

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: VIETNAMESE GARDENS IN AUSTRALIA: THE SCENT OF THE GREEN PAPAYA OR THE CHALLENGE OF THE COBRA CUCUMBER**

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Vietnamese gardens in Australia vary from gardens which delight in one scented plant - the garden of harmony, to the garden as a laboratory- a replacement activity for exiled warriors. Vietnamese gardens represent the gardens of recent migrants. Before 1975 there were few Vietnamese residents in Australia, most being students who undertook studies and then returned to Vietnam. The Vietnamese community in Australia is not homogeneous. It consists of two main groups; those immigrants who came in 1975 soon after the fall of Saigon and those who have come since the 1990s as immigrants, often from the northern part of Vietnam. Each of these groups defines itself as a separate community.

The first group do not see themselves as migrants, instead they consider that they are refugees. There is a difference between the migrant experience and the refugee experience. The refugee experience is one which carries the shame of defeat as well as the loss of a homeland and its associated enforced displacement. Inevitably this experience has an impact on the way the community settles in Australia. The gardens of the Vietnamese migrants from the south reflect two different responses to being refugees. Some gardens recreate the ways of life of the homeland. They are the gardens of harmony. Other gardens are the gardens of displaced warriors; the men who were officers in the South Vietnamese Army. Vietnamese men see themselves as a warrior people. This is a strong part of their heritage. So to be in another country as a result of a war is to be in a state of exile.

### **The Background to the Vietnamese Community in Australia**

The earliest Vietnamese people migrated from Tibet and moved south along the Red River. They settled in the Red River Delta, which at that time was immersed under water. The early people built an elaborate dyke system to reclaim the land. These structures, which still exist, form the longest dyke system in the world. It is thought that the practice of wet rice cultivation may have had its early beginnings in this setting. Such ancient agricultural traditions have persisted to the present despite the subsequent history of centuries of occupation and resistance.

Between c.179 BC to 938 AD, Vietnam was under Chinese protectorate rule.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in a close interweaving of Chinese culture into Vietnamese society. It was during this time that Confucianism became the prevailing form of spiritual worship. In contrast to the harmony created by spiritual worship, this was also the period in which the practice of guerrilla resistance was established in response to the frequent invasions by Mongolian and Chinese forces and the internal battles between different war lords. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century on there were constant feudal wars eventually resulting in the country being divided into two separate nations, each under their own war lord.

Thus within Vietnamese culture there exists a close interweaving of ancient agricultural practices, spiritual worship and the secret sub-culture of guerrilla resistance. Each of these is reflected in the other. Interestingly each is also evident in

the Vietnamese gardens in Australia. The history of the Vietnamese warrior culture needs to be explained in order to understand some of the Australian gardens.

### *The Early European Influences*

A further intriguing aspect about Vietnamese culture is subtle blending of European cultural practices. This began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Europeans, in seeking to establish the highly lucrative spice trade, formed different alliances within Vietnam thus fuelling the rivalry between North and South. The long heritage of spices and the exchange between East and West are evident in much of Vietnamese culture, particularly in poetry and the garden.

Equally pervasive in Vietnamese culture is the combination of the warrior culture, the power of the warlords and the role of the French. The French influence began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> when internal resistance resulted in the North and South warlords being overthrown, except for one small area on the southern tip of Vietnam, which was still held by the Southern warlord. He enlisted the help of the French in return for trade privileges. As a result, the warlord was successful and for the first time in 300 years Vietnam was completely unified. The new Vietnam established an Emperor and the ancient city of Hue became the new Imperial Capital. Hue was the crucible of Vietnamese culture. Unfortunately, peace was short lived. By mid nineteenth century the French were at war with Vietnam and in defeat, Vietnam became a French colony. Despite this, Hue, as an imperial city, was always significant for the Vietnamese, particularly in Vietnamese poetry. Nevertheless, the French occupation led to the collapse of the traditional Vietnamese society, in particular the Confucian mandarin. Instead a new French-educated elite developed and the culture of Vietnam today still contains strong French influences.

