



# Dunstan Reserve Food Forest: Strategic Rejuvenation Plan

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# Background and current status

The Dunstan Reserve Food Forest in Brunswick West is a collection of edible trees and other plants, both exotic and native, established over 15 years ago as a community resource. Being fully open to the public, it goes beyond the typical community garden model and is an unusual space within Melbourne.

The Food Forest is located on Council land and maintained by volunteers, with financial and organisational support from the Organising Committee (OC) of the West Brunswick Community Garden (WBCG), and the parent organisation Moreland Community Gardening (MCG). MCG oversees several community gardens within Moreland, with the aim of supporting edible gardening throughout the community.

The Food Forest covers an area of approximately 1,300m<sup>2</sup>, and is located adjacent to the WBCG and several other community facilities (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Approximate boundaries of the Food Forest

The Food Forest has had minimal attention throughout 2020, resulting in an inevitable worsening of its condition. The departure of a key volunteer in January who was overseeing its maintenance, combined with the limitations presented by COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, has created an opportunity to revise how this valuable public resource is managed. A survey conducted in mid-2020 revealed that the local community was keen to have greater involvement

with the Food Forest but were uninformed as to how they could do so. Results from this survey have been used to inform this document and prioritise actions.

This Strategic Rejuvenation Plan first explores the purpose of the Food Forest at present and into the future, and then formulates a series of actions that will be taken to redevelop the space into a thriving example of urban agriculture that the local community can enjoy.

## Purpose of the Food Forest

The purpose of the Food Forest is to provide a biodiverse recreational space where the local community can connect with others, and learn to grow healthy and sustainable food.

The Food Forest actively contributes to the enactment of MCG's Strategic Plan (Figure 2), by growing food, knowledge and relationships in a publicly accessible and welcoming space. Based on the survey results, the key priorities of the Food Forest are to educate the community about growing food, and to provide a recreational area.

Our vision is for the Food Forest to be:

- a source of healthy, organic food
- a well maintained, productive plantation of trees
- a pleasant recreational space for local residents
- an outdoor classroom and exhibition garden
- a social hub



Figure 2: MCG 2025 Strategic Plan

# Rejuvenation Roadmap

A historical challenge with the Food Forest has been ensuring ongoing facilitation and management of the site. Previous management approaches have occurred in a centralised manner, and have been effective up until the departure of key members has occurred. The departure of volunteers will continue to happen throughout the life of the Food Forest, so this rejuvenation strategy will seek to encourage decentralised administrative approaches where feasible. This will help to reduce any burden on individuals, and ensure that the Food Forest is actively maintained by a number of people.

A key challenge is that there are currently not enough people involved with the Food Forest to maintain it at a level consistent with the vision for the space. Involvement has fluctuated over time. There have however been periods with many people actively involved with the maintenance and use of the space, showing that it is possible to establish an active group.

## 1 PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNICATION

In order to maintain the Food Forest to an acceptable visual standard and allow it to function as a space that is useful for education and recreation, levels of active participation in the space must be increased, particularly by those with some level of horticultural knowledge. Currently, very few people assist with maintenance, and most of those people also volunteer with the community garden. There is also a significant reliance on acquired knowledge of key members (e.g. dry areas, identification of unusual crops), making it difficult for new, less experienced people to garden independently. This results in work generally being completed infrequently, at monthly working bees, which are driven by a very small number of people.

The Food Forest has, at different times in the past, had sufficient involvement, in the form of one-off events such as 'Perma-blitzes' (attended by 50-60 people), and/or ongoing volunteer work by a small team of horticultural professionals and/or students. However, this enthusiasm and input has not been sustained long term and through different groups of people.

Communication with volunteers has historically been a challenge. The primary method for communicating about working bees or other events has been via the Moreland Community Gardening newsletter and, to a lesser extent, the 'West Brunswick Community Garden and Food Forest' Facebook page and 'Dunstan Reserve Food Forest' Instagram page. There is a private Facebook group that is far more active, but this is only available to those with a paid MCG membership. Less than half of survey respondents knew how to find out about events at the Food Forest.

Increasing participation will include both encouraging interested locals (who made up 79% of survey respondents) to assist with maintenance, as well as developing methods to retain volunteers for longer periods of time. The actions we intend to take are outlined below.

## **Actions**

### Working bees and informal maintenance

Working bees are a key element of maintaining the Food Forest, and particularly important for bringing together a number of people to achieve larger tasks. Participation in working bees can also give people greater confidence to undertake tasks independently outside of scheduled event times. Survey results suggested that people prefer working bees to run on the weekend, and for them to have a specific educational focus. There is also in principle support for working bees running more frequently than once per month (as has been standard to date), however this is highly dependent on volunteer capacity.

