

## FGBG PRESIDENTS REPORT 2025

This time last year I was not standing here as the newly elected President of the Friends. Due to unforeseen circumstances, our President felt he could not continue in the role and resigned his position, and I reluctantly became Acting President. Soon after this our wonderful secretary Rossy Jablonsky resigned as her husband Peter became critically unwell.

So, it has been a year of upheaval, uncertainty and pain, and we have lost many talented and experienced volunteers, but I can happily say we feel we are well on the way to restoring the equanimity of our organisation.

There is one key issue that cannot be ignored in this report.

Last November, 6 of our members, all of whom have held leadership roles at some time, were banned from volunteering and from entering any non-public areas of the Gardens, 4 of them for 4 months, and 2 people had a lifetime ban. There was no warning and no reason given.

The Friends Nursery was also under threat of closure, at the end of its current licence, and many volunteers left in disgust.

By March the Friends relationship with Gardens Management had deteriorated to such an extent that the City instigated a Cultural Diagnostic Review which, after 38 interviews of Friends and GBG staff produced a 500-page report, a mammoth task, taking more time than predicted, but finally, I think we feel heard, believed, and valued. Our way forward is looking much brighter, and we would particularly like to thank James Stirton for giving so much time and effort into achieving this.

Our Special 6, those banned from the gardens, are also on the brink of a resolution and we hope to see them back in the Gardens soon.

The committee has been working on a new strategy document to cover the next 5 years. As part of this process, we will be sending out a survey to understand members' experience of the Friends and to hear any ideas in terms of activities, projects or functions that could be considered, so please take the opportunity to have your say.

Despite the setbacks we have had much to celebrate. 2025 marks the 40th anniversary of the Friends, and the City was determined it would not pass unnoticed despite our feeling we had little to celebrate.

So on 4th of April we celebrated in style with a champagne breakfast attended by the Governor of Victoria, Her Excellency Professor the Honorable Margaret Gardner, Executive Director, City Infrastructure James Stirton, Mayor Stretch Kontelj, Councillor Anthony Aitken, Volunteers and GBG Staff.

The Sweethearts sang, speeches were made, and the Governor planted a Glastonbury Thorn tree in our honour and it was a lovely morning. Planning is underway for another celebration on 7 November, our actual anniversary, to celebrate with all our members.

## **Botanic Art**

The Geelong School of Botanical Art continues to be very successful thanks to its core group of prestigious Tutors, and its dedicated Coordinator Pammi Pryor, and our administration officer Tracey whose unwavering assistance with the school throughout the year has made a huge difference.

Classes are at capacity, and whilst there have been some uncertainties around venue and parking, I think these are now resolving favourably.

The Schools main event this year is the biennial exhibition 'Inspired by Nature 9' to be held at the Gordon Gallery in Fenwick Street from 10 September to 24 September. Original artworks will be showcased ranging from beginners to professional pieces.

The Exhibition will run concurrently with the Archibald Exhibition at the Geelong Gallery and hopefully visitors to Geelong will visit both.

### **REPORTS FROM EACH VOLUNTEER GROUP:**

#### **From the Rose Group**

Our group now has 5 core members, and although a small group, we managed well with the tasks this year and the roses rewarded us with a great display.

We could not have achieved this without the support from the Botanic Gardens Staff, particularly during pruning, but also through the year. So heartfelt thanks to Sheree, Claude and Tracey, and also to the larger group of staff members who join us for a magnificent day of winter pruning. Special thanks to Liam and Dave who tackle the climbers each year. They looked beautiful last summer, spilling over the tops of the towers ( which by the way were made by a member of the rose group 30 years ago)

We have purchased new roses to fill in some gaps, and these will be planted in spring. Thanks to Lucy who has potted these for us. Unfortunately, it is becoming very difficult to source the older varieties.

A future project we have begun thinking about is the question of signage, to give some information about some of the special old roses we have.

As this report goes in, we have finished our winter prune, but the older once-flowering roses are awaiting their turn. They will be pruned after they flower in spring and early summer.

Thanks to my co-workers, Anne, Jennifer, John and Robyn, for hard work and good fellowship.

#### **Perennial Border**

This is the area I help maintain.

At this moment it is all cut back as it is every winter, and just waiting for a burst of warm spring weather to start growing again. Our volunteer numbers have halved with just 4 old ladies left, but we still manage to fill that trailer every week!

Fortunately, we have great support from the gardens staff when we need some extra muscle, like we do next Wednesday when we need to shovel about 5 trailer loads of mulch onto the garden beds, so I'd like to thank them all in advance, especially Claude who will be coordinating the event.

The shade border we planted out last year has grown well, and while we still have gaps to fill, it just takes time to find the right plants.

Many interesting plants are difficult to find, and we want to show that there are some that may be out of fashion, but are worth hunting down and growing, whether it's for their perfume, colour of flower or foliage. Also, the soil in Geelong Botanic Gardens is so amazing I have heard staff say they could eat it!

### **Nursery Report**

The past year has been challenging for the nursery team. Propagation restrictions and operational changes have reduced the number of nursery volunteers, and damaged morale of the small number of volunteers who still turn up to run the nursery. We have followed all requests made by Gardens management, but a direct consequence of this is a drastic reduction in the plant stock available for sale.

