

A SHORT WALK FROM MY HOME IS THE Williamstown Botanic Gardens. Like the rest of my local community I have a great affection for the gardens, which, like many great open spaces, are the result of sustained stewardship by the community and local council.

Early residents of Williamstown, an inner-western suburb of Melbourne, showed vision in appreciating the value and community benefits that public gardens can provide. In 1856 they successfully lobbied state and local governments for the creation of a ten-acre public reserve. A design was prepared by Edward La Trobe Bateman and the residents continued their involvement in the creation of the gardens by donating plants. The Williamstown Botanic Gardens, one of Victoria's first botanic gardens, opened to the public in 1860.

In 1865, inspired by the success of the initial gardens, the community successfully lobbied the government for the reserve to be doubled in size. The expanded open space incorporated playing fields, which today continue to provide facilities for a range of sporting clubs. It was on these playing fields that my relationship with the gardens began – a relationship I thought fitting to revisit for this issue, which looks at public gardens.

While at university my football team had a healthy cross-town rivalry with Williamstown (I believe my team still holds the record for the most landscape architects in a single team. Quite a few years later I moved to Williamstown with my family. Real estate prices decided which house I could afford but fortunately it was close to the gardens. As an enthusiastic new resident I thought there might be a "friends of the gardens" group I could join. To my surprise there wasn't. A few months later I happened to meet the chair of the Williamstown Botanic Gardens Advisory Group. She advised me there wasn't a friends group (yet) but invited me to attend the advisory group meeting, which I happily accepted.

The Williamstown Botanic Gardens Advisory Group had been established in response to community concerns about the condition of the gardens. The local council wisely elected to establish a committee that is comprised of community (both local and broader community members), council staff and councillors. The success of the committee is built upon a culture of shared passion for the gardens, a desire to continue to improve them

and an appreciation that it takes time to make a great garden.

Over time modifications had been made to the original garden design, which had resulted in a fragmented layout with significant elements lost or inconsistent with the garden style. In 2000 the council commissioned landscape architect John Patrick to prepare a conservation management plan and masterplan. The document captured the history of the garden and provided a strategic vision, with a ten-year action plan to achieve it. The vision was embraced by the community and the council showed support for the masterplan's recommendations.

Progressively each of the recommendations of the masterplan was implemented and as the gardens were reinvigorated, community connections increased. Local schools are welcomed for tours, the gardens have become an increasingly popular venue for wedding photos and during summer months community members enjoy theatre in the gardens. In 2009 The Friends of Williamstown Botanic Gardens was established. The group runs events such as an annual Paint the Gardens art competition, and creates community networks with other similar groups. Story time in the gardens has become a favourite of young children and parents, who enjoy stories and songs presented by the local library under a large golden elm (a program that has successfully been extended to other gardens within the municipality). An online presence for the gardens has also been created on sites such as Flickr, which captures the seasonal displays of the plants.

Williamstown Botanic Gardens is an example of how botanic gardens can provide broader economic benefits to a community. The gardens consistently feature in tourism promotions, trend highly on travel websites and real estate agents use them as a regular feature to promote houses.

Environmentally the gardens at Williamstown sustain an extensive collection of flora and fauna. A local resident who is a keen photographer of insects has captured the diversity of species within the gardens that is unbeknownst to most residents. Decapitated possums are signs of visits by powerful owls (not frustrated garden staff) and a community of micro bats have long called the gardens home.

In 2010 the gardens celebrated their one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary with a



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range of community events. The recommendations of the masterplan commissioned in 2000 were carried out, which was a credit to the local community and the council. A new masterplan for the gardens is in the final stages of completion by Laidlaw and Laidlaw Design. Community and stakeholder consultation has been a key aspect of the masterplan preparation. The goal is for the gardens to become a model for a contemporary botanic garden that incorporates its rich history – a place that redefines community expectations of a botanic garden through the successful combination of plant conservation, education, recreation, culture and science.

Gardens such as the Williamstown Botanic Gardens are very much part of the Australian landscape history – even if we sometimes forget the affection we have for them. More importantly, an essential part of successful public gardens is the public. A well-designed public garden provides the opportunity to bring people together in a space they cherish, which ultimately results in better, healthier communities.

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