**Action 1:** Add a specific educational focus to working bees

**Action 2:** Run working bees more frequently than once per month, if there is sufficient capacity and interest, and continue to run most working bees on the weekend

**Action 3:** Promote working bees and events via multiple avenues

Activities undertaken outside of working bee times are also crucial to the ongoing maintenance of the site, and will be encouraged via online channels, in particular the WBCG Facebook group and public page. If we are successful in installing a permanent noticeboard on site (see Section 8 – Signage Implementation) we will also utilise this for communicating tasks that can be done.

**Action 4:** Utilise the WBCG Facebook private group, public page and other online channels to promote and organise off-calendar working

## Workshops and tours

Workshops and tours help to educate people about growing edible plants, both at the Food Forest and in their own gardens.

**Action 5:** Run a series of workshops throughout 2021

**Action 6:** Continue to run Food Forest tours during suitable events

## Working Group

While we will aim to encourage decentralised involvement, the Food Forest still requires decisions to be made around funding, activities, and purchase of supplies. Currently, these decisions are made by the WBCG OC. While this is not necessarily problematic, it does add increased pressure to a small number of volunteers that already put a huge amount of work into managing the community garden. The Food Forest also requires decision making that is quite separate from the community garden. This will not necessarily be of interest to, or fit within the time commitments of, community garden OC members.

We will create a Food Forest Working Group, a volunteer group of up to 10 people, who will make key decisions about the management of the space and drive other volunteer activities. One member, either the same person or on a rotating roster, will attend monthly WBCG OC meetings to provide updates, seek approval for funding as required, and discuss any issues or ideas.

The exact details of the Working Group have not yet been finalised, and will require input from interested members, the WBCG OC, and the MCG Board.

However, initial steps will include:

1. Seek expressions of interest for the Working Group
2. Seek feedback and input from the OC and MCG Board
3. Set up initial meeting with potential Working Group members to discuss how the group might operate

**Action 7:** Establish a Food Forest Working Group

In future, if we can source sufficient funding and found it necessary, we may consider implementing a paid maintenance position to ensure that basic tasks, such as checking the irrigation and clearing the paths, are carried out regularly.

### Partnerships

We will actively seek to establish both formal and informal partnerships with other organisations, such as nearby community gardens and community groups, as well as continue to build on existing relationships.

The purpose of these partnerships will be to share skills and knowledge, utilise existing communication networks, and run combined workshops and other events.

**Action 8:** Establish and maintain partnerships with other organisations

### Easy access to information about events

75% of survey respondents selected 'easy access to information about events' as a factor that would make them more likely to volunteer at the Food Forest, with 65% currently being unaware of how to find out about events. Making information more accessible could therefore increase the number of people who are willing to volunteer to help maintain the site.

The preferred options for finding out about events are via a noticeboard and via Facebook, with some support also for the MCG newsletter, Instagram, and the MCG website. Given the ease of cross posting events to various online channels, we will endeavour to promote events via several avenues, with Facebook as a priority.

In addition, we will seek to install a noticeboard for communication (see section 8 – Signage Implementation).

**Action 9:** Increase promotion of events and activities across online channels and via a physical noticeboard

## 2 CLEAN THE SLATE

In the survey, 41% of respondents voiced that reducing the level of weeds would encourage them to attend the Food Forest more regularly. An assortment of weeds and overgrown ground cover plants are unsightly to most and have a substantial soil footprint, so measures to drastically reduce weeds are key to rejuvenation of the landscape.

During COVID-19 restrictions, maintenance activities stopped almost entirely, and the weeds took over some portions of the Food Forest (Figure 3). This resulted in many perennial plants suffering due to weed competition, and prevented most annual plants from self-seeding.



Figure 3: Following COVID-19 restrictions, there was significant weed cover across most of the site

Over the course of three weeks in late October/early November 2020, a team of workers operating under the Working for Victoria scheme for Moreland City Council performed a series of maintenance activities at the Food Forest. The key goal was to reduce weeds to a manageable level post-COVID, and to install weed matting and mulch to help with weed suppression into the future. The group removed a huge number of weeds and overgrown plants, installed biodegradable weed matting and applied mulch (Figure 4 and Figure 5). This was essential to allow intentional planting and growth to occur.