At a Growers meeting in December, it was unanimously agreed to halt production from January 2025 after the COGG produced a draft suggesting the closure of the nursery on the 30 June 2025. Regardless of this negativity, a dedicated group of 9 volunteers presented each Wednesday and continued to be an advocate for the Gardens and record steady Wednesday sales. The Saturday April 5 Autumn sale was exceptionally successful and a credit to the volunteers.

Propagation under tight management guidelines resumed after receiving news of the postponing of the nursery closing date. After the recent negotiations with Management there is an air of optimism in the group, and we are looking forward to rebuilding a strong, respectful relationship with them.

The primary task now is to rebuild the Grower volunteer numbers so that we have a sustainable group for the future.

### **Weeders report**

The weeders group has maintained our number of volunteers during this last year. It is pleasing to see the areas we have weeded over the past three years are showing significantly less regrowth.

We continue to have a very effective working relationship with the Gardens staff and have assisted them on other projects including mass planting, propagation, harvesting of produce and maintenance in the vegetable garden area.

The introduction of FGBG uniforms has greatly increased our visibility and Interactions with the public, and led to more frequent opportunities to promote the Gardens

## **Guides report**

The Guides are a group of people with an exceptional knowledge of the history of the Gardens and the plants within.

This has not been an easy year for them with many obstacles put in their way resulting in poor morale and the resignation of several exceptional Guides.

However, those left have filled the gaps in rosters and continue to offer an amazing service to visitors. Free walks on Wednesdays and Sundays and booked walks for interested groups and also some special themed walks, all of which take many hours of research to provide the standard they aim for.

Donations and booked walks have raised nearly \$2000 this year, which is amazing considering the issues they have had around advertising and marketing.

They are optimistic that by 2026 these issues will be resolved and they can continue to offer Geelong residents and visitors a really interesting experience.

## **Library report**

This year there has not been as much to do in the library, partly because fewer people are using the resources and we have not purchased anything new. Our computer catalogue is an old program on an older PC and requires an update, but as the future of the library is uncertain, I have been reluctant to pursue change at this stage.

The main task for this year has been the ongoing work on our Timeline of the Friends over 40 years, Nadia Zacchigna has been assiduously adding to the current year and editing as any new or altered information arises, and we have been going through our newspaper and photo archives for any additional facts. We are lucky that Meralyn Roberts and others have maintained and updated these, and we plan to publish it electronically later this year and produce a few hard copies.

The Library belonging to the Friends and the collection of the Geelong Botanic Gardens which we look after, includes many valuable gardening and horticultural assets, and I hope it will continue as such into the future, even though resources and databases available on the internet are used more and more for up to date nomenclature etc.

## **Events**

The Events team has put together another excellent program of activities for the year despite the difficulties regarding room bookings.

Many successful events have been held off site, such as this one, and the Friends volunteer lunch which packed the hall.

The Winter Lunch at Mt Duneed Winery was a resounding success, and we hosted our first Silent Auction there. The generosity of donors was much appreciated, and it could be a model for future Winter Lunches. Many positive comments about the venue were appreciated by the team, who put a great deal of consideration each year into the venue and format.

Still to come this year are several interesting events including a Coach tour to Cranbourne Botanic Gardens and the McClelland Gallery, details of them can be found on our website. And we give a very special thank you to Allison and the events team for all the hard work they do.

### **Summary from Sheree Parker, Supervisor of the Gardens**

Despite the difficulties experienced during the year by the Friends, the Gardens are looking magnificent, the Weeders might be hard to find, but you can certainly see where they've been, and the Staff have literally moved mountains of soil and rocks.

The Woody Meadow project is the newest and most exciting project. 1000 Australian Native plants, propagated in the GBG nursery were all chosen for their robustness and floral display. Some of our volunteers helped on a particularly wet Wednesday! You can find it running along outside the fence line from the Playspace carpark towards the old Directors cottage, the plants still very small, just waiting for Spring.

The Florence E Clarke Conservatory now houses a display of Cacti and Succulents, the previous residents are growing around the Heritage Ferny rock structure, and the species Pelargonium collection is now located within the South African garden beds on the Teahouse lawn.

Much work is being done mapping and labelling the plants and updating the database. The gardens currently holds 5,555 plant species across 1,287 genera and 206 plant families. Julie has this never-ending task.

The nursery team have been working on creating a chemical free environment by using Bugs for Bugs. Lucy has been the lead for this and has dramatically cut chemical use, plus reduced the number of pests in the greenhouses.

Supported by a Sustainability grant from the Waste department, the Gardens are collecting data on the use of the City's green waste compost in wicking beds for vegetable production, while also refining a potting mix blend for future use. Liam has been on the ABC talking about the program. Excess produce is delivered to Geelong Food Relief, with the Weeders helping pick the produce.

This is just a snapshot of the work the staff do, Sheree oversees all this and more, and the Gardens are a credit to her and her team, and we can't thank them enough.

And finally, I'd like to thank our amazing office staff, Tracey and Sally for all the work they do each year.

The committee, for helping me navigate this unfamiliar terrain, and lastly, Ali Wastie and James Stirton for believing the Friends have a rosy future here in the Geelong Botanic Gardens.

Thankyou

Jan Cheyne  
Acting President 2025