



For the Friends of the Botanic Garden AGM: 29 October 2024



INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the progress made by the Friends of the Botanic Garden including the combined work of many volunteers, toward achieving our goals for the financial year 2023-2024.

Part 1 provides an overview of key developments, current needs and future possibilities for the garden by the President of the Friends.

Part 2 provides details of progress made and specific achievements by the Friends over the past year, grouped under the headings of our five strategic plan goals.

The five goals under the Friends 2024-2028 Strategic Plan adopted in early 2024, which are based on the Aim of the Friends in the Constitution and added to in consultation with members are :

- 1. Conservation**
- 2. Education**
- 3. Community Enrichment**

- 4. A Strong Friends Association
and**
- 5. A Collaborative Approach**



PART 1: OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR FROM THE PRESIDENT

Relationship of the Friends with the City of Coffs Harbour (Council)

The Friends of the Garden, in collaboration with Garden Manager Rick Ackland and other City of Coffs Harbour staff, have taken some significant steps forward over the last year for the benefit of the garden and visitors. The Friends now meet regularly with senior staff of the City to discuss garden needs and plans. This has helped progress the development of a five year MoU Partnership Agreement and a five year, instead of annual, operating Licence with the Friends, both of which are nearly finalised. The Licence will provide more certainty, and facilitate the reopening of the café.

The MoU will also set up a regular Advisory Body comprised of representatives of the Friends and the City of Coffs Harbour to guide the implementation of the Plan of Management for the garden. This plan was adopted by the City in 2023 to manage the Crown Land Reserve which is the site of the Botanic Garden.

The Profile of the Garden, Visitor Numbers and the Need for Investment

The North Coast Regional Botanic Garden is now listed as one of the eight flagship tourism attractions under a new City of Coffs Harbour Regional Tourism Strategy. This has helped to lift the profile of the garden as part of promotional work to locals and to visitors, including in visitor information products funded by the City, and in local media generated by the Friends such regular stories in News of the Area, and on ABC radio, 2 Air FM, NBN News and a recent visit by the Channel 7 Better Homes and Gardens show.

The electronic visitor counter installed with funding from the Friends in late 2023 now provides a much more accurate count of visitors to the garden. This has revealed that total visitor numbers are over 120,000 per year (or around 10,000 per month on average), more than double the number that was estimated from earlier surveys.



Graham Ross presenting for Better Homes and Gardens

All of this helped to build the case, made regularly by the Friends to the City of Coffs Harbour senior staff and Councillors, of the need for increased investment in the garden. For example, this assisted over the previous 15 months to finally get the education building constructed as well as a clear plan with the environmental approvals needed to replace the mangrove boardwalk. There is now consideration for more regular capital investment by the City for larger projects such as refurbishment of the Red Bridge at the lake and for the replacement of other boardwalks including in the rainforest area and nearby.

The signs in the garden are in urgent need of an upgrade to a more durable standard using a coherent style guide. A core role of a Botanic Garden is to inform and educate visitors about plants and the various roles undertaken by a botanic garden so this project is one which the Friends are well placed to guide, support and manage with appropriate professional assistance. The City has agreed under the MoU to manage the ongoing maintenance of garden signs.

Tours, Events, Catering and Education at the Garden

The number of guided tours, especially using the e-buggies, has increased dramatically and the monthly nocturnal tours are now regularly sold out in advance. There were many other small group visits, events and weddings at the garden requiring the services provided by the volunteer Friends – see details below. The promotion of activities held in the garden has been boosted this year via a new and free monthly email bulletin produced by the Friends called “Whats On” in the garden.

New education kits for schools, new visitor guides, guiding notes and an updated Guides Manual for the garden have all contributed to enriched learning and visitor experiences. The City has recruited a two day/week Education Officer, Jaid Roden, to coordinate and expand the role of the garden for school educational visits and other educational programs.

Catering services in the garden are in a period of transition and subject to final Licence, and finding a suitable café operator the new café operator to be given first option to cater for events in the garden, while the Friends will retain the first option to cater for events which we organise.

Garden Maintenance and the Therapeutic Garden

The garden maintenance (working bee) volunteers, under the supervision of Rick, Mark and Toby, continue to keep the garden in tip top condition. They also help to repair and clean paths and to assist with other projects such as the Therapeutic Garden upgrade. This consistent and high quality maintenance work drew many positive comments from visitors in online reviews, in the visitor book or made directly to the volunteers at the Information Centre.

