



Merri-bek
City Council

Gardens for Wildlife

Community Workshop Summary



Community workshops were held in March 2023 to gather ideas and preferences for the development of a Gardens for Wildlife program for Merri-bek.

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Introduction to Gardens for Wildlife

Theme 2 of the Merri-bek Nature Plan is to “seek opportunities for the private realm to contribute positively to biodiversity”. Backyards are a great opportunity to increase biodiversity and create places for our local flora and fauna. The Gardens for Wildlife (G4W) program encourages residents to garden in their own backyard in ways that support wildlife and biodiversity and was requested by the community while the Nature Plan was being developed. The G4W also supports the community vision of being environmentally proactive and caring for our flora and fauna.

The Gardens for Wildlife program was first developed in Knox, and has been successfully shared with other Victorian councils, and has led to the formation of the G4W Victoria Trust, which provides support and oversight to all programs. Programs can be tailored to suit the local area, but must align with the G4W guiding principles below:

- to combat biodiversity loss and to nurture and enhance our flora, fauna, and environment
- to build a network of environmental stewards and champions
- to build knowledge, skills, confidence, and ownership in caring for the land and its wildlife
- to strengthen connections between residents, nature, community, and place
- to improve wellbeing through experiencing and caring for nature
- to collect and share stories and data about the impact of our work

Effectively, community volunteers known as Garden Guides undertake visits to people's gardens offering advice, usually following up with a report with some recommendations. The report might include advice on plant selection, addition of habitat elements such as bird baths or nest boxes, recommendations on removal of environmental weed species. It's not a comprehensive design service, nor is it a gardening service.

Residents who get involved are making a commitment – they are going to share their garden with wildlife. Often a visible commitment, such as a letterbox sticker is given, and other incentives such as a nursery voucher for indigenous plants are often included.

Summary of Consultation sessions

Discussions with interested community members during 2 community group workshops, and phone calls and email correspondence with individuals have provided the content summarised below. The information captured has been grouped into the following headings:

- Messages – what is it we want G4W Merri-bek to promote;
- Considerations – as we develop the program;
- Opportunities – that will help us promote our message now and ideas for the future;

Messages

The program should promote caring for nature and encourage people to become custodians of their local areas.

Educating residents on appropriate plants to use is important. The program should include promotion of indigenous plants, awareness of Ecological Vegetation Classes, and the avoidance of environmental weed species. However, it was noted that strict adherence to indigenous plant lists may alienate potential participants. The program should adopt a non-judgmental and inclusive approach to garden and plant preferences. For example, a resident managing their garden for food production without a desire to make room for indigenous plants can be engaged by conversations around wildlife safe tree netting, planting to encourage pollinators, and alternatives to chemical pesticides, all of which are beneficial to wildlife.

Gardening without pesticides and water saving garden practices should be promoted. Habitat friendly alternatives to traditional lawns and grassed nature strips should be encouraged. Where appropriate, tree planting should be promoted, and greater diversity in plant types encouraged.

The program should promote awareness of environmental weeds including those already established, and the weed potential of species currently available at retail nurseries.

A wildlife gardening approach should be applied as broadly as possible – balconies, backyards, nature-strips, business premises, community centres should all be included in messaging.

It was agreed that incentives to encourage residents to take part will be important – plant vouchers, mulch, gardening guides and access to activities such as Bee Hotel workshops should be part of what the program offers.

Considerations

A stakeholder mapping exercise should be completed in the development phase to understand the local groups already working in biodiversity and look for connections between groups. For example Friends groups, Merri Creek Management Committee, Brunswick Communities for Nature, Women's/ Men's sheds. Development of the program should also consider First Nations involvement.

The role of the Council Officer is to lead the establishment of the program and continue to facilitate for the duration of the program. This will be important in maintaining momentum if volunteer capacity diminishes. Relevant Council policies and procedures will be applied to this program, and communicated to all volunteers. The steering committee/ working group's decision-making process should be clear as we commence.

Links with other community organisations will be enormously beneficial. We should look to other G4W programs already established for resources, as well as established processes and procedures. There will be opportunities to connect with other programs for Garden Guide training and development support, and use of G4WV resources.

Development of the program should include a communications strategy to consider how to make people aware and interested in the program in order to participate. Using local media, in addition to

Council's communication channels should be considered. The Council website and the Conversations Merri-bek platform should be utilised to host program information and facilitate registrations.

We should consider how we will keep volunteers engaged over the long-term. The social aspects and learning opportunities of the program will provide a benefit for volunteers and should be facilitated through the program. The safety and well-being of volunteers is key - volunteers must feel safe and supported by comprehensive OHS, risk and insurance procedures implemented by Council. Potential volunteers may prefer flexibility in their involvement over time rather than agreeing to a minimum time commitment.

2 draft volunteer positions descriptions were discussed, for Garden Guide and Steering Committee members. It was commented that the position description for Garden Guide volunteers should expand on the benefits to the volunteer, and that the supports and guidance available should be clear.

Guidance on what to plant will be required both for Garden Guides and participating residents. A comprehensive resource that builds on current council and other publications will need to be developed and made available. This will be of benefit to the broader community as well.

Managing expectations of the participating residents will be important. It must be made clear that it is a volunteer program offering advice and any available resources and incentives. The program is not a garden design service, or a landscaping service. The limits of the advice volunteers are giving must be made clear to residents and volunteers.

Ongoing maintenance expectations of suggested plantings should form part of a volunteers training and the guidance they give to residents. Consideration of plant selection and maintenance in the context of bush fire risk should be given.

The program should consider ways to connect people with land and unable to garden with people who want to garden without access to land, bringing a mutual benefit.

A well-developed process for volunteers will be important. Good training, comprehensive resources and pre-prepared report templates will support our Garden Guide volunteers. We need to be clear to residents signing up that Guides are volunteers with passion and some knowledge, not professional experts. In addition, Guides reporting on how visits went, or the questions asked will be an important contribution to ongoing learning and development.

Opportunities

- Opportunities to connect with an indigenous nursery such as VINC or Nangak Tamboree should be explored.
- A seasonal newsletter would be valuable to communicate educational messages, events and information, and keep participants active in the G4W community.
- Demonstration gardens in parks or nature strips with plant labels or QR codes. Volunteers could plant and maintain these as part of G4W social or training events.
- Different gardening styles could be showcased in the resources we develop - productive, for flower display, bush gardens, or formal style with indigenous plants.
- Share the G4W resources (wildlife guides, plant lists) widely, not just with participants.
- Self guided maps/ tours of demonstration gardens or nature strip plantings, or look to an Open Garden type event in future.
- Have G4W representation at council events or market stalls to promote the program
- Sign or letterbox stickers for participating households to show their commitment and promote the program to others
- Mobile garden beds for renters or people with disabilities could be explored

- The Glenroy Hub could be involved as a potential site for a demonstration garden, involvement in the current seed swap to include indigenous plants, and attract a diverse community of participants.
- Link with citizen science activities such as bio-blitzes or bird surveys to record observations.

Workshop notes