### *The Communist Influences*

By the 1940s the effects of the World War both in Europe and in Asia enabled the League of Independent Vietnam to be formed, known as the Viet Minh, and for a brief period Vietnam declared its independence. After World War II, France again occupied the country but this time war raged throughout the country led by Ho Chi Minh using effective guerrilla tactics. Eventually France was defeated in 1954.

The resulting events sealed the fate of the Vietnamese who ultimately came to Australia. The Geneva Peace Treaty divided the nation into north and south along the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. North of the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a communist nation led by Ho Chi Minh while south of the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel became the Republic of Vietnam, which followed the western democratic political system.

Inevitably this peace was short lived and by 1956 the North Vietnamese sent troops along the Ho Chi Minh Trail thus starting the Vietnamese war involving America and Australia. In the late 1960s, the Americans started to pull out of the War and in 1975 the North Vietnamese took advantage of the military weakness of the South and defeated them. As a result Vietnam became unified under the communist regime. Those who had served in the South Vietnamese government and armed forces were interned in Re-education Centres and a massive exodus began.

### *Refugees to Australia*

The fall of Saigon marked the first wave of Vietnamese refugees to Australia. This was followed by a second wave in 1978-1979. The refugees from 1975 to 1982 were people who were most affected by the communist government. They included the elite North Vietnamese who had been residing in the South, as well as the elite South Vietnamese, the Catholics and the Chinese.

Refugees arriving in Sydney were taken to migrant centres where they resided for a short time before settling in nearby suburbs. By the early 1990s with the arrival of the North Vietnamese migrants, the South Vietnamese moved from their former areas to other places while the North Vietnamese settled in the areas they vacated. With this background it is interesting to look at the gardens the Vietnamese migrants created in Australia. They can be described as either Harmony Gardens or Warriors' Gardens.

### **The Harmony Garden: the Cinnamon Fragrance and the Scent of the Green Papaya**

*I lie down to wear away those embroidered cod mats  
Somewhere a river flows by the city's deserted flats  
I remember once the cinnamon tree of my childhood grew  
And I call out the fragrance of the evening dew...*

Pham Cong Thien

Contemporary Vietnamese philosopher and poet.<sup>2</sup>

*The fragrance of cinnamon is bittersweet, both subtle and provoking; the fragrance of cinnamon travels somewhere between her consciousness and sub consciousness, links her past and present, yet exists only in that 'previous life' of hers...*

Nhu-Nguyen Duong, *The Cinnamon Fragrance*.<sup>3</sup>

*I simply want to transform into a small fish to cross the waves,  
searching for the fragrance I have long missed.*

Tho Duong Nhu Nguyen.<sup>4</sup>

For Buddhists, the belief in reincarnation requires that before beginning a new life one must drink the 'forgetting soup'. The refugees who fled Vietnam after 1975, had to start their new lives without drinking the 'forgetting soup'. For Nhu-Nguyen Duong, now living in United States, the memory of the fragrance of the cinnamon tree is deeply embedded in her subconscious. When she smells something similar, she is aware of a gentle thread which pulls her back to her grandmother's garden in the ancient city of Hue.

Her grandparent's house in that sleepy ancient city had a simple front patio of white gravel enclosed by a deep green fence. The patio opened onto the main room where her grandfather had placed two symbols of the East: a sombre brown cinnamon tree next to an emerald green young bamboo.

In that deep room, the shutters were closed to hold the fragrance of the cinnamon tree. This tree, which had been a gift to her grandfather from the people of Hoi An,

symbolised inner courage, wisdom and depth; whereas the young bamboo symbolised youthfulness, vivacity and elegance.

For as much as the cinnamon fragrance evoked memories of her homeland, so did the green bamboo. Nhu-Nguyen's mother had grown up in a village near Hue, which had been immortalised in a poem by Han Mac Tu where he celebrates a beautiful scene of emerald green leaves half covering the pretty faces of the village girls.

