

Friends of the North Coast Regional Botanic Garden

ANNUAL REPORT 2024 -25



The new Nature Discovery Centre building, opened in July 2025, serves as an educational hub in the garden.

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the progress made by the Friends of the North Coast Regional Botanic Garden toward achieving our strategic goals. The five strategic goals of the Friends 2024-2028 Plan which are based on our aim in the Friends constitution are as follows:

- 1. Conservation**
- 2. Education**
- 3. Community Enrichment**
- 4. A Strong Friends Association**
- 5. A Collaborative Approach**

The achievement of much progress has been the result of the combined efforts of a small army of botanic garden volunteers supporting the work of the City of Coffs Harbour employed staff team.

SUMMARY OF INDICATORS

Total Visitors to the garden:	131,500+ / year	To July 2025. Average 2,500+ per week
School students visiting the garden:	4,700+ / year	Conservatively. 350+ on guided activities
Garden website views/impressions:	300,000+	/ year (resulting from searches, ads, links)
Google inquiries/searches for the garden:	15,000+	/ year (to find the website, garden location etc)
Garden website visits/clicks	7,800+	/ year (What's On, educational information etc)
Followers on Facebook Instagram YouTube:	6,832	Annual increase of 960 (14%)
Subscribers to What's On in the Garden:	554	Annual increase of 209 (38%)
Tours and monthly guide/seasonal walks:	86	/ year 68 daytime tours, 18 nocturnal tours
Electric buggy transport bookings:	56	/ year <u>PLUS</u> transport services for weddings/events
Venue bookings/garden events:	490+	/ year an average 9+ bookings/events per week
Educational events and holiday programs:	12	/ year special events, such as senior science studies
Membership of the Friends:	280	43 new members joined over the last year
Volunteers registered:	180	over 80% of new members also elect to volunteer
Value of donated volunteer time:	\$743,000	conservatively, based on volunteer hours

SUMMARY OF PROGRESS IN 2024-2025

- The long-awaited reopening of the garden café, the Leaf and Bean, based on a new longer term Crown Lands Licence agreement between the Friends and the City of Coffs Harbour.
- Opening of the Nature Discovery Centre building, serving as an indoor/outdoor classroom and educational hub for visiting schools and other groups with an educational goal.
- Launch of two new education kits "Art in Nature - Shapes", "Our Habitat, Our Home", as well as of a beautiful 'Habitat Tree' artwork/student activity and other educational resources.
- Advancing the garden signs renewal project including planning, style guide, a new garden map, sign designs, and consultations, ready to manufacture information and way-finding signs.



- Upgrade of the Therapeutic Garden beds and supporting infrastructure near the lake
- Building of a new secure Orchid House for the orchid collection in a sunny location



Peter Green and the therapeutic garden crew with some of the new garden beds.



The secure new orchid house in the plant nursery area.



Members of the Working Bee team hard at work on garden maintenance.

- Big progress on the Living Plants Collection database (Hortis) and the ground checking of plants
- Herbarium: maintenance of collection and negotiations to upgrade the herbarium database
- Regional Seed Bank: progress in seed collecting resources, training videos and events, launch of a new seed bank website, with support of grant funds from NSW Government agencies.
- A substantial boost to the public profile of the botanic garden and of events in the garden via the What's On in the Garden bulletin, website, social media sites and stories in the local media.
- Much appreciated visitor services at the garden information centre and shop, with many complimentary comments in the garden Visitors Book and online.
- Steady plant sales and work by the plant nursery volunteers, raising funds for the garden
- Garden facilities and maintenance: paving, landscaping projects and regular maintenance by the hard working Working Bee teams, also recognised in comments and reviews by garden visitors



Ground checking the location & health of the Living Plants Collection with mobile phones linked to the Hortis database.



Signing the Friends and City Council MoU: the President and Council General Manager, with the mayor, senior council staff and Friends Committee representatives.

- Signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Friends and the City Council covering the roles and responsibilities of the City Council and the Friends of the garden.
- Regular meetings of the Friends Committee with senior City Council staff under the new MoU to improve coordination, and investment in the garden.

