



Australian Garden

HISTORY

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Orchids in Lune River, Tasmania
Pineapples in Queensland
Wattles in Hannover, Germany



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Captain Charles Sturt

Collector and cultivator as well as explorer

Left Captain Charles Sturt by Montfiore c.1830, image courtesy State Library of South Australia

Right TOP
Swainsona formosa
Sturt's desert pea, image Bill & Mark Bell, Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Right BOTTOM
Sturt desert rose, photo Anne McCutcheon

Captain Charles Sturt (1795–1869) is best known for his explorations of the Macquarie Marshes, River Murray and Central Australia; few realise his abiding passion for natural history. A Fellow of the Linnean Society of London, his journals reveal an avid interest in climate, geology, geography, flora and fauna as do his paintings of the native birds and fauna. The explorer took in earnest his task of recording, drawing and collecting specimens of newly discovered species for scientific study.

Charles Sturt's South Australian house, *The Grange*, still stands and is now known as the Charles Sturt Museum Precinct. The museum houses a significant

collection of Sturt family furniture, artefacts and historical materials related to Sturt's expeditions (1828–29 when he named the Darling River after; 1829–30, the River Murray expedition; the 1844–46 journey into central Australia) and his family. Over the past four years, the museum's private garden has been resurrected by a very small group of volunteers who are members of the Australian Garden History Society and Friends of *The Grange*. This effort has cast more light on Sturt's horticultural endeavours.

The collector

Sturt was a keen collector. After the River Murray expedition in 1830, he despatched three cases of specimens to a museum of Edinburgh University. The collection included 18 birds,

six emu eggs, seven sponges and four specimens of coral. His Central Australian expedition added further to the list of bird and fauna specimens and the discovery of two new flora species, which were named in his honour – Sturt's desert pea (*Swainsona formosa*) and the Sturt desert rose (*Gossypium sturtianum*).

Sturt cultivated a close friendship with John Gould, the renowned British ornithologist. Gould visited Sturt at his home in Varroville, south of Sydney, in 1838. In his 1951 book, *Charles Sturt: His Life and Journeys of Exploration*, JHL Cumpston says that Gould particularly 'admired Sturt's large original collection of watercolours of Australian parrots, for which he offered a large sum. But these paintings had been the delight of Sturt's leisure: he had collected the rarer specimens at great trouble and he would not part with them'. Sturt's appointment as Surveyor-General of South Australia in 1839 prompted another visit by Gould. For both, it was a perfect opportunity for a joint field trip into the scrublands of the River Murray, a venture that contributed to Gould's *The Birds of Australia* – the 36-volume colour-plated masterpiece published between 1840 and 1848 that recorded the bird life of Australia.

The horticulturist

Sturt's passion went beyond the natural environment. In 1836, he served on the first Committee of Superintendance of the Australian Museum and Botanic Gardens in Sydney. His property at Mittagong, New South Wales covered 789 hectares, which *The Sydney Herald* reported on 7 December 1837 had an excellent garden. (It was sold in 1838.) A year later Sturt purchased the farm of 405 hectares at Varroville in NSW, which Cumpston explains was to 'gratify his passion for gardening'.

On arrival in Adelaide in 1839 Sturt was appointed a Vice-President of the inaugural Agricultural and Horticultural Society of South Australia and later held the same position in the South Australia Agricultural Society and the Botanical and Horticultural Board. His land grant of two 32-ha sections on the headwaters of the Port River in the Reedbeds to the west of Adelaide provided the means to indulge his passion for horticulture. The land stretched to the dunes and the sea. Dissected by a bountiful creek and on a flood plain of loam and well-drained sandy soil. The property, *The Grange*, eventually grew to a 155-ha mixed farm producing barley and oats, while sustaining horses, cows, pigs, ducks,



chickens, partridges and bees. Sturt cultivated a vast orchard of 4,000 fruit trees – pear, orange, lemon, apple, peach, fig and vines. In the book *Life of Charles Sturt after Sturt* (1899), his daughter-in-law Beatrix Sturt notes how much 'he delighted in wandering over his garden with his two beautiful boys Napier [Beatrix's husband] and Charles'. The biography references Sturt's own letters to illustrate his horticultural interests.

The cultivator

Those letters reveal that Sturt wrote to his old friend George Macleay at Brownlow Hill, Camden, New South Wales, requesting him to send bulbs and couch grass for *The Grange*, as well as seeds of *Cupressus callitris*, the white cedar, and loquat. Sturt is reputed to have introduced (now pervasive) couch grass into South Australia. From Loddiges in London he received 'some fine fuchsias, laurel, chestnut and white roses' and several times in 1842, he sought fruit, flower seeds and bulbs from his brother William in India, instructing him in September to 'put the cuttings into a box with damp moss or into a barrel and saturate the whole well just before you close it up. They will shoot no doubt but I shall be able to save some for the seeds, put them in dried sand – and send the seeds of ornamental shrubs and trees...If an opportunity should offer of sending direct from Calcutta send a case of plants – pineapples, bananas, arrowroot, sugar cane – but at all risks send me some indigo seed in your letter.'

