



## *merri times in the city*

THE EVER-DEVELOPING CERES ENVIRONMENTAL PARK IS A WELCOME HUB FOR GARDENING AND GREEN LIVING AMID MELBOURNE'S URBAN LANDSCAPE. WRITES ANNIE RASER-ROWLAND.

**W**hat do you get when classic late 1970s' zeal for ecologically aware community projects gallops into early 80s relaxed red tape? Some pretty amazing stuff, if the more than 400,000 people that visit Melbourne's CERES Environmental Park each year is anything to go by.

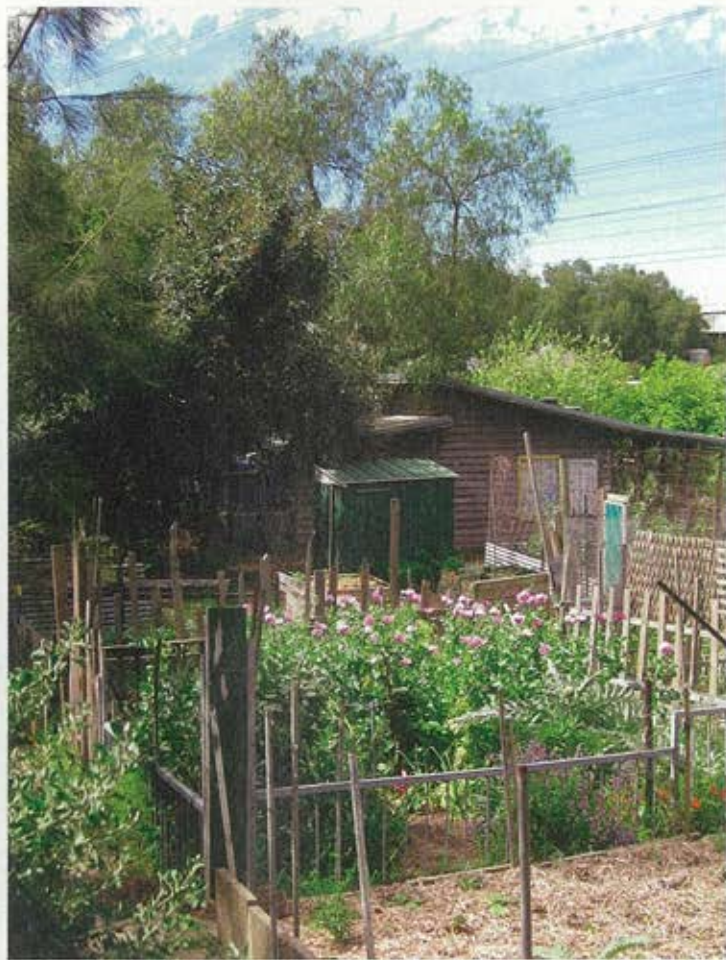
The park's founders signed the original lease on its 4.5ha home back in 1982, having worked on the idea for some years. Tucked into a bend of Brunswick East's Merri Creek, the council-owned site had done recent duty as a quarry, and then a rubbish tip. It needed some love. Landscaping and soil repair was commenced, but navigating the wrecks of dumped car bodies and the holes left by bluestone excavation was seriously hairy work: "You would need all kinds of hard hats and licenses to embark on that kind of restoration now!" reflects a member of CERES' governing board. But that founding collective was energised by a then-slightly eccentric vision: 'to create a hub for social justice and sustainable food projects. To think globally, but act locally.' They secured government

funding to explore new environmentally focused employment possibilities, and got down to business.

Thirty-five years, multiple awards, and several leases later, CERES is a community fixture. Pronounced 'series', the name was originally an acronym for The Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies, but also a head-nod to Ceres, the ancient Roman goddess of agriculture.

### **Fertile grounds**

Agriculture certainly abounds. There are beehives, bush food plantings, community garden plots, and the Honey Lane Market Garden, which supplies fruit and vegetables to the organic grocery shop. Chooks strut through a food forest, and their eggs are sold in the store. The site hums with students attending courses ranging from workshops on companion planting, soil care, home mushroom growing, biochar gardening, weed-foraging, school kitchen gardens and gardening in small spaces, right through to extended



## INDIGENOUS MERRI-MENT

Merri Merri means 'very rocky' in the language of the Wurundjeri-willam people, who once cared for the area around which CERES now stands. They swam, caught eel and other fish, and hunted for duck, possum, kangaroo and emu. They collected eggs, herbs, honey and the fruits of prickly currant bush and pale flax lilies. They made damper from flour ground from the seeds of kangaroo grass (*Themeda triandra*), and sweet drinks from flower nectars and the sap of silver wattle (*Acacia dealbata*). They harvested tubers most abundantly from the daisy-like murnong (*Microseris lanceolata*), but also from water ribbons, small-leafed clematis, and chocolate, vanilla and bulbine lilies.

The CERES Permaculture and Bush Foods Nursery specialises in food-producing plants, and stocks a large range of native food plants, including many of those used by the Wurundjeri-willam. They also sell many other indigenous plants aimed at enabling local gardeners to help feed and house the area's non-human inhabitants.

permaculture design certificates. Polytunnels house propagation facilities, which raise organic seedlings to supply the buzzing onsite nursery. A string of worm farm-bathtubs march down the hill, and compost piles process organic waste into fertiliser that goes back onto the site's gardens.

Environmental thinking is present at every turn. Many of the site's buildings employ passive solar design, and even the converted shipping-container workspaces are bedecked in deciduous climbers to help keep them cool in summer while allowing winter light to penetrate. Virtually every roof space on the property is plumbed to harvest water.

"We have about 170,000L storage capacity, which we use for purposes that do not need potable water," says infrastructure coordinator John Burne. "There's also about 3500sq.m of ground area where we harvest stormwater that is fed into natural sand and reed bed filter systems. Big storm events no longer cause us erosion problems."

