

STEP NEWSLETTER APRIL 2020



Crowea exalata Ginninderra Falls.

From the President

It has been an inauspicious start to 2020 with the severe heatwaves, the continuing drought, savage hailstorms and the ravages of bushfires. Plants at Forest 20 have struggled to cope despite the best efforts of our hard-working volunteers to maintain watering. The very poor air quality due to smoke and dust has been an ongoing concern, along with the many declarations of total fire ban days where activity at STEP (and indeed the whole of the Arboretum) has been restricted. If this is to be our “new normal” then we must find ways to adapt and/or future proof all that we have striven to establish – a challenge for us indeed.

As the new carpark is about to take shape, we have been able to acquire some more rocks for STEP before the heavy equipment starts work (see item). Also, in this newsletter is some information about new (and established) water reticulation which Jens has completed for us. We are very grateful for his expertise and hard work. Jennie Widdowson kindly hosted the STEP annual lunch at her house – it was a lively and convivial occasion. Not deterred by the weather, the ANPS Walking group came to visit early in Feb.

Regards to you all and may you stay safe and healthy in these difficult times.

Addendum - February 10 we had some rain!!

Judy Smith

Seed collecting

On 12 December, we had a visit from Nathan Wells and Micah Stevenson from Yarralumla Nursery. They came to collect seed from our then burgeoning crop of *Leucochrysum albicans* and were very happy with what they were able to harvest. We wish them all the best for their propagating efforts and look forward to the flow on effect that this creates in the promotion of native species for suburban gardens.



Music to STEP to: “We’re having a heatwave” and “Smoke gets in your eyes”.

Thursday 19 December marked the start of the season of Total Fire Ban Days and also was the start of the smoke pollution – at this time from the South Coast and Bringelly fires. Our operating procedures as agreed with the Arboretum are: we would start early and finish all work by 10am; we would not undertake any work involving machinery; we would alert all volunteers to the emergency evacuation plans and we would undertake to remain mindful of our own health and safety, remaining hydrated etc. Mostly watering was done that day and even the insects were looking for a drink.



The smoke pollution was quite alarming and unfortunately this was only the start of this phenomenon over the months to come.





The photos taken from Lainie and David's back deck of clear vs smoky give a better idea of how severe conditions have been.

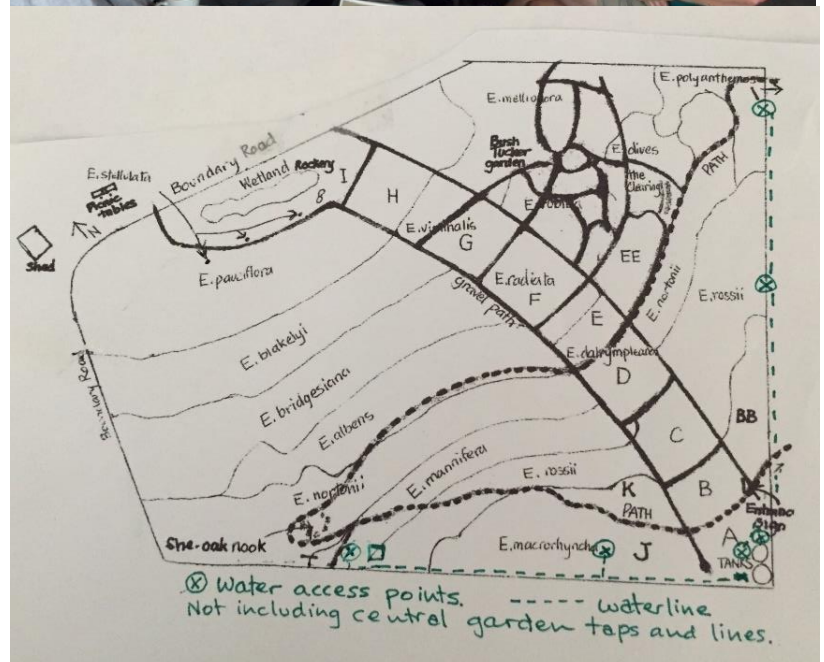
A large group of volunteers turned up this day despite the conditions and we all retired to the Village Centre for coffee and a get-together and Christmas farewell at 10am.