Our little known but highly appreciated Therapeutic Garden program, coordinated by Peter Green, offered the joy of gardening to people with a range of abilities. The garden beds there are now much more accessible and the water supply will be more reliable.

Botanical Science

Botanical science services in the garden have been reinvigorated thanks to the efforts of a growing volunteer teams. Outstanding progress was made on the database of our Living Plants Collection, in the Seed Bank and at the Herbarium. Work has progressed for the labelling of plants, especially in the Eastern Australia and heathland gardens. See more details below.

The Friends are in need of a botanist, and also for a person to assist with the regional seed bank project in a technical support role. A botanist would help oversight our botanical services as well as support and train volunteers. Discussions about some potential funding support for these roles are underway with local and state government.

A strong and growing Association

Membership of the Friends grew by 59 in the last year to a total current membership of 335 members, with the vast majority electing to also volunteer in the garden. This sustains the trend of strong growth in membership with over 100 new members in the last two years.

The most recent comprehensive assessment of the total of volunteer time contributed to the garden is estimated conservatively to be worth well over \$550,000 per year. Our garden has a very high contribution of volunteer time and of fundraising effort for a Friends Association as compared to most other regional botanic gardens in Australia.

Our Friends Association remains in a very strong financial position with a range of steady income streams including from shop and plant sales, tours and venue hire. The café, under the new five year licence, will generate additional revenue for the Friends under a sub-licencing arrangement.

More to do

While much progress is being made there is still much more to do to address the deterioration over many years of garden signs, boardwalks and some paths. Work needs to be done on the aging red bridge at the lake, and for a more secure and solid shelter for the Orchid and Bromeliad collections. Further work is needed at the Seed Bank and Herbarium to upgrade the climate control systems to maintain cool and dry conditions for these valuable collections, as energy efficiently as possible.

Longer term there is a need to upgrade or replace the garden entrance building and toilets. This will be a big project requiring advocacy by the Friends, City leadership and gaining state or federal government grants. All of this should be more achievable under the new Partnership MoU and collaborative arrangements now being finalised between the Friends and the City of Coffs Harbour.

Commitment to host the visit of other Friends of Gardens to Coffs Harbour in 2026

Our Friends Association is a member of the national body called the Australian Association of Friends of Botanic Gardens (AAFBG). The AAFBG holds a national conference every two years, with the last one being held at the Maroochy Regional Bushland Botanic Garden in August 2024. Coffs Harbour has been invited to host the 2026 national conference. This will draw about 100 guests from Friends of Botanic Gardens all around Australia. The theme for the 2026 conference has been set as 'the role of Botanic Gardens in nature education' The plan is to also invite the education officers of other Botanic Gardens via BGANZ, so as to foster more collaboration between gardens on educational resources. Planning for the conference is now underway and the Friends Committee will be seeking the help of volunteers in preparing for and hosting this special event.

Big thank you!

A big thank you to the members of the Friends Committee for their dedication and work in what has been a very collegial and productive year of service for the governance of your Friends Association. Thanks also to each of the Coordinators of our various volunteer teams and to Rick Ackland, Mark and Toby for their work and cooperation with those teams.

Finally, a big well done to all of our dedicated volunteers for your part in contributing to our shared progress and to making this Botanic Garden such an educational and inspirational place to visit.

In Friendship,
Graham Tupper
President

PART 2: DETAILS OF PROGRESS 2023-2024

Goal: Conservation

General Botanical Services

- The Friends offered a free plant identification service, and also a free training guide in how to identify plants and other living things using a phone app (iNaturalist), supported by the Atlas of Living Australia, and checking with RGB PlantNet and printed books and references.
- To help assist in developing skills and knowledge of the botany team, new relationships and networks were developed by various members of the Botany Advisory Group with the Australian National Botanic Gardens, Brisbane Botanic Garden, Royal Botanic Garden (Mt Annan), University of New England Herbarium and botany department and others.
- The reference libraries in the Cottage library and Seed Bank were re-organised and tidied up and a successful fundraiser of the surplus books organised with APS (raising over \$400).

Thank you to the Botany Group Coordinators listed below along with Barry Kemp, Catherine Herriman (library) and others assisting with the Botany Advisory Group.

