

# Rhodo Glen:

## Celebrating 60 years of innovation and service to the industry

IN 2013 WE WITNESS A MAJOR MILESTONE FOR ONE OF THE STATE'S MOST SIGNIFICANT NURSERY BUSINESSES WITH RHODO GLEN NURSERIES CELEBRATING THEIR 60TH ANNIVERSARY. ALAN HOLLENSSEN REPORTS.



Alan with Azalea Anna Kehr

Alan and Barbara Raper started Rhodo Glen Nurseries in 1953, and it is still based on the site of the original family home in The Patch.. Alan by this stage had already gained a significant history in the industry having worked for both Rimington's and Warner's Nurseries.

"It was all he wanted to do," says Andrew Raper, Alan and Barbara's son. This was in the days before apprenticeships were available in the nursery industry and having started at Rimington's Alan moved to Warner's where he learned the skills of propagation. The nursery industry in those days was a family-based 'closed shop', and it was very unusual for someone outside of the family to be taught to propagate. This was a testament to the regard Alan, the new employee, was held in.

Some years later Alan became the manager of The Patch Nurseries (the site of the current The Patch Primary School), a huge retail garden centre owned by Bill Waters, more famously known as a bookmaker. Alan ran this nursery for a number of years before, at the age of 19 he purchased the Georges Rd property in The Patch. Whilst still working for The Patch Nurseries, he was building his own nursery in the evenings, constructing shade houses covered with wire mesh overlaid

with tea tree (shade cloth had not yet been invented!) Tea tree when picked kept its green leaves over summer and dropped them as autumn approached.

Alan would often be found perched at the kitchen table after dinner propagating plants. In later years he would watch Graham Kennedy on TV to keep himself awake. Around this time he purchased a weeping maple which cost the equivalent of three-and-a-half weeks pay, which he used as mother stock for years and which is still to be seen at the nursery, although it isn't used these days.

Not surprisingly, given the name of the nursery, rhododendrons were Alan's prime passion and he was a member of the Rhododendron Society where people really worked hard to promote this widely grown shrub. Despite the closed shop appearance of the industry at the nursery level, in societies like this one, people worked for the common good. Nowhere was this more obvious than when, almost by what Andrew Raper calls "a process of symbiosis" his father, along with Frank Boulter, the van der Ven brothers and Arnold Teese discovered how best to strike the new varieties in what amounted to a revolution in the growing of this stock.



THE ROSE SERIES P. 13024 THE PATCH, FROM GEORGES ROAD, VIC.



Left: The Patch Nurseries 1955, taken from Georges Road. Right: Alan and Barbara C1960 - house at The Patch



Next generation: Tony Gainger (left) and Andrew Raper (right) at Rhodo Glen Nurseries in The Patch.

*When I interviewed Andrew Raper we sat at the old Plants Plus board table. His father was incensed that the supermarkets could buy plants at prices below those offered to retail nurseries so he thought some form of co-op should be started to address this injustice.*

*He got together with a number of other heavy weights in the retail arena and the precursor to Plants Plus was born, then known as "The Nurseryman" brand.*

The contributions of this group to the development of the National Rhododendron Gardens helped make it the garden of significance that we see today.

By the mid '60s Alan and Barbara had three small children, but though money was tight they bought the Warran Glen Nurseries site in Warrandyte. Like all true horticulturists of the era, Alan had no money, so he secured the purchase – for a year – with a £20 note!

Retailing laws in those days meant a shop could only trade until midday on Saturday, and not at all on Sunday unless it was in a 'designated tourist precinct'. With Warrandyte a popular tourist destination, the Rapers, in a clever move, had established a retail nursery which could trade seven days a week. This new business grew like topsy and was viewed by many in the industry as marking the commencement of modern nursery retailing in this country.

In 1994, at the age of 60, Alan suddenly passed away. Andrew was 28 when his father died and was working to set up his own cut flower farm while working five days a week at Rhodo Glen Nurseries. A 'Yes' or 'No' discussion about continuing the business led to bringing Tony Gainger and Carolyn, Andrew's sister, into the company along with Lisa, Andrew's wife. This decision firmed up their commitment to totally rebuild the business.

"The reality is I'm a nurseryman and a businessman. Tony came to us with an economics and accounting background, but one with a passion for the nursery industry," said Andrew.

Andrew pointed out that they both love camellias more than rhodos, and they elected to make them their prime focus into the future – a wise decision in hindsight.

Rhodo Glen emerged relatively unscathed from the carnage of the drought. Andrew and Tony believe the future has looked brighter since the drought and they now focus heavily on reacting positively and decisively to the rapid changes to the retail and landscape market.

Andrew has served two terms on the NGIV and Flower & Garden Show boards and as President of the Camellia Society. Society members typically have a fondness for camellia plants, flowers and plant breeding – and when they come up with something new, Andrew is typically the person they turn to for advice and assistance to bring new varieties to the marketplace.

## The Future

The family is completely rebuilding every aspect of the nursery. Today the nursery operates on multiple sites in The Patch, utilising around 15 acres of their 40 acre holdings for nursery production. When they are finished, every piece of infrastructure will have been replaced or rebuilt and new areas created. They are realistic though in their rate of progress, (droughts, bushfires and hailstorms tend to do that), but the commitment to continual improvement is strong. It is in product development that their unwavering interest and commitment to camellias is strongest. This is true even while they have widened their plant offering – just witness their herbs on sale at Trade Day. Rhodo Glen is one of the few remaining trade day pioneers, last year they enjoyed a couple of their biggest ever trade days. Whilst their past has been an interesting one, their future looks likely to be one where success builds on success.

Happy 60th Rhodo Glen!



*A sign at the front of the nursery honors the past.*