As the park has evolved, its focus on organic and sustainable has jumped the gates. The propagation unit has expanded its reach and now supplies its organic herb, vegetable and native seedlings to other outlets.

In 2003, organic fruit and veg production was extended to a second site 2km north along the creek. Previously farmed for 70 years by Joe Garita, this last bastion of inner-city market gardens was saved from developers and handed over to CERES a few rows at a time by Garita, so he could mentor the new caretakers' ability to do the right thing with his precious piece of rich river silt. 'Joe's Market Garden' now contributes to the grocery produce section, as well as another enterprise that carries CERES' impact beyond the perimeter: the popular Fair Food boxes – over 1000 fruit and veggie boxes are supplied to households and businesses in the area every week.

### Grow and learn

But CERES most powerful reach is the one it has via education. Courses beyond horticultural include cheese making, fermentation, preservation, traditional Tamil cookery and food as medicine. Any given week sees flocks of wide-eyed school children touring the site with teachers. Accredited vocational training programs in horticulture and kitchen operations are on offer, while 'CERES Global' coordinates work- and knowledge-exchange programs in India, Cuba, Timor, China, Samoa, Indonesia and Arnhem Land. There is also a bike shed staffed by mechanically minded wizards who teach bicycle maintenance and repair.

### Growing people

Providing opportunities for volunteering is also a key part of the CERES impact. Over 2000 volunteers each year spend time working on everything from taming tomatoes to maintaining the aquaponics system, and then take that knowledge back out into the community.

"It sounds a bit corny, but it's really true: we don't only grow plants, we grow people," says Olivia Caputo from the propagation area.

"Volunteers often come to us as part of a transitional phase in their lives. They come not just to learn skills in propagation, but to socialise, find a new direction, or develop their confidence. We also couldn't do what we do here without them – nothing here is mechanised, and demand for organic seedlings has really ballooned over the last few years."

Last year saw the three paid staff members and the volunteers they supervise send more than 27,000 punnets of vegetable seedlings and 16,000 tubes of herb seedlings to market.

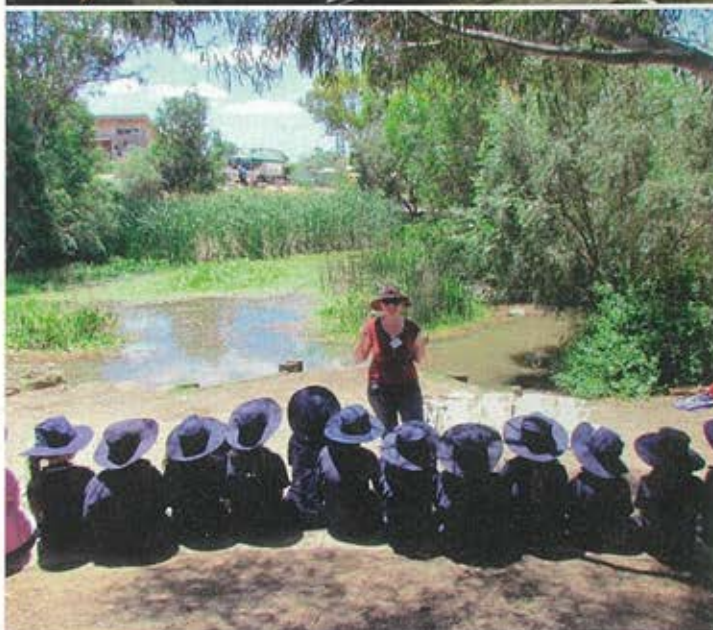
"I can't believe this is here, right in the middle of the city" is a common utterance by first time visitors. Traffic noise fades to a distant murmur and is supplanted by that of pobblebong frogs, kookaburras, and the wind shifting through tree canopies. Employees at the nursery say that pest and disease problems are remarkably absent compared to other nurseries, possibly because the site's biodiversity of plants, birds and insects keeps things in balance.

### Nursery know-how

The nursery served more than 56,000 customers last year, and is replete with all the mulches, stakes, soil amendments, books, fruit trees and vegetable seedlings and seeds that an inner-city gardener could desire – tomatoes alone are represented by 31 varieties this summer. Less standard plants include the likes of golden purslane, perilla (the 'sushi ginger' pickling herb), lovage, cape gooseberry, tamarillo, pepino, wasabi and water chestnut, plus finger limes, Davidson's plum and other bush foods. "Gardening has become hip again," says nursery manager Laurel Coad. "People have realised that you don't need to live in the country or the outer suburbs to grow vegetables or fruit trees, and we have the expertise to help them produce food in whichever situation they have. With the boom in apartments around here, we're also seeing a boom in indoor plant sales – people have realised the benefits of greenery for air cleaning and relaxation."

Satisfying ambitious environmental principles as well as the needs of so many groups operating under a single umbrella is an ever-evolving process. The venue-hire spaces, cafe and grocery shop have recently been redesigned for better access, and plans for the near future include a revamp of the community garden plots to make them more open to the public. And being a not-for-profit, the public is what it's all about in the end. People don't just come to CERES for the businesses and services it houses, or the calendar of festivals and live music that it hosts, they come to be somewhere different. As local father Kieran Sullivan comments, "It's good to be able to take a child somewhere where you walk around and people talk to each other. You don't usually get that in a big city."

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TOP: THE CERES BIKE REPAIR SHED RUNS FIX-IT WORKSHOPS.  
 ABOVE RIGHT: 43,000 VEGIE AND HERB SEEDLINGS WERE SOLD LAST YEAR.  
 RIGHT: EDUCATION IS A CORNERSTONE OF CERES, FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS ALIKE.