Living Plants Collection Database

- The Living Plant Database project is 15 months into what is estimated to be a 3 year program to transfer records to the Hortis database system. The team is making good progress to confirm and record the location, health and identification of the living plants in the Botanic Garden.
 - 5,041 living plants in the garden are now on the Hortis database system
 - 1,041 have been verified, and ID confirmed, on a digital map of the garden with a photo.The garden areas completed so far include: the carpark surrounds, Prime Display Area, Rainforest Proteaceae, Sensory Garden, Rainforest, Botanists Walks area (East Coast NSW and Qld), India.
- The new system will facilitate the making of up to date plant labels for the living plants which will be referenced to the database and can be used, for example, to assist guides on educational tours, and the staff from other botanic gardens, to know more about the rare and endangered plants in the garden including where to find them and their provenance.

Thank you to Living Plants Collection Database Coordinator, Rhonda Sorensen, and team: Lynne Petersen, Larry Corbett, Janet Holmes, Kevin Sheedy and Ben Holmes. Assisted by Toby from staff.

Herbarium

- To manage the maintenance of the Herbarium collection and database a number of needs were identified in consultation with botanists from UNE, after the big effort to change the collection over from cardboard to plastic trays. This includes instituting a new system to protect the collections from insect attack after the removal of copious amounts of naphthalene.
- The Friends have agreed to add to the Herbarium collection the specimens collected by Nan and Hugh Nicolson which were used to inform the publication of the series on Rainforest Plants.

Thank you to Herbarium Coordinator, Andrea Plant, and to other volunteers assisting.

Seed Bank

- Stage 1 of the refurbishment and re-equipping of the Seed Bank building was completed.
- The North Coast Regional Seed Bank Project was officially launched in February 2024 at the botanic garden. This project is a collaboration between the Friends, regional Landcare organisations from Kempsey to the Queensland Border, and NSW Local Land Services (LLS).
- The Friends hosted the seed storage facility and maintain the seed bank database for this north coast regional project, and successfully managed grants of \$47,000 from Local Land Services for the Seed Bank facility to be equipped as the host of the project.
- A manual of Standard Operating Procedures was developed for seed collection, processing and storage for use in the seed bank project, consistent with the Florabank Guidelines.

Thank you to the Seed Bank Coordinator, Karina Hall, the former coordinator Belinda Searle, and to young botanist and project contractor Kit King. Thanks also to Rick Ackland, staff and volunteers for their work to date to repair, refurbish and repaint the Seed Bank building.

Fauna Surveys

- The Fauna Survey and Education Team conducted the third survey of fauna living in the garden in late 2023. This survey added a more comprehensive list of frogs and reptiles, and discovered the very small Feather-tailed Gliders are also living in the garden.
- The fauna survey team also conducted more than 18 nocturnal tours of the garden and helped to produce visitor guides to the animals living in the garden. The team also offered 'how to' sessions for 'citizen scientists' in the use of a phone app to help identify plants and animals.
- This work was complemented by Cheryl Cooper and a range of bird photographers providing photos and information on the extraordinary diversity of bird life in the garden – as seen on our social media. The garden was the number one birdwatching site in the Coffs region on ebird.

The fauna team is coordinated by Graham Tupper. Thanks to team members: Karen Hutchings, Alison King, Sean Espinola, Lillian Stormsong, Alesha Teitzel, and Lee Duffy.

Goal: Education

Tours, Visitor Information and Signs

- There are currently 19 registered garden guides including for walking tours and e-buggy tours
- Regular educational e-buggy tours in the garden are now being offered on Wednesdays and Sundays, as well as the monthly Guides walking tours.
- A new visitor information leaflet on the Powerful Owl was developed and printed



A nocturnal wildlife tour in the garden – using special white and red LED spotlighting torches.

- Other visitor guides were developed including a seasonal guide to the flowering plants in the garden along with other guiding notes.
- A comprehensive new Guides Manual for the garden was developed, printed and distributed.
- A new “best of the garden” self-guided walk was developed and tested by the guides for the ‘Explore Coffs Coast’ phone app and tourism kiosks – funded by the City of Coffs Harbour
- The online listings for the garden including Google, Trip Advisor, Wikipedia, CoffsCoast.com, Visit NSW and others via Australian Tourism Data Warehouse were updated or expanded.
- A detailed audit of garden signs was completed and preliminary consultation done with a specialist company Interpretative Designs on the needs, priorities, design processes and indicative costings for durable signs in the garden.