*Who is the so-green garden which looks like an emerald  
With bamboo leaves covering one's beautiful face.*

Han Mac Tu <sup>5</sup>

The garden of Nhu Nguyen's family home was full of emerald green bamboo leaves and sweet smelling banana trees. Nhu Nguyen, now a successful lawyer in United States, writes about the experience of remembering her lost garden. She says

*Many years later, in the first snowstorm of Southern Illinois, in the hot humid air of her first summer in Texas, or in the temperate forest of North Virginia...the woman stood still, reminiscing on the fragrance of her childhood. The poignant obsession on nostalgia, of a part that could not be repressed, of her lost paradise<sup>6</sup>*

Adapted from 'The Diary of Wendy N. Duong.' Washington, DC. Feb. 1990. Translated from Vietnamese by the author in *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*. Pp 25 - 41.

The gardens in the homeland carry spirituality and ancient traditions, aspects of which feature in Vietnamese poetry. This is the garden which 'Wendy' (Nhu-Nguyen) remembers. The spirituality embedded in these gardens comes from Buddhism which has contributed the practice of meditation and the state of compassion, Confucianism which has contributed the concept of ethics and Taoism which has contributed metaphysical understandings. These were the main religions of Vietnam before the French colonial period. Over the centuries, these religions have become fused into a vague code of ethics and a philosophy of life including the practice of ancestor worship which is a cultural norm, even today.

More recently Caodaism, an eclectic religious movement, emerged in Vietnam in the early 1920s. This is a religion which incorporates most of the main belief systems in Vietnam. It is characterised by three main colours; red, yellow and blue, representing Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. This faith, a social and political phenomenon of Vietnamese society in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can be seen as a typically Vietnamese quest for harmony. It is said that the Vietnamese blending of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism has resulted in '*an exquisite philosophy of life, full of wisdom and rich in moral comfort.*' <sup>7</sup>

Along with the long tradition of spiritual worship, herbal medicine also has a long history in Vietnam, both using Vietnamese herbs (thuoc nam) which are the true folk medicine of the south and using Chinese medicinal herbs (thuoc bac) which reflect a more scholarly and esoteric medicine derived from China.

Gardens of harmony traditionally reflect Vietnamese spirituality as well as providing important foods and medicinal herbs. In contrast, gardens seeking to establish this harmony in the new country are tentative and transportable. The harmony garden in

the new country consists of flowers for the shrine, which is inside the house, treasured fruit trees, medicinal herbs and essential herbs and vegetables.

The Vietnamese have not been in Australia long enough to recreate the cinnamon fragrance and the scent of the green papaya tree. Before 1975 there were only 700 Vietnamese in Australia many of whom were temporary students. The Vietnamese do not have a culture of migration nor are they accustomed to minority status. The Vietnamese have remained in their country through numerous internal wars, so the recent phenomena of being a refugee and forming community organisations in the host country are new experiences.

The gardens do not reflect the automatic creation of a productive farm as found in the Mediterranean migrant communities. The gardens are more tentative. One Vietnamese family who have created a garden of harmony in a Housing Commission house in Western Sydney reveal how hesitant this process of creation is.

Phuong lived with his family on a farm in a village near Saigon where their garden was part of the farm. Phuong, the eldest son, came to Australia with his sisters in 1983. Like most Vietnamese migrants to Australia, they first stayed at a migrant hostel - the Endeavour Hostel at Malabar. Later Phuong's mother joined them and they moved into a Housing Commission house. The house they now live in is their second home in Australia. This house is a characteristic Housing Commission brick bungalow on a ¼ acre block, sitting within a row of identical houses in a western suburb of Sydney known as Cartwright.