Figure 4: Following the clean-up, the majority of weeds had been removed



Figure 5: Before and after the clean-up

Weed management is an ongoing task at the Food Forest, particularly in the large northern section of the site (which has only been converted to food growing space within the last four years), and along the site's boundaries with established Kikuyu turf. Ongoing weed management will form part of the Food Forest Maintenance Plan (see Section 5 – Maintenance Plan), and will be prioritised in early 2021.

**Action 10:** Focus on weed management

### 3 INTERIM PLANTING

Throughout the Spring/Summer planting season, annual food crops will be planted at the site, primarily in the large open area at the northern end in areas divided by temporary paths. This work has already commenced (Figure 6 and Figure 7), and will continue throughout the coming months. The primary purpose of these plantings is to generate community interest in the site. Plant selection will therefore prioritise species that are fast growing, easily recognisable, and have high amenity value (e.g. edible flowers and popular Summer crops such as tomatoes and sweet potatoes). Plantings will be focused around high profile areas, such as along paths and at site entrance points.



Figure 6: Volunteers have started adding annual plants to the large cleared area

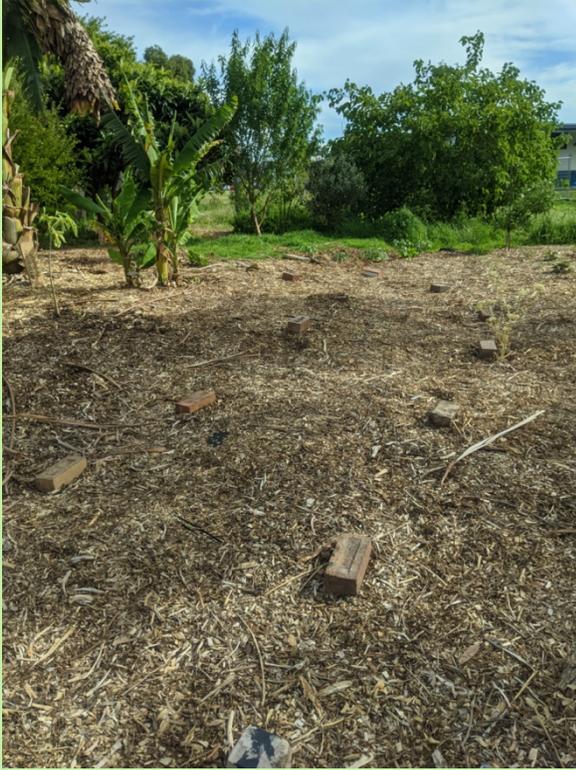


Figure 7: Temporary paths and annual plants have been added to the large open area at the northern end of the site

**Action 11:** Continue to plant fast growing, popular crops in large open area to generate community interest

# 4 DESIGN

## Map update

A historical map of the Food Forest currently exists (figure 8) but is no longer an accurate representation of the assortment of vegetation, and is an indicative guide rather than a scale map.

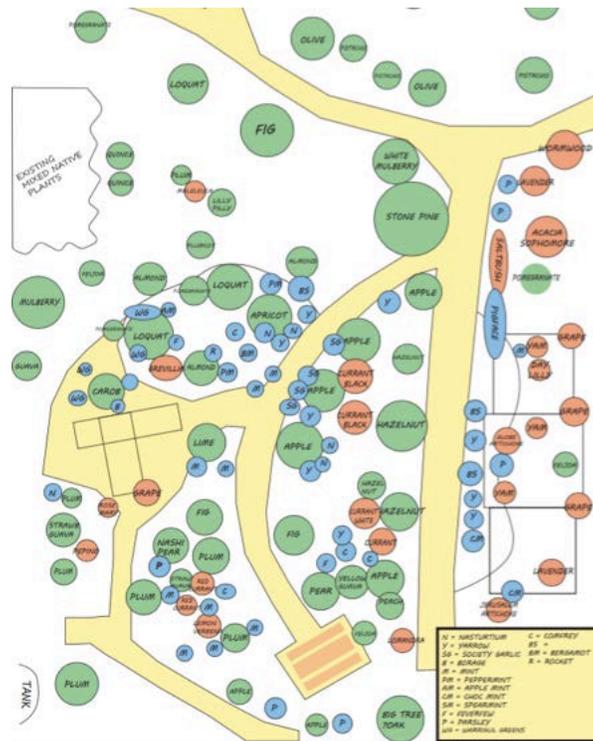


Figure 8: Earlier map of the Food Forest

Prior to any future planting being performed, a review of the existing vegetation will occur to assist in the design decision making process. Moreland Community Gardening has detailed records of all species that have been planted at the site, which will be used to assess the success of previous plantings. The residual vegetation will then be documented and captured in a new Food Forest map. It is proposed that this map will be developed using the tool Garden Planner by Small Blue Printer (<http://www.smallblueprinter.com/>).

