

## Friends of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens

### Annual General Meeting 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021

#### Presidents Report

As my three year term as President draws to a close, it is with mixed feelings that I present my Annual Report for 2021, in our 39<sup>th</sup> year.

On the one hand it's been a great pleasure being part of an enthusiastic and very dedicated group of like-minded volunteers. On the other hand it's been frustrating and disappointing to see that enthusiasm significantly curtailed over the last nine months, due to the restraints of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

However, the Guides were able to get the jump on Covid restrictions by getting off to a flying start in January, with the very successful and well attended "Aussie Tree Tales & B.Y.O Picnic" event. The Guides led a large group on an explanatory tour of significant native species in our Botanical Gardens, after which everybody enjoyed getting together over a picnic.

We were also able to organise a welcome function for new members in early March. This was a late afternoon event held at the Cottage, with approximately 20 new members attending.

Under the circumstances the Committee had to make the difficult decision to cancel all activities from March 2020. This resulted in the majority of 2020 being a period of non-events and cancellations with a noticeable reduction in volunteer hours. The off-set was that email traffic between Committee members increased considerably. However the Committee did manage to meet on six occasions during the year under difficult circumstances, twice by Zoom.

Fortunately the Begonia Festival which attracted over 60,000 visitors over the March long week-end wasn't affected by the Virus. The Festival was one of the last public events before large scale gatherings were prohibited.

As Covid-19 restrictions became less onerous towards the end of 2020, it became possible to hold a unique event in November, which had been several months in the planning. "Seeding the Future" was a Community outreach event inline with the "*Be Kind Ballarat*" initiative. This very successful event was organised by a group of enthusiasts under the leadership of Elizabeth Gilfillan, and was very well supported by many FBBG members who grew seedlings, vegetables herbs flowers and general plants for free distribution to the community. The Rotunda in the North Gardens proved to be an excellent venue where all Covid restrictions could be adhered to. There was a very strong take up by members of the

community with all plants being distributed by late afternoon. The event turned out to be a very successful way to engage with people when regular activities were cancelled.

Despite all the cancellations there is one significant event that wasn't cancelled during the year. As well described in the Summer edition of the Wellingtonia, Julie Bradby was presented with the Inaugural AAFBG Handbury Award. I would like to recognise and congratulate Julie again on receiving a very well deserved Award.

Given the restraints of social distancing, construction work on Stage 1 of the Fernery was still able to continue. Unfortunately the expected December completion time was missed, and now apparently stage 1 won't be finished until sometime in May.

Approximately seven months ago the City of Ballarat submitted an application to the Victorian Government's Botanic Gardens Grants program for Landscape funding of Stage 1 of the Fernery. Both the FBBG and the Foundation gave an "in principle" support for this application. I'm pleased to report that we have recently been advised that the Application was successful in obtaining a grant for \$150,000.

Meanwhile a Submission by Council Officers for allocation of funding for Stage 2 of the Fernery will be presented to Councillors in early February. After a brainstorming session at the January Committee meeting, a joint Submission by the FBBG and the Foundation to support funding for stage 2 was compiled. This will be attached to the Submission to be presented to Councillors by Council Officers.

The big ticket item on the Agenda for the next few years will be the exploration of a concept with the City of Ballarat and Heritage Victoria, to relocate the Nursery and construct a new George Longley Building.

No doubt this will come as a surprise to most members, so the following is a summary of the background leading up to the development of the concept.

Following an inspection of the Nursery by the City of Ballarat's OH&S Committee in October 2020, it was deemed necessary to install two new security fences, which has now divided the Nursery into two sections. As this presents operational difficulties for the Growers, it has opened up the opportunity to consider relocating the Nursery.

While investigating alternative sites in early November, the concept further developed into building a new home for the Friends as well. The preferred site chosen is west of the Cottage and adjacent to the Council storage yard at the north end of the Council greenhouses. This will result in the Nursery having a much more visible profile, with a frontage onto Gillies St. and also being accessible from the service road behind the Cottage.

With the construction of a new building, the current GLB could be transferred to the City of Ballarat and potentially used for staff amenities. This in turn should free up the Robert Clark Centre for more public use. The current Nursery site will also become a useful asset for Council gardens staff.

This concept was initially discussed with the City of Ballarat in early November and received a favourable response.

Naturally the most significant part of the concept will be the construction of a new GLB. As the original building was constructed by SMB carpentry students, this became the obvious place to commence discussions. In mid-January I met with the Director of Operations Federation TAFE to explore the concept. This was met with considerable enthusiasm, with the suggestion of forming a three way partnership between the FBBG, Federation TAFE and the City of Ballarat. The new building would be constructed at the Carpentry school and transported to site.

A further discussion was held on the 9<sup>th</sup> February with the City of Ballarat's newly appointed Director of Infrastructure and Environment, together with Daryl Wallace and Peter Marquand. This was a productive meeting and very well timed, as the Nursery was in full operation which provided the opportunity for all to see first-hand the difficulties of operating with the new fencing. We have since received a Business Case template from the City of Ballarat.

The next step will be to commence discussion with Heritage Victoria as their approval will be required.

**As this concept is a very significant move for the FBBG, it will be put to a vote at the AGM.**

As mentioned in the Wellingtonia Summer issue, there will be some changes to the Committee for 2021. The following changes confirm that succession planning is alive and well.