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2025-2026.....next steps:

- Installation of new garden signs starting soon with new large information panels/map at the entrance and way-finding signs with a garden map ("you are here") throughout the garden.
- The design and installation of information signs for garden paths/walks using the new Style Guide for signs, including for the Nature Trail, Botanists Walk, and the rainforest area.
- Repair and reopen the Wetland Forest boardwalk connecting the rainforest to the creek path.
- Rebuild and reopen the Mangrove Boardwalk near the garden entrance
- Clean up the front pond and improve the surrounds with some new plantings/landscaping
- Completing the ground checking of the Living Plants Collection database and making parts of the plant database accessible for the public to learn about and find plants in the garden
- Progressing the regional seed bank and the herbarium, including to start germination testing
- Investment in the plant nursery to assist plant sales with a focus on native plants, as well as in establishing a small nursery dedicated to the growing of plants for the garden.
- Continuing to provide friendly information services at the garden entrance, garden tours and transport services, venue hire for a range of community events, publicity of the garden and special events, keeping the garden well maintained, and for the fundraising and volunteer services to support all of this!

Thank You to the Friends Committee, and to all the coordinators of various work areas behind the scenes coordinating volunteer teams and advancing our shared projects. Thank you also to the garden staff: Rick Ackland, Mark, Toby, Georgia and Education Officer Jaid Roden for their collaborative approach which is essential to supporting our volunteer work.

Finally, a big thanks to all members and volunteers for your part in raising funds and contributing to our progress in making this botanic garden such an enjoyable and inspirational place to visit.

In Friendship,

Graham Tupper

President, on behalf of the Friends Committee



*Above: The Friends Committee 2024-25
Back L-R: Heidi, John Graham, Ian, Kevin
Front L-R: Peter, Cheryl, Helen, Louise, Patsy*



Tree planting by the Friends with the City Council at the formal opening of the Nature Discovery Centre with the Deputy Mayor and senior staff.

DETAILS OF PROGRESS 2024-25

Strategic Goal: Conservation

BOTANICAL SERVICES

Relationships were developed by members of the Friend's Botany Advisory Group with the Australian National Botanic Gardens, Brisbane Botanic Garden, Royal Botanic Garden (Mt Annan Plant Bank), University of New England Herbarium and botany department and others. The Friends also offered a free plant identification service and free training guides in how to identify plants and other living things using phone applications such as iNaturalist.

The Living Plants Collection database (Hortis)

Over 75% of the 6,500 plants on the Living Plants database have now been checked ("ground truthed") with a photo and details added to the database. A general public access portal to the database has been created and is being tested to look up the living plants in the garden to find their location. This database will assist to create/update new plant labels for the living plants collection referenced to the database and to use in research or to assist on educational tours. Thank you to Living Plants Collection Database Coordinator, Rhonda Sorensen, and team.

Herbarium

Following up the big effort in 2023 and 2024 to change over to plastic storage trays for the plant specimens and to remove naphthalene, the implementation of new systems is underway to protect the plant specimens from insect attack. Consultations were also commenced with the University of New England botany department and herbarium to develop a new database system for the herbarium collection. Thank you to Herbarium Coordinator, Andrea Plant.



Rhonda Sorensen at work verifying plant details on the Hortis Living Plants database.



Dave Wood and Alesha Teitzel collecting seed from native species for the regional seed bank.