This new map will:

- Assist volunteers and contractors to implement infrastructure in a more precise manner
- Act as a blueprint for future signage implementation
- Provide an up to date account of the Food Forest as it moves through the rejuvenation process, assisting the Working Group in the planning and execution of maintenance activities

**Action 12:** Create updated map

### **Spatial Design Plan**

Using the new map as a starting point, we will develop a Spatial Design Plan for the Food Forest. This plan will encompass all physical elements, including infrastructure (such as irrigation, seating, signage and pathways) and plants (types, locations and quantities).

The plan will formalise a division between the more established garden beds in the southern and north eastern sections of the site, and the newer, open area in the northern area of the site. For the foreseeable future, this latter area will not have a strict planting plan, and will instead be used for experimental plantings of different crops. This will give us flexibility in plant selection, and allow the community freedom to have greater influence over plant choice.

The value and compatibility of existing plants (that are not part of the interim planting activity) will be assessed, which may lead to the removal of some plants, for example some Lemon Balm and Apple Mint, which have taken over large areas. The plan will also reconsider the function of some areas that could be better utilised (e.g. the mulched area under the pergola on the site's eastern side).

The plan will nominate an area, likely the existing native garden bed near the public toilets, to be formally developed into an educational Koorie Bush Foods Garden, the creation of which was strongly supported by survey respondents.

The plan will also consider the integration of additional hard infrastructure into the site. Currently, the Food Forest incorporates or is serviced by several Moreland City Council assets including concrete paths, toilets (which are accessible only at certain times, or via a code that is available to WBCG members), seating, and a nearby drink fountain.

The online survey suggested that additional and/or improved amenities would increase the community's willingness to use the site for recreation. For example, when asked what would make them more likely to use the space, 50% of respondents supported the incorporation of

additional seating, 38% supported having the adjacent toilets open to the public more frequently, and 36% supported the installation of a barbecue, pizza oven, or other facility that could be booked.

Moreland City Council has supported Moreland Community Gardening with the installation and maintenance of amenities, such as seating. Depending on several factors, future amenities may be provided in a similar manner or independently. The plan will also consider informal options such as providing logs or picnic areas for seating.

**Action 13:** Create Spatial Design Plan, with input from volunteers and Moreland City Council as required

## 5 MAINTENANCE PLAN

Based on a review of MCG's existing documents (e.g. pruning schedules), a new Maintenance Plan will be created. This will clearly outline the tasks that need to be carried out at the Food Forest, including regular activities such as path sweeping and rubbish removal, and less frequent tasks such as pruning established trees.

This plan will be easily accessible to volunteers, published both online and at the site.

**Action 14:** Create publicly accessible Maintenance Plan

## 6 PLANT PROCUREMENT

Options for procuring additional plants for the site will be investigated in further detail once the Spatial Design Plan has been completed. This will be influenced by multiple factors, including funding availability, selected species, and volunteer capacity.

Plants may be obtained through one or a combination of:

1. Propagation by volunteers, possibly through a workshop
2. Donations from members of the community

3. Wholesale suppliers
4. Retail suppliers

**Action 15:** Source and/or grow perennial plants

## 7 PLANTING PERENNIALS

Based on the Spatial Design Plan, we will plant additional plants in the Food Forest, to fill areas that have been cleared and increase the range of species on site. 53% of survey respondents supported the addition of more plants, so additional planting may encourage more people to get involved. Consideration needs to be given to the additional maintenance requirements of new plants, while also remembering that some plants could help to reduce maintenance needs, for example, ground covers may assist with weed suppression.

Planting is likely to focus on perennial understorey plantings under existing tree canopy. Planting of most species will take place between April and September, during which time plant establishment is generally more successful.

**Action 16:** Plant additional plants in the Food Forest, focusing on perennial understorey species

## 8 SIGNAGE

80% of survey respondents supported installing additional signage at the Food Forest. Permanent signage, including a noticeboard and educational signs for specific plants, has already been investigated and can be installed very quickly if funding is secured. MCG is currently awaiting the outcome of several grant applications.

Signage will be approach in two steps: (1) temporary signage that can be installed very quickly, and (2) permanent long-term signage.

## Temporary signage

Volunteers are already in the process of installing temporary signage, which includes plastic stakes and wooden signs. These are very low-cost signs that have been created using existing materials. The purpose of these signs is to encourage community engagement and participation in the short term.