Phuong and his mother, Loi, commented that there was '*nothing*' to start with in the garden. In the front there was a driveway and grass and in the back just grass and a Hills Hoist clothes line all of which was surrounded by the ubiquitous paling fence. The houses on either side of Phuong's house exhibit such characteristics, namely an unfenced grass area in front of the house on which are parked numerous cars and a grass area at the back with a centrally placed Hills Hoist.

Loi said that the first thing she did was to dig up the clay soil in the front and back to make the flower beds in the front and vegetable beds in the back. She also planted a number of Vietnamese fruit trees. The back area is the productive garden. The trees and vegetables are only on one side of the garden; the rest remains as unkempt grass and paling fences. This indicates the temporary nature of the garden. Nevertheless the area set aside for the garden, although small, is quite intensely cultivated. There are five fruit trees, which are now five years old and are already bearing fruit. The family do not know the English names for the trees. They bought the fruit from the Vietnamese shops in Cabramatta and planted the seeds. One of the species is called 'oe' and it has a fruit, which is rough on the outside and soft (like coconut skin) on the inside. Another of the trees is called 'man' and has a pink fruit, which is juicy and has a large seed. Phuong struggles to describe these unusual fruit in English.

Behind the fruit trees is a collection of make-shift pots with Vietnamese salad vegetables and medicinal herbs. There is also a small vegetable bed near the fruit trees which contains Vietnamese cabbage, Vietnamese tomatoes, chillies, a lemon tree, an avocado, and another fruit tree called 'noi'. There is a small frame at the back of the vegetable garden which holds up two vegetable vines, a choko and a cucumber

vine. This intense area of cultivation floats like an island in the typical Housing Commission back yard. It is clearly a temporary garden.

The narrow shaded area between the side of the house and the paling fence provides the microclimate for shade loving edible plants including a large clump of grey-green grass, 'xa' or 'long grass', which is used with chicken, meat and pork dishes. As well there is a clump of large leaves on long succulent stalks which look like a popular Australian ornamental plant known as 'elephant's ears'. Phuong calls this plant 'bai ha' and Loi explains that the stem is chopped and added to meat and fish dishes. Beside the succulent leaves is a low scrambling herb, which looks like an aluminium plant. The leaves of this plant are used to provide the bright pink colouring seen in Vietnamese cakes and confectionery. At the end of the side passage is a large clump of sugar cane, the stalks of which are harvested as a sweet.

Loi uses the long grass and herbs for her traditional Vietnamese dishes such Chicken with Long Grass.

***Loi's Chicken with Long Grass***

*1 kg chicken chopped up*

*½ teas 5 spice powder*

*2 anise stars (dry)*

*½ Vietnamese onion*

*2 long grass leaves (chopped up)*

*2 tabs white sugar 1 teasp salt 1 teasp salt*

*½ teas MSG*

*Pound 5 spice powder and star anise with mortar and pestle.*

*Mix with chopped onion, chopped long grass, sugar, salt and MSG.*

*Marinate chicken in the mix for 2 hours then BBQ or*

*grill in hot oven.*

Although the fruit trees bear fruit, they are not used for cooking; instead Loi uses dried fruit from Vietnamese stores in Cabramatta. The fruit from the trees are cut up and presented as fresh fruit after the main meal.

***Loi's Dessert 'che thung'***

*2 tins coconut milk*

*1 cup sugar*

*1 packet Vietnamese plums*

*1 tin palm seeds*

*1 taro 'khow non'*

*1 packet of long sago*

*1 packet of split mung beans*

*Wash mung beans well then cook in water separately until soft.*

*Add to coconut milk and chopped taro. Cook until taro is soft. Add sugar, palm seeds, plums, and boiled sago. Warm through*

The front garden stands out among the other houses because of its tropical lushness in contrast to the neighbouring areas of unkempt grass. A row of palms defines the driveway and the path, leading from the drive to the front door, is normally bordered with marigolds and alyssum. These flowers are characteristic of those the Ngung family grew in Vietnam. There is a small feature garden of cactus including an aromatic flowering lily somewhat like the flower of the water lily, which the

Vietnamese name 'Hoa qujan'. The flowers from this area of the garden are taken into the house and placed on the small shrine in the living room.