Waterworks

One of the problems associated with hand watering has been the lack of pressure in the gravity-fed line down the central garden and loss of water flow when several people are trying to fill watering cans.

Jens Svensson, our water reticulation expert, has provided additional lines from the tank to assist with the watering process.



Yet more music to STEP to – The Rocky (no Horror) Show.

The old (temporary) carpark at NAC had levels delineated by rocks. Prior to the start of work on the new carpark, these had to be removed so Bill Handke, Mike Todd and Mike Smith identified ones which could be used at STEP as landscape features or path markers. Once places for these had been selected, the hard work with shovels, crowbars and picks began, preparing scooped out sites for the new rocks.



Above, stockpile of rocks to be moved *Right*, preparing sites for the rocks to be placed
Ed, the contractor for NAC, delivered the chosen rocks and subsequently placed them where required. This work was done over a month under very trying conditions of extreme heat, raging dust storms and heavy smoke. Thanks for all the hard work – the results are great and add to the landscape appeal of Forest 20.



Left Choosing the rocks



Right Mike and Bill in a dust storm

ANPS Wednesday Walking Group

On Wednesday 5 February, we were host to the ANPS Walking group. It is very satisfying for STEP to offer tours for this group as ANPS was one of our founding organisations, and this is a small way we can give back to them and demonstrate how, given their belief in us, we have “blossomed”.

A group of about 25 people met with Jennie Widdowson and Judy Smith. The group was lively and very interested in what STEP had to offer. While many are members of STEP, none was an active working bee participant. As guides, and aware that Forest 20 was not being shown at its best due to the extreme weather, we were heartened by the positive feedback and encouragement of the visitors.

We hope they will come again to see Forest 20 when conditions improve.



Judy Smith and Jennie Widdowson with ANPS Wednesday Walking visitors



Pat and Warwick Wright

Wednesday Walkers at the Village Centre

Three photos by Digby Gascoine and the bottom left hand one by Judy Smith

The Acacia Walk and its roots in ancient Greek and Latin

In recent months some new acacia species have been planted in STEP's Acacia Walk. Sometimes their botanical descriptors give us some clue as to their appearance; sometimes their names tell us more about the history of identification. Here are the new plantings:

1. *acacia acinacea*: leaves are shaped like a curved sword or scimitar (from Lat. *acinaces*, a short Persian sabre)
2. *acacia pravissima*: grows in very irregular shapes or forms (superlative form of Lat. adjective *pravus*, crooked, irregular; cf. Engl. *depraved*)
3. *acacia cultriformis*: leaved shaped like a knifeblade (from Lat. *culter*, a knife, ploughshare; cf. Engl. 'cutlery')
4. *acacia lanigera*: leafstalks are woolly (from Lat. *laniger*, bearing [*ger-*] wool [*lana*]; cf. Engl. *lanolin*)
5. *acacia implexa*: entwined (from Lat. *plecto*, to braid, plait; cf. Engl. *complex*)
6. *acacia buxifolia*: with leaves like those of boxwood (from Lat. *buxus*, boxtree; *folium*, leaf)
7. *acacia rubida*: leaves are reddish (from Lat. *rubidus*, red or reddish; cf. Engl. *ruby*)
8. *acacia boormanii*: this is the first of two species named for a person, in this case J.L. Boorman, who worked for the Botanic Gardens in Sydney (1864? -1938)
9. *acacia mearnsii*: this one is named after Colonel Edgar Alexander Mearns (1856-1916), who collected the type from a cultivated specimen in East Africa.

