

# STEP NEWSLETTER SEPTEMBER 2024



Main path from the seat looking northwards showing flowering wattles either side. Photo Andy Russell

## From the President

Hello all, and happy spring.

We have been fortunate to have had enough regular precipitation down in Forest 20 over the winter period to have enabled plenty of planting, despite the frequent and VERY cold frosty mornings. Our trusty STEPPers have tackled some big projects, including a major pruning of the *Callistemon sieberi* patch in Central Garden (section E). These shrubs were severely defoliated by the Callistemon Sawfly larvae, and by coppicing them heavily we have not only removed the pest but opened some areas to trial new plants. A few Rasp Ferns, *Doodia aspera* have gone in, although the heavy frosts have burnt them back. They should however recover, as will the Callistemons!

The other benefit of clearing out some of the overgrown beds has been the creation of propagation material, for use around our gardens and potentially for sale at Harvest stalls up at the Arboretum. Some of the plants propagated have been Native Flax Lily *Dianella revoluta* and Showy Copper Wire Daisy *Podolepis jaceoides*.

During July we had the National Arboretum's *Warm Trees* annual knitted installation extend down into the STEP gardens. The colourful textiles are used twice, once for display and then turned into rugs and scarves which are donated to charity. The day that I photographed the Red Stringy Barks *Eucalyptus macrorhyncha* wrapped in their scarves, there was also a chirpy group of White Winged Choughs sitting in the tree. I couldn't help wondering what they were saying to each other about the décor!

Spring is always a busy month for anyone who likes to spend time outdoors- we are expecting plenty of visitors at the two Wattle Walks, done in conjunction with the Arboretum's Wattle Day celebrations, which will have occurred by the time this Newsletter goes to print. The Canberra *Festival of Nature* (managed by Landcare ACT) has dozens of events listed, and we will have some down in Forest 20. This includes a Stroll through Southern Tablelands Flora on Saturday 16 November at 2pm. To find out more about the festival go to [landcareact.org.au](http://landcareact.org.au).

Regards Jane Cottee





## The new neighbours

It might seem that Forest 20 exists in splendid isolation, bound as we are on two sides by native grasslands and rehabilitating Red Gum/Yellow Box woodland. However, we are soon to acquire a neighbour in the form of the National Rock Garden. For some months now, paths have been mapped and created, and wondrous specimens from near and far (even from Antarctica) have been put in place. Their block still needs some landscaping but doubtless once the Wilga trees (*Geijera parviflora*) start to grow, their place will look more presentable. Our new neighbours seem to be a hugely diverse mob, likely to attract many visitors once they have fully settled in. Observations over the fence seem to reveal they are a rather stony-faced lot. One thing we do know for sure is that they are not likely to party into the wee small hours, playing rowdy rock music to disturb the tranquil atmosphere of Forest 20. Nor are they likely to surreptitiously encroach on our boundary lines. Welcome NRG – we at STEP are looking forward to familiarising ourselves with our new neighbours.



*The new National Rock Garden to the east of Forest 20 still being constructed.*

### Diversifying the grassy understory

Between the two mineral paths which lead from the entrance towards the She-Oak Nook is an often-overlooked area. This is understory for the Eucalypts and contains a range of native grasses such as *Bothriochloa macra* (Red-leg Grass), *Austrostipa densiflora* (Foxtail Speargrass) and *Poa labillardierei* (Common Tussock Grass). Increasingly, it is evident other species are volunteering here, promoted perhaps by the less frequent mowing activity. Some species observed have been *Pelargonium*, *Glycine*, *Acaena ovina*, *Calocephalus citreus* (Lemon Beauty-head) and *Tricoryne elatior* (Yellow Rush Lily). In an effort to extend this diversity, some 14 *Podolepis jaceoides* (Showy Copper-wire Daisy)

have also been randomly planted among the grasses. These plants are hardy and spread easily and will add to the interest of the plants to be seen along the Eucalypt Walk.

*Left Austrostipa densiflora Right Bothriochloa macra* Text Jane Cottee this page, top 3 photos Jane Cottee, grasses Andy Russell







*Podolepis jaceoides* Showy Copper-wire Daisy



*Tricoryne elatior* Yellow Rush Lily



*Pelargonium sp perhaps sp. Striatellum*



*Calocephalus citreus* Lemon Beauty-heads

## News from Forest 20

Throughout the winter STEPpers continue to turn-out to weekly Working Bee, sometimes in surprising numbers considering the temperatures. Maybe the convivial morning teas and their variety of edibles on offer is part of the reason!

Over the past few weeks, we have welcomed several visitors to Forest 20 and its hospitality. It was very good to welcome Stuart Jeffress (acting Executive Branch Manager) to meet us, and he tells us that he frequently takes a walk in Forest 20. Our location near to the Visitor Centre and carparks is certainly a great advantage to all visitors. We also look forward to meeting Jayne Simon (newly appointed Senior Director, Events and Community Engagement) and thank Alison Stewart for her close liaison with us while that position was being filled permanently. *Stuart Jeffress talks to Ross Dalton at a May morning tea.*



STEPpers have noticed an increase of casual visitors to Forest 20 as they work on their weeding, mulching and other tasks on a Thursday morning. It was delightful to watch a group of under 3's enjoy the pleasure of splashing in the muddy management track after a stroll down the Wattle Walk one Thursday morning.