Facts and Figures

- Over 252 people booked and paid for regular e-buggy tours (on Wednesdays and Sundays)
- Over 300 people booked and paid for the nocturnal wildlife tour (first Friday of the month)
- An additional 16 special tours of the garden were delivered, of which 6 included catering
- An additional 13 events were catered for at the garden by the Friends
- Over the Sundays in summer, a total of more than 1400 visitors on the Great Southern Rail tour visited the garden for hosted visits including e-buggy service contracted by JBR.

Big thanks to the busy Guides and Group Visits Coordinator, Helen Wildman and to all the volunteer guides team. Thank you also to our dedicated Catering Coordinator Pamela Leigh who needed to step down mid year, and to all the catering volunteers.

Education Building and Resource Kits for Schools

- The construction of a new education building to be called the ‘Nature Discovery Centre’ has been completed. This will be the hub for the hosting of school visits and other educational programs. Landscaping and fit out work is still being done prior to the opening of the building. A formal launch with publicity about the services offered will be organised in early 2025.
- Development and testing of new education kits designed for school use (for self-guided and guided activities) were completed for: 1. Art in Nature (Shapes) 2. Our Habitat Our Home, and a kit has been drafted for 3. Rainforests. These will be made available online.
- The Friends assisted with running the annual week long secondary science program in the garden called ‘AusBiota’ in collaboration with the Australian Museum and Taronga Zoo.

Thank you to the members of the Communications and Education Advisory Group: Graham Tupper, Cheryl Cooper, Sue Siwinski, Rowena Post and Jaid Roden.

Goal: Community Enrichment

Visitor Services (in addition to the tours and other events listed above)

- Our friendly volunteers in the Information Centre and Shop kept the centre open for every day of the year 9am to 4pm and received a lot of positive feed back from visitors.

- The Friends managed the booking calendar, delivery of services and invoicing for a wide range of events big and small in the garden, from birthday parties to weddings to festivals and orchestral performances.
- The Friends catered for group visits and for groups hiring the meeting rooms. The Friends organised a successful sausage sizzle fundraiser for the 'All One Under the Sun' festival.
- A free buggy ride/morning tea service at the lake for the elderly in our community was trialled in September with the support of a donation by Basia Meder and will commence soon.



Coffs Harbour City Orchestra performing a free concert in the garden for Seniors Week

Visitor Information

- A new monthly "Whats On" in the Botanic Garden email bulletin was commenced in October 2023 and now has over 300 subscribers.
- Our garden Facebook page has grown by over 800 followers during the year to a total of just over 4,600 and our Instagram followers have increased by 25% to almost 700.
- Our garden website now has nearly 30,000 views per month.
- Our garden listing on Google receives between 4,000 and 9,000 views per month and the most common Google search term to list the garden website is "attraction in Coffs Harbour"
- Many positive five star reviews of the Botanic Garden were received on Google and Trip Advisor, especially noting the help of the friendly volunteers at the Information Centre and Shop, and the garden guides.

Garden Maintenance and Facilities (Working Bee teams)

- Garden beds and path systems were kept in tip top order, despite the efforts of the Brush Turkeys, including to clean paths, prune trees, weed garden beds, remove truckloads of plant debris and spread mountains of mulch.
- The working bee teams help deliver a number of special projects including: the Japanese Garden makeover (prior to a visit of a delegation from our sister city Sasebo), the makeover of the Waterwise Garden, the upgrade of Therapeutic Garden and the maintenance of ponds, lake and waterfall areas.

- The area around the café was painted and window treatments were upgraded with funding from the Friends. (The café roller door is to be replaced and when the new five year operational licence is signed expressions of interest will be called from commercial operators and a sub-licensing agreement put in place to reopen the café.)
- The rainforest boardwalk at the Palm swamp Rainforest was re-routed around the Blue Fig roots and repaired, as stage 1 of a rainforest boardwalk replacement and path repair project.
- The Therapeutic Garden (also known as the community garden) was upgraded to greatly improve the useability for people with special needs and their carers.

Thank you to Roster Coordinator for the Information Centre/Shop, Rob Watt and to whole volunteer team welcoming and informing visitors to the garden.