Elizabeth Minchin



Acacia rubida

Acacia acinacea

Acacia cultriformis

Acacia buxifolia

Some of the acacias mentioned in Elizabeth's article. Photos Andy Russell

Forest 20 survives the long hot summer

The summer of 2019-2020 will be remembered by many of us for its long, hot, dry and smoky days, weeks and even several months. During this time, STEPpers were pained to observe many plants succumb to drying surface and deeper soils, prolonged heat waves and extreme temperature days. It was almost heart-breaking to see the fruits of our labour, so warmly celebrated at our tenth anniversary celebrations early in 2019, begin to suffer before our eyes. BUT, with the cooler autumn weather and drenching rain in February, Forest 20 has come alive again.

Of course, there has been some loss and damage, but many plants had reserves sufficient to send up new shoots, some to flower in late summer, and others to send out new leaves. And with some improvement in soil moisture we have been able to renew some plantings with new plants sourced from local growers, unable to participate in the cancelled autumn Australian Native Plants Society sale in March.

Then the Covid-19 hit us, and the Arboretum asked us to cancel our regular Thursday working bees, often attended by 20-25 STEPpers. However, the Arboretum was able to ask us to continue to care for this part of the Arboretum's 'living collection', which we have been pleased to do.

We have reorganised ourselves so that some STEPpers undertake maintenance tasks on each day of the week. We carefully observe suitable separation, so that on most mornings only 2-4 STEPpers can be seen amongst the understorey and trees. Morning tea is not held, but the weeds trailer is often full!

In the midst of this separated existence we also achieved removal of four dead trees (2 eucalypts and 2 acacias) that had died over the summer period! Arboretum staff undertook the chain-saw work partly as a staff training exercise as well as for safety reasons (for STEPpers)!

Some examples of recovery in our regional botanic garden are shown on the next two pages.



New shoots (*Stipa verticillata*) and grassy understory following the February rain.

Photo Lainie Shorthouse



Glycine tabacina (Variable glycine) has appeared in many parts of Forest 20 without us having to find new plants from growers.

Photo Lainie Shorthouse.



Bursaria spinosa (Sweet Bursaria) flowering prolifically.

Photo Lainie Shorthouse.



Removal of dead *Acacia dealbata* (Silver wattle) in cooperation with Arboretum horticulture staff.

Photo Lainie Shorthouse

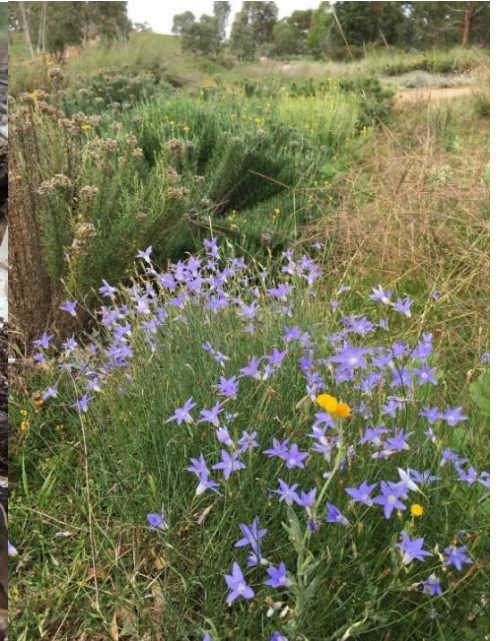


Cheilanthes sieberi (Poison rock fern) living up to its reputation for recovery after rain.

Photo Lainie Shorthouse

Below left, the ephemeral wet land on February 10th Photo Lainie Shorthouse

Below right, *Wahlenbergia* sp. Centre unidentified fungi Photos Digby Gascoine



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Welcome to following new members who joined STEP since 1 July 2019

J & D Davidson Mowle, Y De Brit, D Gascoine, J & R Gilleland, D & R Swanson, G Till and The Wattle Day Association.

STEP Newsletters are produced quarterly in March (though a bit late this time), June, September, and December and are edited by Andy Russell.

Contact details for STEP are by post, STEP President, PO Box 440, Jamison Centre ACT 2614. For newsletter or membership matters email contact is membership@step.asn.au For further information on STEP please visit the STEP website at www.step.asn.au