Heritage.



Oh, to-day it all looks so simple – but it wasn't. How well I remember Patricia Wilson with felt pen and butcher's paper, running a 'think-tank' on one of these areas. There were long discussions about exotic and/or indigenous rainforest, ways to honour the Bundjalung Nation and how to recognise the pioneering farmers. There were protracted enquiries about our relationships with the tourist industry and educational bodies. And all the time we were developing the idea of what the unique characteristics a botanic gardens in Lismore might be.' *Geoff Walker*

Membership of the newly formed Friends brought in much needed funds with some members becoming Foundation or Gold Foundation members paying \$200 or \$1000 respectively. Various large companies, government departments and politicians were approached. In 1997 Lismore City Council granted \$5000 and has continued with ongoing financial and physical support. Other small grants helped get the Gardens started, as did Envite, Work for the Dole and Green Corps Teams.

## *Manifesting the dream... Pat Offord*

'The **Founding Committee followed by the Steering Committee** had worked for more than 10 years before we were finally offered the present site in 1997. During that time various members of Council staff had encouraged us and we received small grants each year. In January 1998, we inspected the site with the then Manager Keiran Wade. Most of the inspection was done in his four wheel drive over rough terrain. The view from the top of Fern Gully was over the working tip site but both Mary and I could see the possibilities for our future Gardens.

On that day Keiran told us that the landfilling on this site would cease in eight to ten years. Of course developments in recycling waste since then mean that the site will continue to be used for this purpose for a long time yet.

There were more hurdles to be jumped before Council would give final approval and this included development of a **Capability Study** which looked at previous land use including any Indigenous sites and agricultural use, plant and animal species, availability of water and power, topography, geology, hydrology soils and climate. We worked on a committee with Council staff and Consultants (URS Australia) and the Study was completed in July 1999.

The next step was a **Master Plan** that would show details of the development of the Botanic Gardens covering the whole site. More committees were formed and the Consultants called in again. We also sought community support from educational institutions politicians, tourist organisations and the general public. The Vision was to develop world class Rainforest Botanic Gardens. The Master Plan was accepted at a Council meeting on 11 November 2001.

We had already started working with volunteers. Pat Macbeth, who was very involved in setting up the Friends, organised groups working at Elizabeth Gardens so as to learn the skills we would need. In 2000 we joined **Landcare** and began clearing weeds north of the area we now call the top carpark - above the Fern Gully Picnic Area. We had no idea of what we would find in amongst the weeds. It was extremely difficult work with the usual lantana scratches and tick bites but amongst wrecked cars and other rubbish, we did find beautiful rocks and a lovely little creek.

We were fortunate to obtain a grant for some training of our volunteers in bush regeneration in 2000/2001. Sometimes a Work for the Dole team would come in and help and we also employed professional bush regenerators for specific areas. Eventually, the clearing revealed a natural a set of four rooms. **These rooms were spaces cleared of weeds and with small patches of already established Dry Rainforest species growing as natural boundaries.** The bitumen path in the western section now runs through this area. *(Cont. overleaf)*



### ***The First Planting***

When the Masterplan was accepted by Lismore City Council in early 2002 we indicated to Keiran Wade, Manager of the Waste Facility that we would like to start planting. I think he was testing us because he offered us an area near the main gate - possibly the worst site for local rainforest trees. It had little soil moisture, was in sun most of the year and exposed to southern winds. He offered to clear the site, build up the soil with mulch and let us plant. We were very keen to make a start so agreed without a lot of thought about water supply, as there was a tap on the other side of the road.

While waiting for the site to be prepared, I was despatched to Firewheel Nursery to seek suitable plants. Mark Dunphy was most helpful and put together a collection of mainly dry rainforest local species - 100 plants in total. We had some tools and purchased stakes, plant bags, fertiliser and a hose, using a small grant. Keiran provided us with witches hats and protective vests. He gave us a small shed for storage and it even had a fenced lockable yard so that we could safely leave plants outside.

We advertised the day and about 30 people turned up all very willing and excited about this new venture. We handed out printed directions for planting and everything went well. Had we known that by November, water restrictions would be in place I don't think we would have started that year

There was a follow up planting in September but little planting after that for quite a while. But our rainforest plants survived that drought period, watered monthly by tanker for a while, and are still thriving despite the adverse conditions. I think we passed the test with Keiran because he continued to support us through those early and sometimes difficult years.

On that first day new members who are still Friends include Marie and Denis Matthews, Margaret Smith, and Jenny White. Also David de Nardi and Heidi Lunn both of whom worked as gardeners in the early days. They brought along our present president, Jan de Nardi, soon after. Members of the pre 2000 team included Lionel Phelps, Pat Wilson, Phyl Young, Geoff and Betty Walker, Bert and Mary Harris, Calder Chaffey and Pat Mac Beth. Sadly Laurie Chelsworth passed away before that first

day but we often wonder what he would think of the project now.

I would like to give special thanks to my trusty car that transported thousands of trees over the last ten years!

### ***The Future***

Because of improvements in waste management the land south of the present site will not be available in the near future as had been originally planned. So the Masterplan is now obsolete, though there are lots of good ideas in it which may be used down the track.

For the foreseeable future, the boundaries of the Gardens extend from Wyrallah Road in the east to the western side of Upper Fern Gully. **This area will be completely enclosed with fencing very soon.**

The rest of the Waste Facility site is being used for waste management operations but also for the **restoration of old landfill sites**. A program of **phytocapping**, where the old landfill sites are planted with local species, has already commenced.

### ***My Vision***

**My vision** is that eventually many other parts of the site will be **areas of exploration** leading out of the Gardens through revegetation sites with picnic areas at points of interest like the wetlands on the lower part of the site. Let's hope that future generations will continue to come up with good ideas to make the most of our Gardens.

*Pat Offord*



*Upper Fern Gully completely transformed in 2012*