Plant Display House re-opens
by Fiona Douglas

Stimulated by the imminent visit of many bromeliad enthusiasts for the Australasian Bromeliad Conference being held in Darwin in April 2011, the Friends and Gardens staff got together late last year to plan the comprehensive refurbishment of the Plant Display House (PDH).

Friends funds were augmented by a Community Support Grant from the Chief Minister’s Department and additional funds were made available by NRETAS. Our ideas were inspired by plans generously donated by Tony Cox and staff of Cloustons Landscape Architects. In the end just about everyone was involved - all Gardens staff, Friends and a team from Conservation Volunteers Australia.

We used local contractors for gates, benches, plants, pots and floor resurfacing. Staff member Ant Fuller’s great sense of design was used to the maximum for reinvigoration of the display. New pots were of different sizes and shapes, but in a limited range of colours, to highlight the plants. Epiphytes were strategically placed around the walls and a new, more flexible, watering system was installed. An informally formal re-opening allowed those involved to see the project having been completed just in time for the conference.

Stop Press: Jack Thompson will do a ‘short but special’ one-poem private reading for Gardens Staff & Friends of the Darwin Botanic Gardens.

When: Tuesday 16th August at 5.30pm.

Photos: Fiona Douglas (above), Helen Panatos (right).
Food Garden grant for wetland
by Kathy Clayden

Kathy is one of the Food Garden growers, and coordinates the group of people with plots in the Garden.

The Botanic Gardens Community Food Garden is for people who share a love of growing their own food but may not be lucky enough to have space for their own veggie patch. From a small fledgling band of wannabe organic growers we have grown into a dynamic, community spirited group utilising permaculture principles to demonstrate ways that we can live sustainability in tropical Darwin. Our take home message is that individuals can make a difference by growing their own food in a sustainable way.

Since our inception two years ago, we have become a popular and integral part of the Botanic Gardens. The initial food garden surrounding the Eco House was expanded this year and our veggies now sprawl and scramble down through the permaculture terraces to what will one day be our aquatic and wet area terraces.

Our group is also a member of the recently formed ‘Darwin Garden Education Network’ (DGEN), and so now we see ourselves as part of a larger connected community that is building community resilience through small scale food production that is both localised and sustainable.

June 27th was a significant milestone for our group as it was the day we received our Climate Change and Environment Grant for our Water Learnscape from Darwin City Council. The $10 000 grant, which was obtained with assistance from the staff at the Botanic Gardens and under the umbrella of the Friends of the Botanic Gardens, will allow us to undertake our first environmental project to improve the landscape around the food garden and provide an educational resource for the community.

The Botanic Gardens is a ‘sink’ for water drainage from nearby suburbs but a lot of the runoff from nearby suburbs is wasted as it pours down an old watercourse along the perimeter of the permaculture terraces, scouring out valuable soil and nutrients on its way. The problem is exacerbated because the runoff contains oil and detergents from driveways and other light industry pollutants from spray painters, panel beaters and mechanic shops.

The grant will provide design and construction funds to enable us to enhance the existing watercourse so that it more closely mimics the patterns of nature and so the water will be useable and not wasted. The plan is to slow down the wet season torrent through specifically designed twists and turns and to use rock barriers to encourage the water to pool in three or four places rather than draining off in a fast flow.

Filtration plants such as typha and reeds will be situated along the edges and we’ll use fine sand and small rocks to help filtrate, clean and oxygenate the water as it passes through each stage. Clean water will collect in a wetlands sink at the bottom of the permaculture terraces where we can grow edible wetlands plants such as kangkong and water chestnuts. The final part of the plan is to install interpretative signage to turn our water feature landscape into an educational “learnscape” for the community.

We think $10 000 is a wonderful investment by Darwin City Council in improving water quality and efficiency of what was previously wasted and polluted wet season runoff. The grant will also help enhance the landscape aesthetics in the Botanic Gardens and create a model of localised food production. The flow on effect is a rich source of community education that will showcase permaculture principles and hopefully inspire and motivate Darwinians into thinking more creatively and sustainably.

Gardens activities
by David Griffiths

In February the Gardens once again were struck by a tropical storm, this time Cyclone Carlos, that battered the area for several days. Wind and rain caused extensive loss of trees and palms, and flooding right across the Gardens [see last issue - ed.]. Added to that, the prolonged Wet meant we couldn’t access some areas at all until after Easter and yet we needed to complete the clean up in time for the Tropical Garden Spectacular and Top End Sustainable Living Festival (TGS/TESLF) in early June. I sometimes doubted this could be done, but the Gardens team and contractors rose to the challenge and the Gardens were indeed ready.