Figure 9: Temporary signage

## Permanent signage

In 2020, a pergola collapsed, along with the metal 'Food Forest' sign that was on top of it. This needs to be reinstalled, likely on an adjacent pergola.

Other permanent signage will ideally include both a noticeboard, and educational signs for individual plants. This signage must be durable, and resistant to both vandalism and theft, making its installation highly dependent on funding availability. MCG is currently awaiting the outcome of several grants that would assist with its implementation. If these are unsuccessful, additional grant applications and/or fundraising may be carried out in 2021.

The installation of permanent educational signage will assist members of the public to carry out maintenance tasks outside of formalised events. This will be enhanced through the use of modern mobile application technologies, specifically QR codes.

### *QR codes*

As COVID-19 restrictions have eased in Victoria, many citizens attending bars and restaurants are coming into contact with QR codes. Taking a photo of a QR code with a mobile phone camera prompts the handset to open up a browser window with content that has been linked by the barcode creator. While QR codes are a technology which may previously have been unfamiliar to everyday users, there will now be a much greater awareness of their utility within the community. Both Android and iOS handsets have integrated QR codes, which should allow 99% of mobile phone users to interact with the technology (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/861532/australia-mobile-os-share/>).

It is proposed that the Food Forest will use QR codes embedded into physical signage that can link visitors to a Youtube video. Videos will be periodically updated by the Working Group or other volunteers, and will contain content such as information about plants in the segment where the visitor is positioned, and demonstrations of maintenance activities relevant to the time of year.

**Action 17:** Install temporary signs

**Action 18:** Install permanent noticeboard

**Action 19:** Install permanent educational signage

**Action 20:** Integrate QR codes into signage

## 7 DATA COLLECTION

We will collect data about the Food Forest, utilising the website Farming Concrete (<https://farmingconcrete.org/>), which allows for easy recording of information and contributes to a global data set on the benefits of urban farming. We will aim to collect data about participation, species variety, and other topics as deemed useful/necessary by the Working Group and others.

**Action 21:** Implement system for collecting and distributing data

## 9 OFFICIAL RE-OPENING

In 2021 we intend to have an official 're-opening' of the Food Forest, to highlight the work that has been done and engage further with the local community. This could be tied in with the Spring Plant and Produce Sale (which has been held in conjunction with the adjacent West Brunswick Community Garden in the past), and could incorporate an educational session. The planning and execution of an event is dependent on COVID-19 limitations. This will be revisited in 2021.

**Action 22:** Host a re-opening event

### Action summary

**Action 1:** Add a specific educational focus to working bees

**Action 2:** Run working bees more frequently than once per month, if there is sufficient capacity and interest, and continue to run most working bees on the weekend

**Action 3:** Promote working bees and events via multiple avenues

**Action 4:** Utilise the WBCG Facebook private group and public page and other online channels to promote and organise off-calendar working

**Action 5:** Run a series of workshops throughout 2021

**Action 6:** Continue to run Food Forest tours during suitable events

**Action 7:** Establish a Food Forest Working Group

**Action 8:** Establish and maintain partnerships with other organisations

**Action 9:** Increase promotion of events and activities across online channels and via a physical noticeboard

**Action 10:** Focus on weed management

**Action 11:** Continue to plant fast growing, popular crops in large open area to generate community interest

**Action 12:** Create updated map

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**Action 14:** Create publicly accessible Maintenance Plan

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**Action 22:** Host a re-opening event

# Implementation

Implementation of the actions will be coordinated by the MCG Community Gardening Coordinator in conjunction with Food Forest volunteers, WBCG OC members, and the MCG Board as required.

The timeline for works is available via this spreadsheet:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18cGs9AZT7-CoK7Y7n4jF2xdA2UohRTnhLLzbDBQVTNQ/edit?usp=sharing>

Progress will be discussed at monthly OC meetings, and tracked via this spreadsheet:

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1hT8fkPC6Wzyb6MajTDVnrdLFxhIGbo\\_dw8IAiUU\\_xno/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1hT8fkPC6Wzyb6MajTDVnrdLFxhIGbo_dw8IAiUU_xno/edit?usp=sharing)

A follow up report detailing progress and any adjustments to the actions or focus areas will be published by the Community Gardening Coordinator in 2021.

## Stay in touch

**Website:** [www.morelandcommunitygardening.org/dunstan-reserve-food-forest/](http://www.morelandcommunitygardening.org/dunstan-reserve-food-forest/)

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