Thanks to our dedicated Publicity Officer and Online Editor, Cheryl Cooper, and to all contributors of photos and information for our social media posts and Nature Gallery.

Thank you to the Venue Hire Coordinator, Glenis Hunter, and to Patsy Caves and all volunteer e-buggy drivers assisting with weddings and events.

Thank you also to Working Bee Coordinator John Bliss, and to our small army of dedicated volunteers. And to Therapeutic Garden program manager, Peter Green, and volunteer team.

Goal: A Strong Association

Members/Volunteers and Governance by the Friends Committee

- Membership of the Friends increased by 59 to be currently 335 members, of which nearly 300 are registered as volunteers.
- The Friends Committee maintained full membership for most of the year until the resignation of Pam Leigh due to illness in June. Chartered Accountant Heidi Loots was appointed by the Committee as Treasurer to fill the vacancy on the Committee. The Committee brought a range of complementary skills and experience to provide input and oversight for a wide range of garden projects and needs during the year.
- The Committee developed a 2024-2028 Strategic Plan informed by a membership survey.
- Volunteer recruitment, placement and monitoring processes were enhanced with the membership database spreadsheet being updated and details corrected for some emails.
- Regular social events offered to volunteers to celebrate work at the garden along with the recognition of long and exceptional service through five Life Memberships.

Finance and Reporting

- The Friends maintained a strong fundraising and financial position overall with steps made to increase efficiency, with good accountability, in the financial management systems.
- The annual audit was completed and reports and resolutions prepared for the AGM.
- Fundraising was generally maintained across the key revenue areas of plant sales, the shop, venue hire tours and group visits/catering.
- Preliminary work was commenced to help lift donations via a bequest program and to reapply for tax deductible gift recipient status for the Foundation Fund.
- The Friends archival records management system was organised and the online storage systems of records (Google Drive) improved and expanded to include a photo and video database

- A Friends Manual of standard procedures and volunteer roles was further developed.
- The regular system of reporting using emailed 'Friends Updates' bulletins was maintained, and complemented with the new monthly Whats On in the garden email bulletin.

Thank you to the Volunteer Placement Coordinator: Gisella Conechado, and daughter Georgia, assisted by Louise Power. Thanks also to Membership Officer and Shop Coordinator Patsy Caves. Thanks to all the Plant Nursery volunteers for their work on propagating plants and stocking the plant displays for sale.

Thanks also to Treasurer Heidi Loots, Assistant Treasurer Ian Scott, and the finance volunteers.

Goal: A Collaborative Approach

- Regular meetings with senior City of Coffs Harbour staff to advance a long term MoU Partnership agreement, a new Advisory Body on the implementation of the garden Plan of Management and a five year (instead of annual) operating Licence for the Friends, including a pathway to reopen the café and generate revenue for the Friends.
- A submission was provided to the City of Coffs on the draft tourism strategy to seek the addition of the Botanic Garden as a flagship attraction in the Coffs Coast Region.
- Friends Committee members regularly attended City of Coffs tourism meetings and provide input into tourism promotions.
- The President delivered addresses about the garden to a wide range of community groups and meetings through the year, including to Rotary and Probus and at City of Coffs Harbour events.
- The Friends collaborated with BGANZ (Botanic Gardens Australia and New Zealand) for the annual Botanic Gardens Celebration Day.
- The Friends collaborated with the Australian Association of Friends of Botanic Gardens (AAFBG) members in sharing of information on aspects of managing change in Botanic Gardens at the 2024 conference, and to begin planning to host the national AAFBG conference in August 2026.
- An engagement plan has been drafted for meeting with elected Councillors including to invite Councillors to the gardens for briefing about programs, facilities and needs.

Thank you to the Friends Committee, and John Bliss assisting on the City of Coffs Harbour MoU and Licence negotiations. Thanks also to Cheryl Cooper for assisting in liaison with the City of Coffs Harbour Tourism section, BGANZ and the AAFBG.

THANK YOU !

Finally, a big thanks to all our wonderful volunteers, including all of those not mentioned by name in this report, for your work in fundraising activities, garden maintenance, visitor services, administrative tasks and all the many roles needed to run a Botanic Garden.

All of this collaborative effort by volunteers and with the garden staff helps to achieve our vision for the Botanic Garden to be 'a valued place where people can come to relax and learn, and where the community can gather to be inspired by plants and nature at the heart of Coffs Harbour'.