

Bringing nature back to the neighbourhood

WORDS JULIE MULHAUSER
PRESIDENT-ELECT, ROTARY CLUB OF BALWYN, VIC

The Rotary Club of Balwyn is putting the 'nature' back in nature strips by connecting people, place and purpose.

THE Rotary Club of Balwyn, Vic, is helping property owners in Boroondara beautify their nature strips by replacing the grass (and weeds!) with flowering native shrubs, grasses and groundcovers to attract bees, birds and butterflies.

Verge gardens or biodiverse nature strips connect people, place and purpose for multiple benefits.

These benefits include improved street tree health, direct support for biodiversity – in particular pollinators – create biodiverse corridors and 'stepping stones', connect people to nature and strengthen neighbourhood social connections.

More than a third of public green space in Melbourne is nature strips. This offers a tremendous opportunity to nurture the social and natural ecosystems nature strips (verges) inhabit.

Murray Wilkinson, a 43 year member of the Rotary Club of Balwyn, was inspired to commence the Balwyn Rotary Biodiverse Nature Strips project after attending the Rotarians for Bees event 'Bring Back the Buzz', organised by Rotary Club of Canterbury, Vic, member John McCaskill in March 2022.

Since then, a small team of Balwyn Rotary members has tackled more than 60 nature strip transformations.

While households are permitted by Boroondara Council to transform their own nature strips, in practice there are significant knowledge barriers to overcome.

This is where the team from the Rotary Club of Balwyn comes in.



LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT JEN MARTIN AND ROTARY CLUB OF BALWYN PRESIDENT-ELECT JULIE MULHAUSER.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROTARY CLUB OF BALWYN MEMBERS MARC MIRAMS, BO CUI AND CHRIS FINLEY; CLUB MEMBERS MURRAY WILKINSON AND MARC MIRAMS; LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT JEN MARTIN, WITH BALWYN MEMBER DELARAM KERMANI AND PRESIDENT-ELECT JULIE MULHAUSER; CLUB MEMBERS CHRIS FINLEY, MARC MIRAMS, MURRAY WILKINSON, BO CUI, JULIE MULHAUSER AND DELARAM KERMANI.

In return for a small donation to the club, the team helps with the council permit, site preparation, mulch, advice on plant selection and a professional garden design. Households can then be confident that what at first seems a daunting task, is achievable.

A survey of households identified support for biodiversity was a top priority (100% of respondents) followed by wanting to reduce mowing (60%) and lower water use (42%).

Homeowner Cathy explains that she was motivated to make the switch from grass and weeds to a biodiverse nature strip because “there are better things to do with this patch of dirt”. Cathy’s new nature strip softens the look of the street, improves street tree health by reducing soil compaction and contributes much needed support for bees, lizards and birds.

The regular chore of mowing and edging the nature strip has been replaced by removing the occasional emergent weeds.

The project has largely spread through word of

mouth and the ‘What’s Happening Here’ tree signs on completed nature strips.

The aim is to not only increase the number of biodiverse nature strips locally, but to build partnerships with other community groups and experts to both learn from others and share knowledge and experience.

The Rotary Club of Balwyn has also helped the Rotary Club of Highton, Vic, launch their pilot program, organised a roundtable with invitees including other community groups, council officers and experts, and supported the launch of a Friends of Belmont Park group.

The project highlights Balwyn Rotary’s active role in a civic ecosystem that enables collaboration to achieve much more than can be done alone.

Importantly, the project sparks conversations that identify opportunities and keeps hope alive in the face of what can feel like overwhelmingly complex problems.

It is a project that, while the details are location-specific, the model is replicable. ^{RDU}

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ANY CLUBS INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE CAN CONTACT ROTARY CLUB OF BALWYN PRESIDENT-ELECT JULIE MULHAUSER VIA [JULIEMULHAUSER@GMAIL.COM](mailto:juliemulhauser@gmail.com) OR [NATURESTRIPS@BALWYNROTARY.ORG.AU](mailto:naturestrips@balwynrotary.org.au) VISIT BALWYNROTARY.ORG.AU/PAGE/NATURE-STRIP-PROJECT FOR MORE INFORMATION.