Trees have been planted to soften the bleak grass area in front of the Housing Commission house. In the centre is a healthy Manchurian pear which five years old. To the side are mango, persimmon and apple, all about five years old. The plants in the back garden have come from Vietnam either as gifts or as seed. The palms in the front garden have been planted to represent an Australian garden. They were all purchased at the local garden centre in Cabramatta. The garden is an interesting reflection of Vietnamese culture. It not only provides fruit, vegetables and medicinal herbs but also flowers for spiritual worship and memories of their life on the farm in Vietnam.

There is, however, a sense of impermanence about the garden. The family, of nine people, has indicated that they want to move to a bigger house in the same area. Loi will take her plants with her and create a new garden. Despite the transportability of their garden, Loi and her family have settled in Australia. This is in contrast to Quynh Duc who has a highly developed garden but sees himself as an exiled warrior temporarily located in Australia.

### **The Warrior's Garden.**

The garden of Quynh Duc Nguyen is renowned amongst the Vietnamese community in Sydney. His garden has been the subject of numerous newspaper articles, which refer to his outstanding floral displays and to his ingenious horticultural experiments with vegetables

Quynh Duc Nguyen came to Australia in 1980 as refugee from Saigon. He had been an officer in the Republican Army and the headmaster at the Army's primary and high school. Fearing reprisal after the fall of Saigon, he and his family fled by boat. He had been secretly modifying a fishing boat so that it could take both his family and one other. As they prepared to depart, they were surprised by a coastal guard and in the ensuing melee, one of his daughters was left behind. They escaped and made the treacherous journey across the waters to Malaysia. They were attacked three times by Thai pirates, surviving the two-week journey only to be placed in a camp in Malaysia. Quynh Duc Nguyen was well connected through the army and was soon sponsored by a friend from Switzerland. He selected Australia for his destination because it was close to Asia and he wanted to locate his daughter.

Once in Australia the family was placed in a hostel at East Hills. This was not to their liking and after only a week the Uniting Church at Manly assisted them to find accommodation first in Warriewood, a northern beach suburb of Sydney and then in nearby French's Forest.

Quynh Duc Nguyen did not have a garden in Vietnam. He was a busy teacher and administrator. When he came to Australia his English was not good enough for him to work as a teacher. While he reflected upon what work he could do in this new country, he gardened. This was the first time he had worked in a garden and he found it so interesting that he decided to work in a nursery while he learned English at evening college. He became fascinated by plants, reading avidly. So intense was his interest, that he travelled to Tasmania to see cold climate plants and then to

Queensland to look at tropical plants. He was able to live on his Army stipend and because the state of exile for a warrior is often seen as a period of waiting, he gave up working in the nursery and concentrated on the science of gardening.

He and his family lived in their first house in French's Forest for the first seven years in Australia. He established a garden and proceeded to win a number of gardening prizes. During this time Cabramatta flourished as a centre for the Vietnamese people in Sydney, so he moved to Cabramatta to be closer to Vietnamese life and culture. All his family are now in Sydney and he has been re-united with his lost daughter who survived her ordeal, arriving in Australia as a political refugee in 1993.

Quynh Duc's house is a cream textured brick two-storey building with strong European features. It had been built by a former Yugoslavian immigrant who had come to Australia as part of an earlier wave of migrants and had settled in the former Yugoslavian community at Cabramatta. The overlay of one immigrant group over another is part of the richness of Australian cities. Quynh Duc has not altered the house but the garden has been extensively changed. In typically military fashion, he felt the garden was a blank sheet of paper on which he could do anything. When he bought the house, the garden consisted of two palms (*Phoenix canariensis*) symmetrically placed in the front garden. According to Quynh Duc there was nothing in the garden, '*everything else was just grass*'.