The weekend of the TGS/TESLF was a beautiful dry season day.
and the Gardens looked perfect. The combination of the horticultural industry and sustainability seemed to be a natural fit within the Gardens environment. This year the event expanded from the Gardens Road entrance up the newly created Primary Loop, the Permaculture Terraces and into the Eco House Food Garden.

This blend of activities, demonstration, societies, community groups, food, art, music and coffee meant that people stayed for an extended time to soak up all that was on offer. Highlights of the weekend were the talk back panels and the guests such as George and Serge Negus, Costa from Costa’s Gardening Odyssey, and local identity Leonie Norrington. A fantastic weekend was had by all who attended the event.

However, if asked to name my favourite moment, it was following crowds of people up the hill to the food garden, where our “Snakebean” gardeners served amazing cakes and where Costa himself said our soil was “good enough to eat”.

EcoArt Workshops

This dry season, with the wonderful support of Sarah Amies from the Friends, and volunteer artist Caley Parker, we’ve been able to offer a series of free EcoArt workshops for children in the Gardens. Held one Sunday each month on the decking of the Wesleyan Church, these sessions have been fully attended and enthusiastically received. As well as seed pod and bark painting, breezy spinners and natural collage, we’ve had fresh fruit and birdwatching to boot.

With special thanks to the Friends for their donation of ‘small sized’ Friends t-shirts, to Gardens staff for provision of some ‘natural materials’ for workshops, and to the community for their encouragement, this is a great initial partnership upon which we hope to be able to build in coming years.

Recent highlights for the Gardens are completion of the Plant Display House (PDH) renovations, including the new collection of potted plants. I still get a buzz when I go into the PDH and see this fantastic collection in all their colours. The delegates attending the International Bromeliad Conference were also impressed by what the Gardens had to offer.

Planning is under way now to complete the Primary Loop landscape, create a Sensory Garden near the Orientation Centre, a Rainforest Tea House Garden in the lower section of the rainforest and a Mandala Garden behind Holtze House. The newly named Snake Bean Garden group has plans under way for a creek and wetland project [see previous page - ed.].

The new exciting project for the Friends is reopening the Holtze steps leading down to the Heritage Area and connecting the PDH to the rainforest loops.

It’s been a busy few months here in the Gardens with a lot of milestones achieved and an exciting journey ahead as the Gardens team and Friends work together on the new projects.

Gardens for the Community
text & photos by Susan Wills

Tropical Garden Spectacular and Top End Sustainable Living Festival

Having been involved in the creation of last year’s TGS/TESLF as a community volunteer, it was heartening to see this year’s Sustainable Living Festival bloom for a second time. To my mind, our hopes of building greater synergy between the two aspects of the event were quite genially realised and, perhaps even more successful, we introduced the new School and Community Garden Precinct where ‘The Mulch Pit’, the ‘Lakeside Drive Community Garden’, ‘Marrara Christian College’ and ‘Millner Primary School’ (to name a few) had wonderful wares on display. The other exciting addition this year was the satellite event of the ‘Sustainable Schools Day’ where 200 children from 11 schools visited the Gardens on the Wednesday prior to the event. However, if asked to name my favourite moment, it was following crowds of people up the hill to the food garden, where our ‘Snakebean’ gardeners served amazing cakes and where Costa himself said our soil was ‘good enough to eat’.

At the TGS/TESLF people were enticed to the Food Garden. Photo: Susan Wills
Every garden lover has heard of the Chelsea Flower Show and this year I was privileged to attend with my sister. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) hosts the show on the grounds of the Royal Hospital. Founded over 200 years ago to promote the science, art and practice of horticulture, the RHS is the largest gardening charity in the world.

Weather was not on our side with thunder showers most of the day. This gave us plenty of time to see all of the colourful displays of nurseries, florists and plant societies from around the world in the Great Pavilion. This contained more than 100 displays ranging from pots of bonsais to full gardens - including shed.

The Nong Nooch Tropical Botanic Garden exhibit from Thailand was by far the most elaborate with a temple, elephants and dragons part of the display made of millions of flowers. UK Horticulture incorporated fruits and vegetables with flowers for a delightful colourful display.