One very recent visitor was Sarah Danckert from Wagga Wagga, an active member of the Murrumbidgee Field Naturalists. At our morning tea Sarah explained to assembled STEPpers the vision of a project she and others are working on in collaboration with the Wagga Wagga City Council and the horticulturalist at the city's Arboretum/Botanic Garden. Although their site has many established and non-local mature trees there is plenty of scope to create and maintain garden beds demonstrating local Australian native plants. Their project has a long way to go, and the potential of a rather open canvas for what can be achieved is a challenge.

Another recent or rather a repeat visitor was Sally Holliday, Wellness Coordinator with Landcare ACT. Sally is planning to run special walks through Forest 20 as part of her Landcare and wellness role in helping visitors experience Australian native plants in all their variety and well beyond their 'names'. This walk is called "Women in Nature". These walks are described as *"A mindful meander in which there will be moments for both quiet contemplation and group discussion. We'll wander through forest 20 at a leisurely pace, pausing along the way to attune to our surroundings, activate the senses, and experience nature connection through various embodied activities. The walk will be guided by nature connection facilitator Sally Holliday (Landcare ACT) and STEP volunteers, and can be booked through: <https://events.humanitix.com/women-in-nature-put-a-spring-in-your-step>*

So, Forest 20 continues to expand its value beyond being simply a place where local and regional Australian native plants grow. As Canberra grows and suburbs develop nearby Forest 20 increasingly becoming a place to encounter and learn about our natural heritage in a safe and welcoming location.

David Shorthouse

## STEP Visitor

On Thursday 22 August, Sarah Danckert from Wagga Wagga visited STEP. She was representing the Murrumbidgee Field Naturalists who work in the Leeton, Griffith, Narranderra and Wagga Wagga areas. Her interest in visiting us was to see how we have created our Regional Botanic Garden to display Australian flora. Her group has been allocated some 4-5 hectares of the Wagga Wagga Municipal Park. This area already has some well-established trees, though not all are native to the region (such as the Illawarra Flame trees). Sarah is advocating for an Australian flora garden but there are many other tasks which are on her agenda. One of these is creating a detailed map of what and where existing plants are. Another is mobilising volunteers with botanical and horticultural expertise.

Sarah claims a previous interest of hers was birding where she realised how little she knew. Now she had moved on to this project, she maintains the same applies.

We wish her all the best for her endeavours and hope that she will keep in touch to let us know how the project is progressing.



*David Shorthouse in conversation with Sarah Danckert photo Andy Russell text Jane Cottee.*



## Glorious Grevilleas!

If you are looking for hardy evergreen shrubs and ground covers, that flower for many months of the year AND attract native birds and insects, you can't go past Grevillea species. Grevilleas are members of the Proteaceae Family, so are related to plants like Banksias and Hakeas. There are about 360 species of them (mostly Australian) and many, many cultivars. The main things to remember about this group is that they require adequate drainage and soils low in phosphorous, so do NOT respond well to chemical fertilizers. They are drought tolerant and respond well to regular light pruning after flowering. NOTE: many people have an allergic skin reaction to the leaves, so protect skin when working with them. Above *Grevillea victoriae subsp nivalis*



At STEP we have several Tablelands species that flower magnificently for most of the year. The two top performers are probably the Mountain Grevillea *Grevillea victoriae subsp. nivalis* and the Woolly Grevillea *Grevillea lanigera*. These both have reddish or pink spider-like clusters of flowers and are medium sized shrubs. The ground cover form of *G.lanigera* 'Mt Tamboritha' is a popular garden centre variety and readily available.

Left *Grevillea lanigera* Woolly Grevillea

For a perfumed Grevillea (most of them aren't particularly fragrant) I would recommend *Grevillea australis*. This low growing prickly shrub has inconspicuous white flowers in spring/summer that smell divine.

*Grevillea alpina* is a small, softly hairy plant found naturally around Canberra Nature parks. With its reddish - orange pendulous clusters of flowers it's a joy to see on places like Black Mountain and Aranda bushlands. *Grevillea diminuta* is another low growing shrub and survives sub-alpine conditions, naturally occurring in the Brindabella and Bimberi ranges. It sits well in a rockery or on top of a retaining wall, and has small, neat oval leaves and deep red flowers.

We also have the rare and endangered Tumut Grevillea *Grevillea wilkinsonii*, which flowers well each year. It is found naturally in just a couple of places near Tumut and seems to grow well in Canberra, given adequate drainage. With its dusky pink toothbrush like flower spikes and grey leaves it makes a handsome addition to any garden. Another endangered Grevillea that grows well at STEP is the



*wilkinsonii* Tumut Grevillea

Wee Jasper Grevillea *G. iaspicula*. This is a dense shrub with greenish pink flowers and makes a good low hedge.