#### *The Front Garden: the display garden*

The front garden clearly shows why Quynh Duc has won so many gardening prizes. It is highly cultivated and manicured. The house occupies a corner block enabling a continuous display garden of massed colourful flowering plants across the front and the side. The front garden is a particularly interesting example of the relationship between spiritual worship, horticultural practices, and the warrior culture. The horticultural experiments are evidence of a precise military mind. They consist of a number of distorted palms, which have been manipulated by contrived water regimes to produce unnaturally constricted trunks. Mixed in with the horticultural experiments, there are carefully tended temple plants, which have been topiaried according to ancient spiritual practice. They include jade and box and have been topiaried into branching shrubs consisting of a number of closely cut spheres at the end of small branches. This form of topiary carries spiritual significance which varies depending on whether there are six spheres, seven spheres, or nine spheres at the ends of the branches.<sup>8</sup> The ancient Eastern spiritual practice blends with Quynh Duc's Catholicism, inherited from the French, as the garden supplies the fresh flowers for the altar in the main hall of the house.

The richly tiled entry porch, inherited from the former-Yugoslav owner, provides a backdrop for a number of pots containing exotic cacti. Cacti are widely used in Vietnam as ornamental plants. The pots are interspersed with a collection of painted concrete statues, which are also scattered throughout the front and side gardens. The statues include kangaroos, cockatoos, frogs and other animals along with bush rocks obtained from local garden centres. Quynh Duc is proud of the rockery and the concrete statues because he sees them as Australian elements in the garden.



### *The Back Garden: an experimental garden*

The back garden is surrounded by a paling fence, which is high enough to provide a sense of privacy. The side gates open onto a short concrete drive leading to the door of the garage which is part of the two-storey house. There is a shaded pergola with hanging baskets of plants extending from the garage and it is clear that this area is not used for cars. The garage is a work room/ recreational room with one wall devoted to the display of Quynh Duc's gardening trophies and press articles about the garden.

Quynh Duc has been the Grand Champion Gardener of the City of Fairfield for six years. Other awards are for the most beautiful garden in Fairfield and there are garden awards from the Vietnamese community. Every year he gets four prizes - Best Front Garden, Best Back Garden, Best All Round Garden and Best Vegetable Garden. Quynh Duc spends a great deal of time in the garden and has many ideas of what he would like to do. This is clearly a replacement activity for a highly intelligent man living in exile. The garden is, in fact, a horticultural laboratory.

The back garden is the working part of the laboratory. It is divided into an orchard, a vegetable garden, a hen house, and an aviary. Like the front garden, there is also an unselfconscious combination of spiritual and cultural elements. Near the house there is a small grass area which contains an elaborate and yet delicately canopied swing for two people. Quynh Duc built the romantic swing from timber and wrought iron and has even designed a small table so that his daughters could have a cool drink while gently swinging. Behind the swing is a finely carved octagonal wooden aviary. The aviary is set within a number of delicate Asian trees in a way that is similar to small temples within Vietnam.

In contrast, near the aviary is a hen house, which Quynh Duc calls the '*chook house*'. This is a fastidious laboratory. The hens are a cross between Vietnamese chickens and Australian hens and all their eggs are carefully numbered. The Vietnamese chickens are quite distinctive. They were purchased in the Sydney markets so Quynh Duc assumes that they were brought to Australia by earlier Chinese or Vietnamese migrants. By crossing them with the Australian hens he has been able to get a much larger bird. He also has a bird which lays eggs with medicinal qualities. He refers to these eggs as '*black eggs*'. He allows the hens and the birds out and they fly around the garden and beyond for a few hours a day, always returning to the hen house.

The orchard contains an eclectic mix of fruit trees. They are planted in the lawn area adjoining the pergola which shades the driveway. The area for the orchard is not large but includes lemon, grapefruit and mandarin trees. There is also a Nashi pear, a plum and an Australian custard apple.