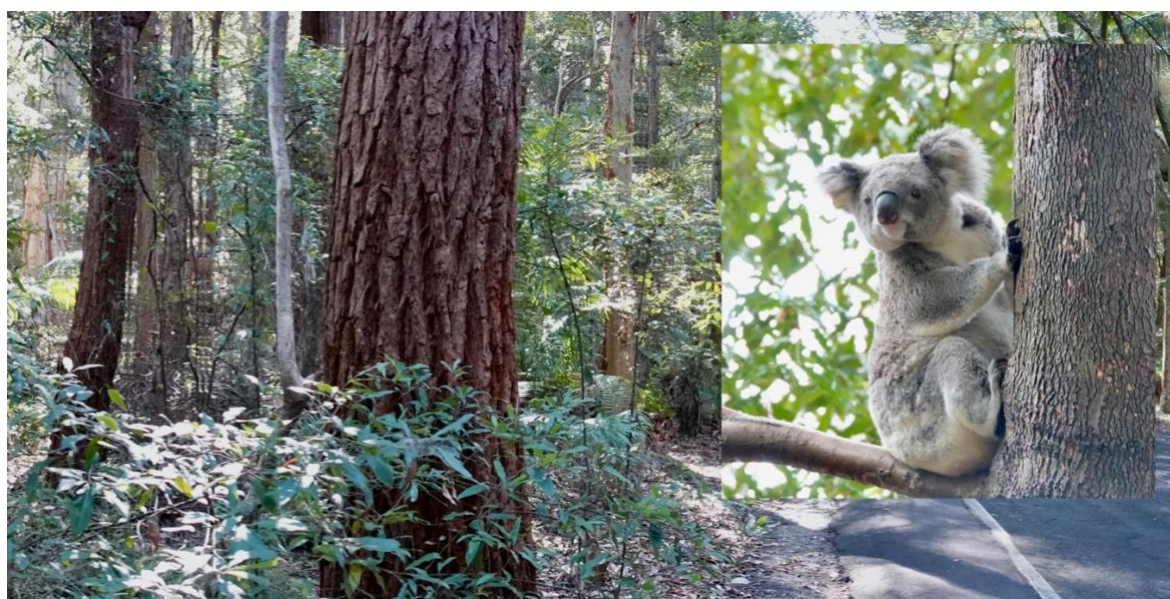
Regional Seed Bank

Building on the repair and upgrade of the seed storage facility in the botanic garden, the Friends are now part of a regional network with Landcare (north coast region) and NSW Local Land Services (LLS) to host a regional seed bank to store and test the seeds of over 100 native plant species which are to be used for land restoration and habitat recovery programs across the north coast region. The Friends also manage a regional database for seed collecting and storage, seed storage, and develop operational systems and training resources for seed collecting and processing. All of this information is now accessible under a new north coast regional seed bank website developed and managed by the Friends. Thank you to the Seed Bank Coordinator, Karina Hall, and to Alesha Teitzel for technical and administrative support.

Fauna Information and Conservation

The botanic garden is a refuge for wildlife at the heart of the city and is home to at least 12 threatened species including the Koala, Powerful Owl, Squirrel Glider and a variety of large and small bats. The Fauna Survey and Engagement Team conducts regular monitoring surveys in the garden and noted the re-emergence of bandicoots and wallabies in the garden over the last 12 months after the removal of foxes in 2023/24.

The team also conducted 18 nocturnal tours in the garden with most of the tours selling out in advance. Educational resources on fauna in the garden were developed along with a database of images and videos, supporting the online educational work. This was complemented by the efforts of Cheryl Cooper and a range of bird photographers providing brilliant photos and information about the extraordinary diversity of bird life in the garden. Thank you to fauna team members: Karen Hutchings, Sean Espinola, Lillian Stormsong, Alesha Teitzel, and Lee Duffy.



The Swamp Mahogany is one of the preferred feed tree species for the koalas living in the garden

Strategic Goal: Education

The Nature Discovery Centre and new education kits to assist school visits

A major milestone was achieved after five years of fundraising and preparatory work with the completion of the 'Nature Discovery Centre' building, along with paving and landscaping works around the new building, assisted by our volunteers. This project was inspired by, and driven along through all the various City Council processes, by the Garden Manager, Rick Ackland.



LEFT: The formal opening of the Nature Discovery Centre in July with Deputy Mayor, Cr. George Cecato, Council staff, architect Ann Gee, Prosper (fundraising) representatives, and Friends volunteers.