*Grevillea*

*Grevillea iaspicula* Wee Jasper Grevillea



To see these Grevilleas in bloom come for a stroll in Forest 20 through spring-you will be rewarded with not only beautiful flowers but also honey-eating birds and buzzing bees! Photos Andy Russell

## Plant Nerds corner

Not a STEP native but one of immense interest to those of us who enjoy the wonders of Australian natives. I recently came across some growing specimens of a truly 'dinosaur era' (much abused term re *Wollemi nobilis* in my view) plants. They are a bit difficult to see though as they are extremely rare even in their remote location, the lower coastal rainforests north of the Daintree River on Cape York. The plant is *Idiospermum australiense* (no common name) and there is substantial evidence that it was "spread" by dinosaurs. It has an extraordinary growth habit, but its most astonishing characteristic is that it has 4-6 cotyledons, the seed leaves of an embryo that emerge when it first germinates. All other plants have either one (most grasses, lillies, orchids) or two (all the rest).

It is also extremely toxic and its seed, the size of a small coconut, kills modern animals. Indeed, when it was discovered in 1905 it was later thought to have become extinct until a bunch of cattle died near the Daintree River a few decades ago and vets found the killer was the fruit of these few remaining trees. Luckily, they are now being given ex-situ preservation and you will be able to see them in the new tropical conservatory at the Australian National Botanic Gardens when it opens (hopefully) later this year.

Max Bourke



*Idiospermum australiense* Photo Atlas of Living Australia



*Ian Potter National Conservatory an artist's impression Photo Canberra Times November 2023*



## Spring 2024 at the Gallery of Grasses

As daytime temperatures and daylength increase, the Gallery starts to show a division among the grasses. If you walk along the Boundary Road, it is very easy to pick up the difference between the rows of brown and those showing signs of fresh green growth (see photo). This is the distinction between those that are known as cool -season perennials and the warm - season perennials and refers to the timing of their growth and subsequent flowering. The picture shows adjacent rows of Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra* on the left) which is a warm season grass and is dormant, and a Spear Grass (*Austrostipa sp.*, on the right), which is a cool season grass, and is showing active new tiller growth. One of the factors contributing to the expression of the difference is their relative temperature optima for growth. This in turn is underpinned by differences in their photosynthetic systems. The warm season perennials are what are termed C4 grasses that mature and flower later in the summer and the cool season types are C3 grasses, that mature and flower early in the summer.



Kangaroo Grass is a very widespread species in Australia. On a continent with a flora dominated by Eucalyptus and Acacia it may seem surprising that the most widespread species in the flora is in fact *Themeda triandra* (picture on right). The genus *Themeda* is thought to have arisen in southern Asia, where it has its greatest species diversity (27 species). One species, *Themeda triandra*, spread into northern Australia and Africa and became the dominant grass of the subtropical savannas on both continents. Despite its wide adaptability it did not fare well with the advent of pastoralism in south-eastern Australia. With the application of fertilisers and heavy grazing pressure it was not competitive against the introduction of



cool season perennial grasses like phalaris, cocksfoot, tall fescue and annual weedy species. Swards of Kangaroo grass are not very evident in the landscape now; however, if you walk through the Cork Oak plantation (Forest 1) on the lower path and look out towards the motor way, you can see a good expanse of Kangaroo Grass, especially in late summer.

Another interesting aspect of the biology of Kangaroo Grass is its genetic system. It has several chromosomal types in which the whole genome has been duplicated (polyploidy). The standard (Diploid) type occurs in the southern NSW Tableland and in Victoria, while the higher chromosome types (Tetraploids and Octoploids) are found in the hotter, drier northern areas. Polyploidy is thought to have aided its spread into the warmer and drier parts of northern Australia.

Wal Kelman Text and top photo, *Themeda* photo Andy Russell



## STEP display at Park Care Exhibition, Jamison shops



*Ross Dalton wearing his STEP t-shirt manning the STEP display and the other two separate panels. Pictures Andy Russell*

The annual combined Parkcare display at the Jamison Centre took place on the 6-8<sup>th</sup> of September. There was quite a bit of interest from passers-by in both the STEP display and those of other volunteer groups who care for local parklands around Canberra.

Thank you to all of those who helped out this year.

Jane Cottee

## Victim Of Wild Weather

The STEP banner at our entrance fell victim to the recent wild windy weather. Our banner supplier Flag Central of Burleigh Heads Queensland has been approached for a replacement.

*Photo David & Lainie Shorthouse*





## Wattle Walks at Forest 20 are again popular

The wattle walks were popular this year and were fully booked up! Judy and Jane took a total of thirty visitors around on the Saturday and Sunday mornings of Wattle Day Weekend.

This provided an excellent opportunity to not only introduce people to Forest 20, but also to inspire them to grow local Wattle species in their own gardens.



*Picture and text Jane Cottee*



## More Acacia photos from Wattle Time



*Acacia acinacea* Gold dust Wattle



*Acacia pravissima* Ovens Wattle



*Acacia rubida* Red-stemmed Wattle



*Acacia dealbata* Silver Wattle



*Acacia ulicifolia* Juniper Wattle



*Acacia melanoxylon* Blackwood and *Harmonia conformis* the Common Ladybird photos this page Andy Russell



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