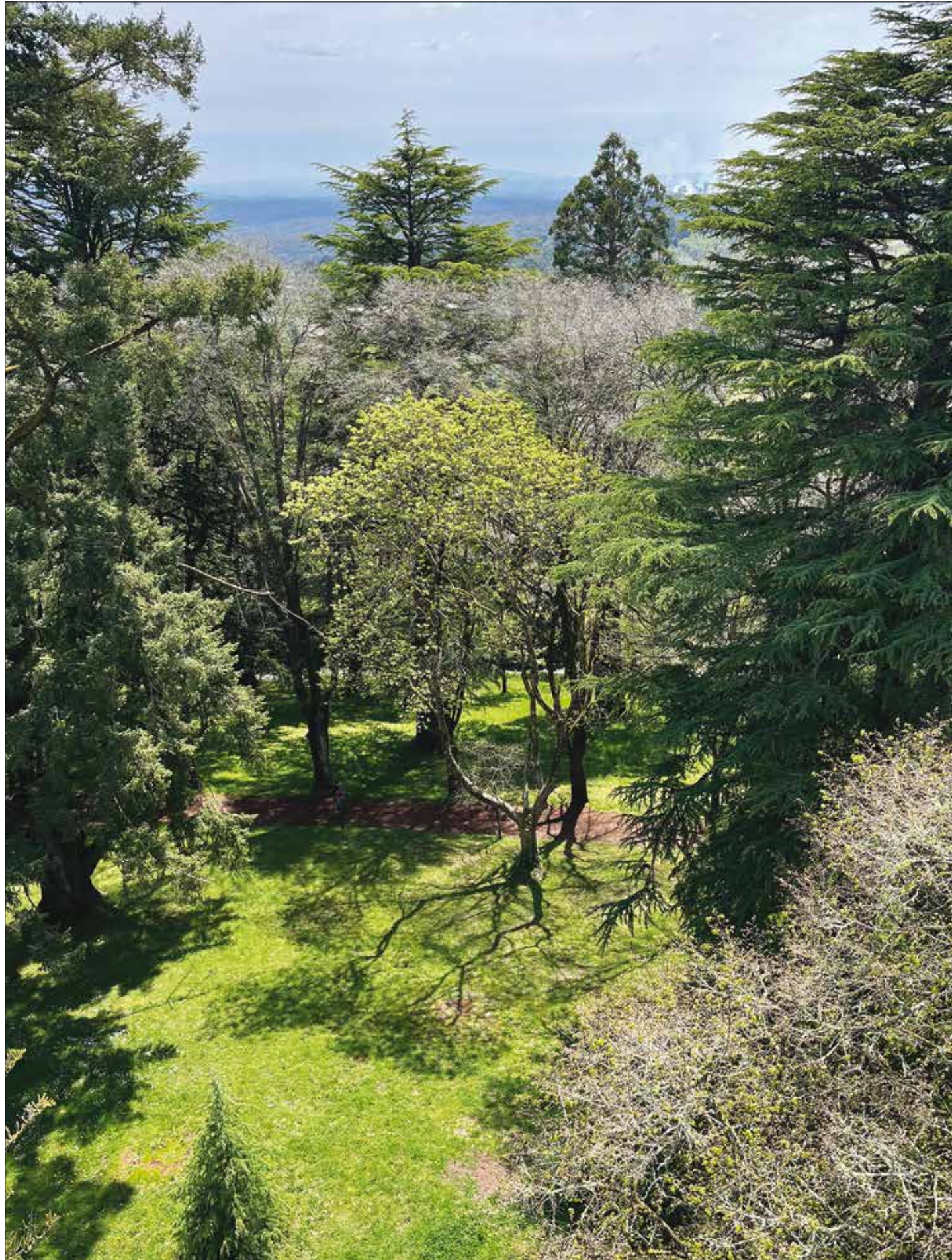




HILL OF CONTENT

Linda Carr meets the local volunteers caring for
Wombat Hill Botanic Gardens in Daylesford.

Photography by Jeffrey Richardson

There can't be too many botanic gardens in Australia that are perched on top of an extinct volcano — but as you take the steep winding drive through the gates of Wombat Hill Botanic Gardens, the benefits of being on such a site become very clear — the rich soil feeds majestic trees and through the foliage you catch a

glimpse of expansive views. The 10-acre gardens are cared for by staff, supported by a band of volunteers on weekly weeding bees. On a stunning spring morning a small group of volunteers have gathered promptly in the growing nursery to commence the day's tasks.

'I suppose the growing friends group

+ HILL OF CONTENT

has been going for about 20 years, where people come up and work regularly,” says co-ordinator Gillie.