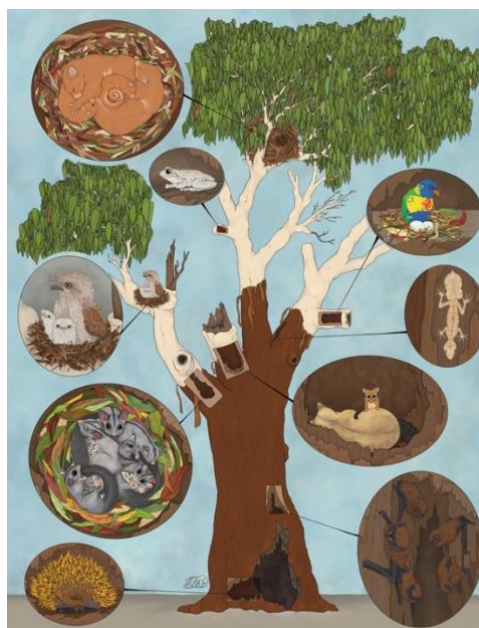
The Friends contributed over \$50,000 to the building construction and fit out costs for this \$350,000 project as well as volunteer time for landscaping, paving and educational resource development.

Two new education kits were launched at the opening of the building: 'Art in Nature - Shapes' by Rowena Post and 'Our Habitat Our Home' by Graham Tupper, Simone Olsen and other contributors. The kits are designed for teachers to plan curriculum linked self-guided learning activities in the garden. A colourful new digital artwork, the "Habitat Tree", was produced by garden volunteer, Lillian Stormsong, and a printed and laminated version made for an activity by young visitors.



Above: Rowena Post with the new 'Art in Nature' education kit at the Nature Discovery Centre opening.

Right: 'Habitat Tree' poster, based on a Blackbutt tree (Eucalyptus pilularis) and wildlife observations in the garden forests. Artwork by Lillian Stormsong.



The botanic garden also hosted an annual Biological Diversity Study Day for senior secondary science students in August in collaboration with the Australian Museum and Taronga Zoo. The Friends provided a module and guided tours for students on the evolution of eucalypts. Thank you to the volunteer guides for this event and especially to coordinator Sue Siwinski.

Visitor Information and Educational Resources

The visitor information leaflets at the garden entrance, supported by answers to visitor questions from our friendly shop volunteers, enables visitors make the most of their visit the garden and to learn more. Thank you to Vicki Davidson for regularly checking, printing and stocking up the supply of garden information leaflets for visitors.

Information about the garden flora and fauna is also regularly posted to the garden Facebook and Instagram pages and updated on the garden website and in our listings on Google and Wikipedia. The volunteer work to make this happen behind the scenes not only increases awareness about the garden well beyond our region but also gives visitors a greater understanding about the plants and wildlife in the garden. The council and NSW government tourism staff working for CoffsCoast.com and Visit NSW also assist in promoting the garden based on a regularly updated garden listing in the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse.

Thank you to Cheryl Cooper and other volunteers providing photos and content for the flora and fauna listings and for keeping our online listings up to date. Thanks also to all the members of the Friend's Communications and Education Advisory Group convened by Graham Tupper for the oversight of this work: Cheryl Cooper, Sue Siwinski, Rowena Post and Jaid Roden.

Garden Signs

Good informative signage is an important element in the educational role of a botanic garden. Following on from the audit of garden signs in 2023, showing a need for significant renewal, and the decision by the Friends at the 2024 AGM to allocate a budget of up to \$220,000 for a garden

signs program, steady progress has been made. A Style Guide for all new signs has been adopted, along with the creation of a new garden map and names for all of our main paths. Sign locations have been identified and the designs completed of a set of new large information panels and way-finding signs throughout the garden. The first set of new signs are now being manufactured and should be installed within the next few months. Thank you to Kevin Dupé for helping to get this big project underway.

Left: The new map of the botanic garden for the new signs and a revised visitor information brochure.



Garden Tours

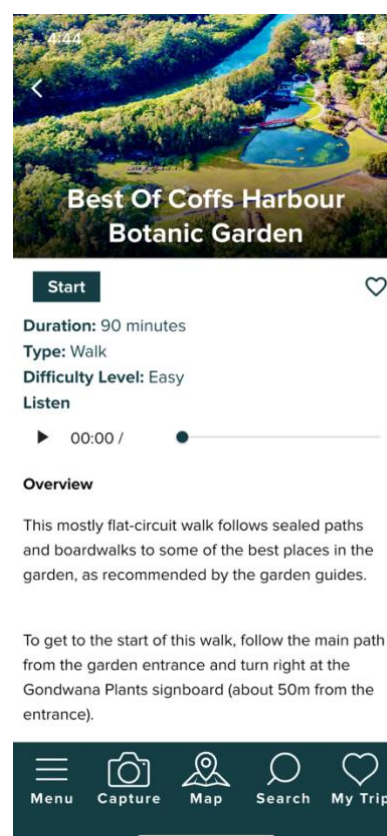
The running of regular guided tours is an important educational role played by the Friends. The volunteer garden guides provide both regular daytime walking tours and e-buggy tours: at least 68 formal daytime tours and 18 nocturnal wildlife tours during the year. In addition, a popular new initiative is the bi-monthly Seasonal Walks (guided walks to plants in flower or fruit) coordinated by John Gray. Over the Sundays in summer, the Friends also hosted a total of more than 1400 visitors on the Great Southern Rail tour visited the garden including an e-buggy transport service, raising funds for the garden.

