



FRIENDS OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL BOTANIC GARDENS INC

19th Annual General Meeting, 12 February 2008

President's Report

At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude to Council members for their unqualified support for the Friends and for the enormous amount of time they freely give to the organisation. The Friends' Council operates as a series of portfolios. Each Council member takes responsibility for one or more areas of Friends' activities. Council members do much more than attend a Council meeting each month. All are involved in subcommittee meetings and give countless hours of individual work. I thank them all for their dedication, for the time they have given, for their friendship and support.

The pool of talent and commitment extends beyond the membership of Council and includes a great many members of the Friends. During the year, we appealed for help with some specific tasks and, invariably, help was offered. In some cases, such as with the Newsletter, more members offered to help than we could use at the time. We will be giving further thought as to the best way to directly involve more volunteers in the future.

We have had some notable successes in the past year even though there have been some challenges and difficulties. I will turn to the successes in a moment but the challenges largely stemmed from budgetary problems faced by the Gardens. As media reports towards the end of 2007 highlighted, government funding for the Gardens has, for some years, not kept pace with increasing costs. Staff numbers have fallen. Towards the end of last year an internal organisational review was commenced which looked as though it would lead to more staff cuts and reduced maintenance for areas of the Gardens.

This impacted on the Friends in two main ways. Firstly, we felt compelled to mount a public campaign to demonstrate to government the very high levels of community support for the Gardens. That was a time-consuming and emotionally demanding exercise. As things stand at the moment, we have been told that the organisational review will not proceed further, that existing staff numbers will be maintained, that additional funding will be provided for higher water costs, and that reforms will be pursued in the context of revising the Gardens' Management Plan. The Friends have been promised a role in that process and we look forward to participating.

The second kind of impact we faced was increased pressure to fill gaps in funding and staffing as levels of government support declined. This sometimes involved judgments as to what kinds of support are appropriate and what the role of the Friends should be. As with many such judgments, these issues often came down to shades of grey rather than black and white. When this kind of issue has arisen, decisions have not been made lightly and only after careful consideration of all relevant facts.

One such decision led to the resignation of a Council member, my immediate predecessor as President, Andrew Walker. We were all greatly distressed by Andrew's departure and appreciative of his work for the Friends over many years. Council appointed Don Beer to fill the vacancy on Council and we have greatly valued Don's positive contribution.

I will now turn to the details of the Friends' year.

Activities Sub-committee: Convened by Warwick Wright, this group arranges lunchtime lectures in the Theatrette each Thursday from February until the end of November. To ensure a variety of subject matter, topics are selected from a number of themes, including climate change, Australian plants, plants of the world and water management. The Theatrette is often full to overflowing. Warwick gives many hours of his time to organising these lectures. His network of contacts is amazing and he is to be congratulated on the very attractive and successful program.

Bernard Fennessy What's in a Name Award: Twelve very high quality entries were submitted for the first in what is planned to be an annual competition to remember our late friend and colleague Bernard Fennessy. The winning entry, by Sue and Byron Serjeantson, was published in the July 2007 Newsletter. The award was presented at the first Bernard Fennessy Memorial Lecture on 9 August 2007, the closest Thursday to the first anniversary of Bernard's death. Other entries either have been or will be published in the Newsletter. We are very grateful to Prof. Ralph Elliott for judging the entries and presenting the award, and to Brendan Lepschi for checking the botanical details.

Botanic Art Groups: Interest in painting and drawing in the Gardens has been so great that a second Botanic Art Group was formed in 2007. The groups will hold their first exhibition of work in the Visitor Centre next month. Some works will be for sale, with a commission on sales going to the Friends. We thank Robin McKeown for her enthusiastic and energetic convening of the groups, and wish them every success for the exhibition.