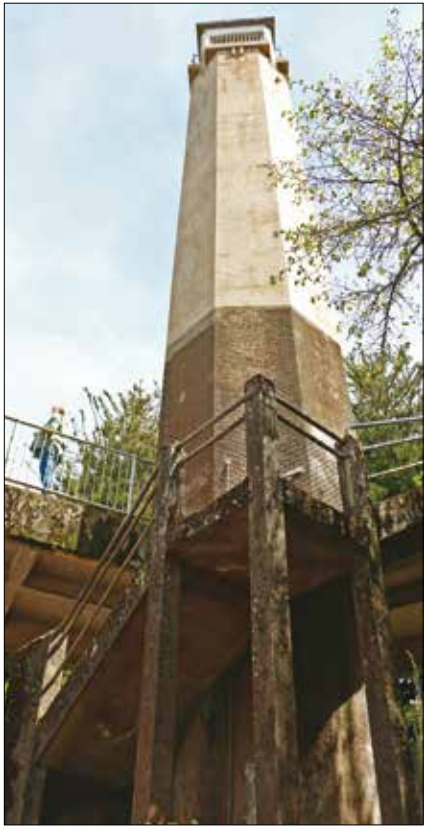
“Maybe 40 members but people come and go because they have other lives. It’s the nature of volunteering. People give their time when they’ve got it and sometimes they can’t, they have other priorities,” she adds.

‘Growing Friends’ seems a very apt name – the volunteers grow plants for sale in the nursery and through this activity they grow their personal friendship circle.

‘It’s like finding your tribe! New volunteers are often new residents in town,” quips Karla, gloved up and ready for action.

The large nursery is full of stock propagated by the Growing Friends. They also work the sales counter Thursday to Saturday, taking full advantage of people enjoying a break in the café next door, who later wander in to see what’s available to take home.

Income from nursery sales is boosted when the Friends are invited to assist with private Open Gardens – providing



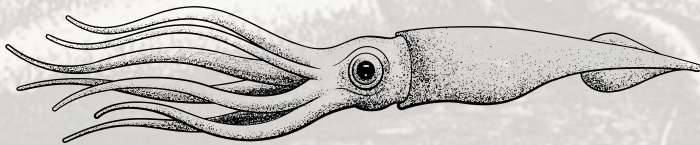
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Devonshire Tea and potted plants for sale. So successful is the fundraising that the volunteers group has contributed substantially to the costs of significant infrastructure improvements such as renovation of the entrance gates, fernery replenishment, path steps and glasshouse works.

The group is particularly proud of current work being done to renovate the Day Basin. Erected in the 1800s, this heritage-listed brick tank held all the water that Daylesford needed for one day. It is no longer required for that purpose and is now being converted into a water-plant collection with a cascade into the fernery. Balancing contributions for improvements against sales income is a delicate matter for Gillie.

“We recycle all the pots and the labels,” she explains. “Locals bring back the labels and we clean them so we don’t have to buy new ones all the time. It costs money. The volunteers not only do propagation but weeding is a constant task particularly with sycamore saplings, broom and blackberry bushes sneaking up amongst the rhododendrons and other colourful displays. We are also organic; no poisons are used by the volunteers.’

The gold rush days were important to the development of botanic gardens in central Victorian towns, firstly because there was plenty of spare money but also



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things botanical were seen as being a good cultural pursuit, fostering civility in often rough and ready times.

Such historic gardens share another common thread – they all received critical tree saplings and flower seeds from Baron von Mueller, who became director of Melbourne Botanical Gardens in 1857. The pathways at Wombat Hill are still those that he possibly walked upon more than 100 years ago when the now-largest horse chestnut in Victoria was planted.

The old-world charm of Daylesford is



a draw card for out-of-towners with the seasonal changes at Wombat Hill being a very popular stop. The car park is full almost every day with locals and visitors, the more curious of whom take the climb up the 78 stone steps to the top of Pioneer Memorial Tower from where the layout of the Gardens and expansive views can be seen.

The site of the Gardens is Crown land with a Management Committee from Hepburn Shire but the volunteers play a very critical role in maintaining the heritage and recreational value of this special place.

Some of the volunteers have bravely ventured into the world of local community radio with a monthly half hour Sunday

program where they speak on gardening topics and respond to calls from listeners.

The final thoughts on Wombat Hill Gardens come from volunteers, Sue and Sandy.

“Every time of the year, there’s something wonderful here and that’s what makes it so special,” they say. “We have a big collection of conifers but we have a lot of deciduous trees too and unusual ones, so we get the colour, the new buds and the flowers and then in winter the wonderful skeletons when all the trees are bare. So, every season of the year is good, consequently, there’s always people here. It’s a special place.”

Wombat Hill Botanic Gardens are on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, Central Springs Road, Daylesford.



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