Every week a number of other informal e-buggy tours or transport services are provided and this service is especially appreciated by people needing mobility assistance.

Right: The “best of the garden” self-guided walk is featured on the ‘Coffs Coast Explore’ phone app which is now being widely promoted by the City of Coffs Harbour. At each stop on the walk, which is shown on the online map, visitors can listen to a brief explanatory commentary of the features at that stop.

Supporting all of this is a Guides Manual which is constantly being refined, now complemented by the Living Plants database, to assist guides to find particular plants or groups of plants for special tours.

Thank you to the Guides and Group Visits Coordinator, Helen Wildman, the e-buggy transport booking coordinator, Patsy Caves, and to the team of friendly volunteers assisting with e-buggy driving and tours.



Goal: Community Enrichment

The botanic garden is a valued community space hosting many public and private events such as art/craft and flower shows, concerts, festivals, special events, weddings and celebrations. The flat paths and serenity of the garden is especially valued by people with mobility restrictions or special needs who can also, with their carers, learn about growing things in the Therapeutic Garden.

To help the community know about upcoming events and other news the Friends provide the What's On in the Garden email bulletin is offered as a free service now reaching over 550 people and with events being promoted further by the City Council and others. This is supported by the regularly updating and promotion of events on the garden website and on our social media sites.

Facilitating these community services requires the efforts of a range of volunteers including our Venues Coordinator, Glenis Hunter, managing venue bookings and the garden bookings calendar.

Our friendly team of volunteers at the Information Centre and Shop provide information to visitors about events in the garden and services such as free wheelchair hire and the e-buggy service.

The garden paths and plantings need to be well maintained in order to host regular visitors and community events and this is made possible by our dedicated teams of Working Bee volunteers coordinated by John Bliss in cooperation with Rick Ackland and the garden staff. Their work has included some special projects over the last 12 months to assist with the landscaping around the Nature Discovery Centre and the upgrade of the Therapeutic Garden.

Getting plants ready for sale and providing information about the plants for home gardens is also an important aspect of our community engagement, requiring dedicated work in the plant nursery as well as in presenting plants in good condition at the garden entrance.

As a result of all these combined efforts the botanic garden receives every week many lovely comments in the Visitors Book as well as in online reviews, mainly on Google.

Thank you to:

- Information Centre and Shop roster coordinator, Rob Watt and to the whole volunteer team welcoming people and informing visitors about the garden.
- Publicity Officer and Online Editor, Cheryl Cooper, and to all contributors of photos and information for our social media posts and the Nature Gallery.
- Venue Hire Coordinator, Glenis Hunter, and to Patsy Caves and all the volunteer e-buggy drivers assisting with weddings and events.
- Working Bee Coordinator John Bliss, and to our teams of dedicated volunteers.
- Therapeutic Garden program manager, Peter Green, and volunteer helpers.
- Plant Nursery Team leaders Janice Fitzpatrick, Lindy Malone, stepping down this year, and to Andrea Plant and all nursery team volunteers.

Garden Café – The Leaf and Bean

The long awaited reopening of the garden café finally happened in June 2025. Experienced cafe operator, Toni Taylor, now operates the café under a four year sub-licence agreement with the Friends and a head licence agreement between the Friends and the City Council. The café, which is open every day, has brought a new energy to the garden as a place to meet and relax over a coffee or a bite to eat.