Botanical Resource Centre: During the year the Gardens proposed that a Botanical Resource Centre be created in the Ellis Rowan Building, next to the Friends Lounge. The Centre would include the Public Reference Herbarium, then somewhat inaccessibly located in the Library, and also include reference books and computer-based plant identification programs. It was proposed that volunteer facilitators, drawn from the ranks of the Friends and guides, would be trained to help users identify plants and to use the Centre. The Friends and guides enthusiastically agreed to the proposal. The Friends agreed to provide up to \$10,000 to fit-out of the Centre. Volante, the Gardens' IT contractor, agreed to provide and maintain 2 computers. Training for facilitators has started and we look forward to the Centre opening for business in the relatively near future.

Financial support for the Gardens: My predecessor said in last year's President's Report that the Friends had agreed to provide up to \$100,000 for Friends' projects in the Gardens for the three years 2006-08. Council has been disappointed and frustrated that the Gardens has not, so far, been able to use those funds. We have now re-formed the Friends' Projects Sub-committee which will, in collaboration with management, review the guidelines and processes for selecting projects and identify projects for future funding. Council will give this the highest priority in the coming year.

Financial support has been provided during the year for several initiatives outside the formal *Friends' Projects* system, including up to \$10,000 to fit-out the new Botanical Resource Centre discussed above.

Growing Friends: Growing Friends meet regularly to learn plant propagation techniques. In the process, they produce plants for sale, with proceeds going to the Friends. A very successful plant sale was held in April 2007 which raised \$7,400 for the Friends. Financially, this was almost certainly the most successful plant sale held by the group. Unfortunately, a sale planned for October had to be cancelled because stock available was, for a variety of reasons, insufficient. During the year the Growing Friends asked Council to fund a rainwater tank to enable plant propagation to continue in the event of Stage 4 water restrictions being introduced. Council willingly agreed. The tank and fittings cost \$3,500.

Guides: The guides this spring and summer offered 3 scheduled walks a day starting from 1 October 2007, continuing to 31 March 2008. From that time, walks will drop back to 2 per day. This is a huge commitment for a group of only 50 or so guides. No other Botanic Garden in Australia offers such an extensive program of freed guided walks.

Don Beer took over as guides' convener from the start of 2007. He has brought a renewed emphasis on professional development to the guides service. As part of that process he arranged for Rosemary Purdie to lead a workshop on the role of guides in the ANBG and another will be held this month on interpreting the Gardens. Annie Bartlett of ANU led a workshop on communication in guiding. We are very grateful to Don for taking on this important role and to Rosemary and Annie for their help.

Towards the end of 2007 Don sought the guides' endorsement for him to continue as convener for another 12 months. The guides unanimously agreed. They also elected Jane Keogh to be the regular secretary for guides' meeting for this year. We wish them well for 2008.

A number of guides attended the biennial Botanic Gardens Guides Conference in Adelaide in September 2007. The Friends provided a subsidy of half the registration cost to each of our guides who attended.

Guide numbers have now dropped to the point where an intake of new guides is needed; the previous intake was in 2005. The Gardens has asked the guides and Friends to take on much of the responsibility for organising and running the training course for this intake. We have agreed, and are very grateful to Don Beer who has offered to co-ordinate the process. The training course will begin on 30 July and operate 2 days a week for 5 weeks. It is hoped that new guides will start guiding by the start of the busy springtime season.

Membership: We finished the year with 1400 members, almost exactly the number we had on 1 March 2007. During the year we gained 200 new members, balancing those who did not renew their membership. Many new and renewing members took advantage of 2 and 5 year membership terms, offered for the first time in 2007. The membership database now runs on a new computer which was obtained during the year with funding from the Commonwealth Government's Volunteer Small Equipment Grant Program.

Council is very grateful for the excellent work of Membership Secretary Barbara Scott, along with Lesley Harland and technical support from Les Fielke. Barbara's predecessor as Membership Secretary, David Mellowship, is not standing for re-election to Council at this meeting and I acknowledge, and sincerely thank him for, his great and valuable contribution over many years.