One of my favourites was by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI). One side was a mass of proteas from the Cape Floral Region a natural World Heritage Site; the other side represented the Richtersveld which is the only “arid biodiversity hotspot” in the world with 2700 species. Aloes, Pachypodiums and Euphorbias dominated the display.

There was even a donkey in the Horticultural Society of Trinidad & Tobago’s display.

Surrounding the pavilion were the large show gardens and many commercial sculpture stalls.

The award-winning Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne’s Show Garden was based on gardens at the Royal Botanic Gardens Cranbourne.

Salix caprea, a plant instrumental in the development of aspirin,
was featured among the stylised metal blood vessels in the British Heart Foundation Garden.

Beyond the large displays was an avenue of over 100 small stalls selling everything gardening. The hospital gardens were the site of many food stalls and the band stand. Because of the rain, music was intermittent and picnicking was non-existent. By late afternoon we had covered the ground. My sister and I were cold, wet and tired as we made our way back to the hotel. However, it was a fabulous day and definitely an outing I would recommend.
Collectors Corner
Text & photos supplied by Adam Grainger
This is the first in a series intended to inspire us to include some unusual plants in our gardens.

Australia has a core of serious collectors of rare and unusual tropical flowering plants. These collectors go to great lengths to source and collect these rare beauties before releasing them for sale at specialist plant shows in Cairns and elsewhere in North Queensland. Some collectors travel the tropical regions of the world in search of new specimens that will strike envy into the heart of other collectors and enable them to maintain a competitive advantage.

The two plants from New Guinea shown here are extremely desirable for collectors:

Lamiodendron magnificum
Family: Bignoniaceae
Common Names: None
Origin: New Guinea

These photos represent what is believed to be the first flowering of the famed Lamiodendron magnificum in Australia. The tree was first described by Edwin A. Menninger in his famous publication "Flowering Trees of the World for Tropics and Warm Climates" as the rarest tree in his book. It was discovered in 1956 on Normanby in the D’Entrecasteaux Islands in New Guinea behind a beach fronting a swampy rainforest. However it has not made its way into cultivation until quite recently and is considered very rare at present.

It was described as a "magnificent sight when in full bloom" and the trunk was noted to be prominently fluted at the base with pale brown bark. The flowers were described as brilliant orange veined with purple-red, conspicuous in short racemes and leaves up to 16-20 inches long. New leaves also appear purple. It is a large tree that may reach 15-20m in height and is highly sought after by collectors.

Mucuna benettii
Family: Faboideae / Leguminosae / Papilionaceae
Common Names: Red Jade Vine, New Guinea Creeper
Origin: New Guinea

Mucuna benettii is sometimes referred as the Red Jade Vine due the resemblance of the flowering clusters to the turquoise coloured Jade Vine (Strongylodon macrobotrys) from the Philippines. In winter amazing long cascading clusters of brilliant red/orange flowers chained together form 10cm long racemes of splendour. Mucuna benettii originates from New Guinea but it also flourishes in tropical to semi tropical regions.

The vine is sought after by collectors and is sometimes also called the 'Flame of the Forest', alluding to the very bright splash of colour it brings when in flower. It is a very large, woody climber and the roots must be planted in shade for the vine to flourish. It can be used to climb a large tree or a very large pergola. Flowers are vivid orange/scarlet or flame coloured, in a long inflorescence. A magnificent vine, one you will never forget once you have seen it in person. It does however need plenty of room to spread.

Committee of Friends of the Darwin Botanic Gardens
P.O. Box 36435, Winnellie NT 0821
This committee was elected in April 2011
Patron: The Hon. Austin Asche AC QC
Chairperson: Adam Grainger (ah) 8948 1971
Vice Chairperson: Jill Metcalfe 8927 1461
Secretary: Peter Knibbs (ah) 8981 6694
Treasurer: Fiona Douglas 8985 4179
Newsletter Editor: Fiona Douglas 8985 4179
Editor email: fiona.douglas@octa4.net.au
GBDBG Liaison: David Griffiths, Susan Wills (bh) 8981 1958

Friends activities
Every Thursday
Time: 8.30 am
Activity: Potting up and nursery maintenance
Where: Geranium St nursery
Ring to confirm: Jill Metcalfe 8927 1461

Second Saturday of every month
Time: 8.45am
Activity: Nursery activities and/or group meeting
Where: Geranium St nursery & administration building
Ring to confirm: Adam Grainger 8948 1971