- Elizabeth Gilfillan will be stepping down after a very significant contribution of 22 years. She has been a very passionate supporter throughout this period, having served as President and Projects Convenor. Her experience on the Committee will be greatly missed.
- She has also decided to retire from the position of Acting Secretary for the AAFBG, which she has held for the last 12 months, having been Secretary for the previous seven years. Her position as AAFBG Representative on the Committee will be taken up by Merrill Shulkes.
- Merrill and her husband Arthur have only recently moved to Ballarat and joined the FBBG. I welcome Merrill to the Committee and no doubt she will be a great contributor.
- Raoul Dixon has also decided not to stand again after a 20 year period of dedicated service. Having been membership Convenor throughout this period, and President on two separate occasions, his wealth of knowledge and experience will also be greatly missed.

- Warwick Sellens, who joined the Committee during the year as AAFBG Representative will be taking over the Membership portfolio from Raoul.
- As Terry O'Brien moves into the position of President, Julie Chandler has offered to take over the demanding role of Guides Convenor. Having been trained by Terry I'm sure she will be taking up the role with great gusto.
- To round off a very strong Committee, Wendy Taylor has volunteered to fill the vacant position of Promotion/Public Relations.
- As the year unfolded there was a growing concern about the effect of Covid-19 on Nursery sales and the subsequent impact on our revenue stream due to the Nursery being closed. This led to a discussion with Susan Pilbeam, who agreed to relinquish her paid position as Administration Assistant. The role will now be covered on a voluntary basis and initially spread between Kim Nolan and Natalie Radomski. I thank Susan very much for the work she has done over the last five years, and for her understanding and acceptance in the transition of this role onto a voluntary basis. I'm pleased to add that she will still remain a member of the FBBG, and continue to assist Michael Bird with the publication of the Wellingtonia.

As the above Committee changes still leave two General Member vacancies, there is an opportunity for any member who would like the experience of becoming more involved by joining the Committee.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Convenors and Committee members for their enthusiasm and dedication during my time as President. Your input and fellowship has been very much appreciated:

**Vice President and Guides Convenor**, Terry O'Brien for his endless initiative in making the Guides a very worthwhile and meaningful activity. I take this opportunity of congratulating Terry on being elected President. As the FBBG are part of his DNA he will without doubt be a very dedicated and energetic President over the next three years.

**Growers Convenor**, Yvonne Curbach for her tenacity in trying to manage the Nursery during the challenging Covid lock-down period. Whilst this resulted in Nursery sales being 21% below the previous year, plant sales from the trolleys outside the Conservatory were in fact 17% up on last year. This increase was due to the initiative of Yvonne, Kim and Sue Rattray in setting up an extra trolley outside the Conservatory. Thanks also to Peter Marquand for his assistance in providing the extra trolley. Special thanks to Sue Rattray who works quietly behind the scenes – watering, managing the trolleys on week-ends and keeping the GLB well supplied with all the necessities.

Having two plant trolleys has been a most interesting exercise and without doubt has increased the profile and visibility of the Nursery. It will be even more interesting to see what effect the potential new location will have on sales?

**Treasurer**, Sincere thanks to Bruce Holland, who retired during the year after 12 years as Treasurer. He has been an outstanding and dedicated Treasurer and we thank him for his diligence and contribution over a long period.

Congratulations to Kim Nolan for taking on the role and being such a willing volunteer. Kim is well placed to take up the position and has already shown she will be a competent Treasurer. As well as being Treasurer, she has also taken on some of the Secretarial duties.

**Wellingtonia Editor**, Michael Bird has shown great perseverance during the Pandemic in continuing to find relevant and interesting items for publication. That he was able to keep the presses rolling and keep us all informed and connected during this time, has been greatly appreciated by all members.

**Botanikids Convenor and Gatekeeper's Cottage Superintendent**. Our hearts go out to Julie Bradby who has found the last nine months extremely frustrating, as she had to postpone a long list of educational and community programs. However one in particular is nearing completion which is the development of Plant Evolution interpretative signage. This will be installed in the Cottage to assist educational groups appreciate the plant world. The display is being developed by Julie, Terry O'Brien and Elizabeth Gilfillan and will be used by the Guides and Botanikids and other Groups.

**Events and Speakers Convenor**, Carole Haines has had to cope with the cancellation of all Events from March, having had a good line up of speakers organised. But she did manage to arrange the all important annual Christmas Nibbles & Drinks. This was held in the Rotunda in the North Gardens and was a very successful event with raffles organised by Carole and Kim Nolan, and provided the opportunity for members to engage.

**Ballarat Botanical Gardens Foundation**, whilst Chair Elizabeth Gilfillan has covered the main items in her Report, I think it's worth reiterating the successful development of a Horticultural Apprentice program. The apprenticeship commences in February 2021, and has come about by the very generous pledge of FBBG members, Merrill and Arthur Shulkes.

**History Convenor**, Congratulations to Lorraine Powell on being awarded an OAM in the Australia Day Awards. A very significant award which recognises her contribution for service to the community. As Lorraine steps down as Convenor in March, her position will be taken up by Stephanie de Boer. Thanks to Lorraine for her long term commitment to the History Group, and we welcome Stephanie back to the Committee. Lorraine remains on the Committee as a General Member.

Hopefully with Covid restrictions now starting to ease, the History Group may be able to recommence their activities.

**Ambassadors**, now under the command of Trish Twaits, have been unable to recommence since the start of the Pandemic, and unfortunately there is still no certainty when they will be able to start again.

**Hospitality and Catering**, the main catering event for the year was the annual Christmas Nibbles & Drinks. The Nibbles turned out to be enough Christmas sandwiches to feed over 60 members. Our caterers, Doff Kemp, Helen Vincent & Heather Boyd are to commended for another excellent effort.

**Well done everybody!**

Finally, I thank my wife Christine for her valued support and understanding over the last three years.

Robert Selkirk  
18<sup>th</sup> February 2021