Newsletter: The Friends Newsletter is a professional-quality 12 page, full colour production, issued 3 times year. It contains stimulating and original articles by members and staff and keeps members informed about developments in the Gardens and Friends' activities. The Newsletter Sub-committee was re-formed during the year. Barbara Podger joined the group, to provide a link with Council. Margaret Clarke and Susan Ford joined continuing members Anne Phillips and Anne Rawson. They need another person with graphic design and desktop publishing skills to join the sub-committee. Barbara Podger would be delighted to hear from any member who could help. Newsletter production is a demanding and time-consuming exercise and the Friends greatly appreciate the dedicated work of all sub-committee members.

Patron: During the year Her Excellency Mrs Marlena Jeffery agreed to become Patron of the Friends. We appreciate her willingness to take on this role and look forward to welcoming her to the Gardens in future. We are very grateful to our outgoing Patron, David Young, for his enthusiastic support over the 12 years he occupied the position.

Photographic Competition: The 11th annual photo competition for school and college students was held in 2007. Entries were again of a very high standard: the winning entries are on display still in the foyer outside the Theatrette. Conditions of entry were streamlined in 2007, mainly to limit the

number of entries per student. This worked well. One of the best features of the 2007 competition was that all entries were hung for a few days in the Visitor Centre. We hope that will happen again in 2008. Barry Brown and Denise Ferris judged the competition again in 2007. We thank them, and thank Shirley McKeown who again managed the competition.

Public Fund: On 29 March 2007 the Rock Garden Shelter, the first project to be funded from the Friends' tax-deductible Public Fund, was opened by Her Excellency Mrs Marlena Jeffery. The Friends are very appreciative of the work of the Public Fund Management Committee. At present, the Committee consists of Beverly Fisher, Geoffrey Hay, Neville Page (chair) and Pauline Wicksteed. Robert Boden was forced by poor health to stand down towards the end of 2007. Sue Serjeantson has agreed to join the Committee.

Social Sub-committee: Led by Louise Muir, this group looks after the Friends' responsibilities for the summer concert series (see below). A number of other events were held during the year, including:

- The Twilight Dinner at Hudsons in the Gardens last February. The theme of the Dinner was *Produce of the Canberra Region*. Local produce included local wine from Barton Estate. The winery's owner, Bob Furbank, was guest speaker.
- Breakfast with the Birds during Floriade, which attracted 150 participants.
- A screening of original films by Friends member Matthew Higgins in October was very well attended.
- Graze in the Gardens last December was memorable for coinciding with the start of a La Nina wet summer. Fortunately the heaviest rain didn't fall until the main course, on the Eucalypt Lawn, was almost finished. Guests then sought shelter in the Café for coffee and dessert. Louise and her committed team are to be congratulated for many memorable moments in the Gardens.

Summer Concerts: The summer concert season has, for many years, been the Friends main fundraising activity. The concerts attract a large audience and are extremely popular with Canberra residents and visitors. We were very disappointed that Gardens' management reduced the length of the 2008 season from ten to four evenings. The financial effect of the shorter season was that income dropped from \$24,000 in 2007 to \$8,000 in 2008. We will argue strongly for a significantly longer season in 2009 and examine options for musical and other social events in the Gardens.

Website: The Friends website is very efficiently managed by Shirley McKeown. It contains a wealth of information about the Friends and the Gardens, and is a useful way of keeping members and others informed about last minute changes to our programs. We are very grateful to staff members, especially Murray Fagg, for assistance.

I started this Report with thanks to my colleagues on Council and to all members of the Friends for their help and support during the year. I'd like to finish by thanking Gardens' staff for their enthusiastic support, help and friendship. This has been an emotionally stressful year for all Gardens' staff and the Friends have admired their positive approach to the challenges we have all faced. We look forward to continuing our constructive and productive relationship into the future.

Alan Munns