The vegetable garden is the area where Mr Nguyen's horticultural experiments flourish. The vegetable area extends across the back third of the garden. It consists of neat linear beds. A tall wooden frame which supports a pumpkin vine and over which palm fronds have been laid to provide shade, covers the last bed. To one side is a small water garden. This has been created to grow water vegetables and it reflects the continuity of the ancient water agricultural practices. This small garden is delicately designed and includes the blue flowering water hyacinth as well as a number of small ornamental ceramic water creatures carefully placed on the rockery which defines the pools. In this area water bamboo and other water vegetables including Vietnamese

watercress are grown. There are many elements which convey the sense of the East, but they are not obvious. Instead the garden resonates with the energy of the gardener and his quick enquiring mind.

### *The Herb Garden*

There are a number of herbs growing in the vegetable beds as well as in pots under the pergola adjoining the garage. Quynh Duc is experimenting with Vietnamese herbs, which are both culinary and medicinal. They include the Vietnamese equivalent of mint which is a purple leafed herb with an aroma, when the leaf is crushed, which hints at mint but is overlaid by an aroma similar to cardamon. This herb is used in salads and soups.

There is a special bed of medicinal herbs including one with lemon scented leaves which Quynh Duc describes as '*medicine food*'. It is used for gastric colic. Another herb called 'tiato', growing nearby, is used for flu and headaches. Quynh Duc demonstrates its effectiveness by taking off his cap and placing some of the herb on his head, replacing the cap. He suggests that placing herbs under one's hat will ease headaches. He has been cross-pollinating a number of Vietnamese herbs, some of which are used for '*women's problems*'. Although he does not know the medicinal effects of his crosses, they do result in some unusual leaf colours. One of his experiments involves different Vietnamese mints.<sup>9</sup> This has resulted in a plant with brilliant coloured leaves. As a result, he has named the new plant 'ram-dap' or 'fire colour'.

He is also growing a basil, called 'hunjqe', which he states is a Vietnamese basil not an Italian one. He has been experimenting with a cross between the medicinal 'tiato' and culinary 'hunjqe'. The cross has produced purple coloured leaves and an unusual aroma, but he is unsure whether it is medicinal or can be used for cooking. He uses the Vietnamese basil in noodle soup and suggests that Vietnamese noodle shops will be using his new basil soon.

### *An Experimental Garden of New Vegetables*

Quynh Duc, in keeping with his military training, is highly disciplined about his gardening. He has undertaken a number of experiments using cross pollination and grafting techniques to produce a range of new vegetables, including a new pumpkin, a new melon and a strangely distorted cucumber. The new pumpkins hang from the timber frame, shaded by palm fronds, at the back of the vegetable beds. They are creamy white and smallish with a shape resembling a spinning top. This pumpkin is the result of many horticultural experiments involving the crossing of five different species of pumpkin. While he is pleased with his new pumpkin, he is particularly excited about his new melon. This unusual melon has been created by crossing a Vietnamese melon with an Australian rock melon and a papaya. Quynh Duc is proud of his fruit saying '*...now I have new food for my country and your country*'. He points out that the Vietnamese melon, '*dua gang*', is not sweet. *It only has a pleasant smell but not an interesting taste. Also the flesh is very soft.*' Whereas the new fruit has a pleasant smell, firm flesh and a sweet taste. He calls the new fruit a '*Vietnamese Rockmelon*'. He will sell it after it has been registered. He speculates that if he sold it for \$1 initially in his country where there are so many people, he could charge three dollars once they have tasted them because his new melons have '*very good taste and very good smell*'. Developing the new fruit took a great deal of

skill because papayas are trees and melons are vines. He grafted the papaya stem and flower, however the process was complicated by the fact that the papaya and the melon belong to different botanical families. He stated that the grafting is hard to do but he is continuing to experiment. When he is experimenting with new ideas he allows four years for the results to develop.