A lot of administrative negotiation and some building upgrade works were required to get to this point and to meet health regulations. Special thanks to Patsy Caves, Louise Power and Rick Ackland for helping to address these issues and enable the café opening.



Toni Taylor, the manager/licence holder of the new Leaf and Bean café at the garden.

Strategic Goal: A Strong Association

Members and Volunteers

Membership of the Friends remains strong with a stream of new members replacing those that leave or retire. Over 80% of new members also elect to volunteer their services in the garden. The processes for recruitment, placement and support of volunteers are being enhanced with a new membership database and other support systems. This will also help to improve communication with members and membership renewal processes – the ability to easily renew online. A “Friends Update” email bulletin was distributed to members at least every second month and some special social events were offered to members. Thank you to our Secretary, Louise Power, who also looks after volunteer records and placement, and to new volunteers Angie and Tom assisting with the implementation of the new membership database and related IT issues.

Governance

The Friends Committee met 9 times during the last year bringing a range of complementary skills and experience to manage garden programs, services, special projects with all of the important planning and financial accountability work that this entails. The profile of the botanic garden and the use of modern communication technologies has greatly improved in the last few years, as shown in the summary of key indicators. A big contributor to this progress has been Cheryl Cooper who is stepping down from the Committee this year. Thank you to Cheryl for her dedicated and productive work over the past years and also to Kevin Dupé, also stepping down this year, who has assisted with getting the big new garden signage renewal project underway.

Finance Refer to the Treasurers Report and audited Financial Statements for details.

The Friends continued to fundraise effectively and to maintain a very strong financial position overall, even with additional expenditure for special projects agreed at the 2024 AGM. Fundraising was generally maintained across the key revenue areas and additional income will now flow from the licence agreement with the new café operator. The Friends received significant additional grant income from NSW Government agencies to support the development of the north coast regional seed bank. It is planned to introduce some new systems over the coming 12 months, such as a new Point of Sale (PoS) system as well as the capacity to securely take online payments, which will make accounting for revenue a lot easier.

Maintaining our financial systems in an open and accountable way with all of the new IT systems involved is a big job. Big thanks to the Assistant Treasurer, Ian Scott and Treasurer, Heidi Loots.

Administrative Systems

A ‘Friends Manual’ of standard procedures and volunteer roles was further developed and refined. Our online system for records management was also further refined, and now includes a photo and video database. This will be useful for illustrating our regular communications with more photos and to update our historical timeline of the development of the garden. Our current systems along with our IT needs are currently being reviewed with a view to improve the ease of use for volunteers in key roles, as well as to ensure the best possible online security.

Goal: A Collaborative Approach

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the City of Coffs Harbour

Consistent with a goal in the Friends 2024-2028 Strategic Plan an MoU was signed with the City Council to outline the respective roles and responsibility of the Friends and the City Council. Then MoU also sets up a quarterly consultation meeting between representative from the Friends Committee and the senior staff to identify priorities and progress the Plan of Management for the botanic garden. Briefing notes and meetings were organised for a range of meetings by the President and others with City of Coffs Harbour Councillors including with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor. The Publicity Officer and/or the President also regularly attended regular City of Coffs Harbour tourism meetings and provided input into tourism promotions.



LEFT: School students learning about the garden inside the new Nature Discovery Centre building.

This space is also where the Friends now meet regularly with senior staff of the City Council to advance collaborative projects and to highlight priorities for action or investment in the garden.

Celebrating the botanic garden

The Friends collaborated with BGANZ (Botanic Gardens Australia and New Zealand) to celebrate the annual Botanic Gardens week in May and also participated in a gathering with other Friends organisations at the biennial Australian Association of Friends of Botanic Gardens (AAFBG) at Maroochy Bushland Botanic Garden.

The Coffs Harbour Garden Club as part of their 75th year celebration donated \$5,000 toward the upgrade of the front pond area. The Friends also assisted to promote the garden club. The President delivered a range of presentations about the botanic garden to community groups, and via various radio and print media interviews, to foster cooperation and community enjoyment of our green garden oasis at the heart of Coffs Harbour.



We look forward to making more progress in the garden in 2025-26 and in the lead up to the 40th anniversary, in 2028, of the formal opening of the botanic garden.