In October 1842 he wrote to William that a flood had wiped out his garden. 'Oranges, lemons, figs, 1,800 vines and more than 3,000 trees of all kinds are killed.' Not to be deterred, he tells William, 'Dr Wallick's two cases of plants for our Horticultural Society came in excellent order.'

The Grange, from the front, photo Peter Richards



A

None of those you sent me did I ever get, much to my mortification...Send me melon seeds of varieties, pumpkins, Bengal chillies and any other. I want to try indigo, cotton and other things. Forward them via Sydney, addressed for me to the care of Major H. Smyth there.'



B

Finding clues about *The Grange's* garden

We will never really know the exact plan of Sturt's garden, farmyard and orchards. In 1896 Captain Sturt's son, Charles Sheppes, drew a plan for Beatrix to assist her when she was writing her biography. The plan, drawn from childhood memory, denotes some of the plantings, particularly trees and vines. We do know that Sturt planted artichokes, oleander, Brown Turkey fig, heliotrope, fuchsia, and ferns including *Asplenium australis*, *A. marinum* and woodsia but the plan lacks detail.

The present-day Charles Sturt Museum in the suburb of Grange holds some relics of Sturt's gardening activity: pressed flowers, ink drawings, plant lists and instructions for planting, and a list of largely Australian native trees and shrubs planted at *The Grange* in 1842. In conjunction with the launch of the Museum in 1967, a diverse collection of 10 packets of seeds arrived back in Adelaide with other Sturt family memorabilia.

They are labelled:

- *Acacia decurrens* (black wattle)
- *Asters* (two packets)
- *Blue hardenbergia*
- *White hardenbergia*
- *Hardenbergia King George Sound WA*
- *Poppy*
- *Cosmos*
- *Hibiscus* or *Sturt Rose*
- *Clianthus dampieri* (Sturt's Desert Pea)

A The garden in 1905, photo Mabel Hardy

B The garden today, with cosmos, one of Sturt's favourites, photo Richard Nolan

C Charles Sheppes Sturt's 1896 garden plan reproduced in Casson, M (1990), *The Story of Grange*, and shown on the sundial in the heritage garden, photo Margaret Phillips



C



While now named *Swainsona formosa*, in the 18th century it was placed in the genus *Cianthus* (as *Cianthus dampieri*). It later also became known as *C. formosus*. Specimens were collected by William Dampier, who recorded his first sighting on 22 August 1699 on Rosemary Island off the Pilbara in Western Australia. The common name commemorates Sturt, who made several references to the plant in his journal, *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, including: 'We saw that beautiful flower the *Cianthus formosa* [sic] in splendid blossom on the plains. It was growing amid barrenness and decay, but its long runners were covered with flowers that gave a crimson tint to the ground'.



The heritage garden

The Charles Sheppye Sturt plan of 1896 has guided the design of the current garden, though having to work around mature (not original) eucalypts and olives has limited some features. Plantings are based on references to the garden in various publications, remaining plant lists, drawings and seeds in the museum collection and use of local catalogues such as that of FC Davis Nursery in the Reedbeds (1862), Bailey's Hackney Nursery (1845), as well as the Brownlow Hill plant lists, given George Macleay's friendship with Charles Sturt's family in his days farming in New South Wales.

The garden remains a work in progress. It is being adapted to current climate conditions, a change to the course of the creek and the very close urban neighbourhood. The garden is a memorial to Captain Charles Sturt's desire to create a little piece of paradise for his family. It has also been a catalyst for a new exhibition, 'The Art of Nature', that will trace Sturt's fascination with the natural world, to be launched in August 2022 on the completion of a new Visitor Centre.



Some of the seeds are in folded paper or envelopes, others are in brown paper seed packets from E&W Hackett Nursery of 77 Rundle St, Adelaide, suggesting these seeds and perhaps others had been sent to the Sturts after their departure from Australia in 1853 for their garden in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.

Books donated to the Charles Sturt Museum highlight Sturt's scientific approach to gardening, which continued when he returned to England. The library collection includes five volumes of *Familiar Wild Flowers* by FE Hulme published from 1877–1885, 15 volumes of Paxton's *Magazine of Botany* (1834–1849), *The Management of Bees* by Samuel Bagster (1835) and *British Ferns and Their Allies* by Thomas Moore (1859).

Above Sturt's desert pea growing in *The Grange*'s heritage garden, photo Anne McCutcheon

Left Black wattle seeds sent to the museum in 1967 and now conserved and housed in the museum's archive, photo Margaret Phillips

Honorary curator at the Charles Sturt Memorial Trust, **Margaret Phillips**, is a research historian, author of *Meet You at the Gilby, History of the Gilberton Amateur Swimming Club 1915–2015; A Smile, a Wave and a Word, A Hundred Years at Alberton School*; and curator of museum exhibitions *A House with a History and Men of the Central Expedition*.