Another experiment that has brought him fame is his ‘Cobra Cucumber’. The plants used for the ‘Cobra Cucumber’ have fruit weighing up to three kilos and are usually about thirty centimetres long. He uses acupuncture needles to distort them. The needles also deter pollinating bees. He starves the plant when he wants to pinch the fruit in, and he floods it with water and fertiliser when he wants it to produce spurts of growth. It takes three years to produce these grotesquely twisted vegetables.

#### *Traditional Vietnamese Vegetables*

There are a number of plants in the back garden which are characteristic of most Vietnamese gardens and are used in different Vietnamese dishes. There is a prolific plant, similar to ‘Elephant Ears’ called ‘*baiha*’ which also grew in Loi’s garden. In Vietnamese cooking, the stalk is chopped into segments and peeled, salted and drained before cooking. It is used in soups as well as with prawns, pineapple and particularly with fish, either Kingfish or Spanish Mackerel.

Another plant characteristic of most Vietnamese gardens is a grey-green grass called the ‘long grass’ or ‘*Xa*’. Quynh Duc uses the grass in stocks prepared from meat and bones because the grass removes the odour. There are also some Vietnamese salad vegetables, in particular, a lettuce-like plant which he calls ‘*rau - moung*’. He and his family often start the meal with this salad or they may combine it with beef or chicken.

Quynh Duc enjoys cooking with his wife. The house has a large kitchen and they use produce from the garden to cook traditional Vietnamese meals. In December, they prepare a Vietnamese dish for Vietnamese New Year, which occurs in February. This dish requires a long marinating period, possibly three to six months.

#### ***Quynh Duc’s Vietnamese New Year Marinated Prawns.***

*Remove the heads on three kilos of prawns, but keep the skins on.*

*Wash the prawns 3 to 4 times in water and put in the sun for 1 to 2 hours to dry.*

*Add chilli (finely sliced), salt and pepper, fish sauce, garlic and sugar in layers between the prawns, filling a large glass jar. Fill the jar with Dubonnet and seal.*

*Put in the sun for 5 days and the colour should change to red.*

*Store for 3 - 6 months before using*

Quynh Duc Nguyen’s garden occupies him fully. His floral display gardens change with the seasons so that he has a distinctive spring, summer, autumn and winter gardens. His horticultural prowess has become so well known that he is listed in the Vietnamese ‘*Who’s Who. Edition 3*’. In characteristic warrior style he is proud of this acknowledgement and of his many awards.

### ***Epilogue***

Neither the harmony garden nor the warrior's garden have cinnamon trees or the emerald green bamboo. Vietnamese gardens in Australia are relatively new. They do not have a sense of permanence about them at this stage. Aspects of Vietnamese gardening culture are jumbled together with contemporary Australian and other migrant cultures. Gardens in Vietnam are usually closely integrated with the layout of the house, where the garden is often a central courtyard. The plants in these gardens have deeply symbolic meanings. As the Vietnamese community become established in Australia, it will be interesting to see if they recreate the houses of their home country or if they follow the pattern of the Chinese community in Australia and live in opulent brick mansions with conventionally Australian front and back gardens.

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### **Endnotes**

1. Jupp, J. 1988. *The Australian People*. Angus & Robertson: Sydney. 831-836.
2. This poem is used as the opening to an essay called 'The Cinnamon Fragrance' in 'The Diary of Wendy N. Duong.' Washington, DC. Feb. 1990. Translated from Vietnamese by the author in *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*. Pp 25 - 41
3. Ibid. 26.
4. Ibid. 31.
5. This poem was given to me by Loc Tran who told many stories about Vietnam. The poet, Han Mac Tu, wrote the poem in the 1930s.
6. Doung. Op.cit. 25.
7. These quotes have come from an unpublished essay by Loc Tran, a Vietnamese liaison officer in Marrickville who introduced me to members of the Vietnamese community.
8. This form of topiary carries spiritual significance which varies if there are six spheres, 'luc bat', or seven spheres, 'that bat', or nine spheres, <sup>2</sup>'cue bat'.
9. The crossing of mint called 'ram' with another mint called 'dap ca'.