

26th Annual General Meeting, 21 October 2014

President's Report

This is my fourth and final report as President of the Friends of ANBG. This is a totally voluntary group that plays an increasingly important role at ANBG. As President I am enormously indebted to the large number of people who have contributed to the various tasks and activities over my period as President.

Our membership numbers continue to grow, from 1625 four years ago to 1997 at the end of September this year. Our membership team does a great job in managing this side of our operations.

Over the past year or so

- The Friends for the first time took on full underwriting of the summer concerts. The summer concerts are a major drawcard and bring many younger people to the Gardens. Details are given in the Treasurer's report.
- The 7th Botanic Art exhibition was opened on 21 March by well known botanic artist Sharon Field and ran until 21 April. The Friends again purchased two of the paintings, which have been added to the growing collection currently on display in the Dickson room.
- A slowly increasing number of volunteers are doing an excellent job staffing the desk at the Visitor centre during the week. A review of this operation was done earlier in 2014 and many suggestions taken into account.
- The Growing Friends continue to do excellent work and held a further two sales in the past year. Some funding was provided to repair and improve their facilities following storm damage. There will be some further interaction with the Nursery, with a proposal for a staff member to run propagation workshops for the group.
- The red centre garden was opened on schedule in November 2013 by Senator Birmingham. The Friends centenary gift of an original pavement artwork has proved to be a major attraction.
- The Alpine seed project has reached its conclusion with a major symposium in June this year. The project leader, Dr Adrienne Nicotra will talk to us about the project at the end of this meeting and copies of the final symposium report will be available outside the room for those who wish to take one.
- Support for research at the Gardens has continued this year with significant further funding being made available for additional equipment at the seedbank, mainly through the Friends Public Fund.
- Our volunteer guides continue to play an essential role, with the regular walks, special themed walks and guiding in the red center garden. The guides are also the first to step up for a number of special tasks and their contributions are essential for the Friends and the Gardens
- The relatively new plant science group and photographic group have continued to grow during the year and that is very pleasing to see. The photographic group mounted its first exhibition in February called ANBG through the lens and this was very well received.
- On communication, the Fronds team has put out three excellent issues during the year, the website team continues to maintain an excellent website for us and we have moved to issue more frequent broadcast emails.
- Our Social and Activities committee has arranged a number of events during the year. As well as the dinner in February and the Breakfast with the Birds there has been a viewing of Banks Florilegium at the National Library. A tour of the NGA garden and sculpture and a visit to the STEP arboretum are coming up very soon in October.
- The Thursday talks continue to be most popular and are being well organised by the small committee responsible.
- Pat and Warwick Wright continue to give great service with a number of external talks on the Gardens and native plants to groups in Canberra and the surrounding region.
- We are strengthening ties with the Association of Friends of Botanic Gardens. Warwick Wright is their Vice President and Anne Rawson edits their newsletter Campsis. About 10 of our members attended the recent conference hosted by the Gold Coast Regional Botanic Gardens.
- The Gardens phone system has had severe problems in the second half of the year, with the message system collapsing entirely. While a new system should be in place very shortly it has meant that it has been erratic, to say the least, for members to leave messages on our phone. I thank members for being tolerant while this has continued.

Looking at the year ahead I would like to mention two major developments

- The Gardens approved a Public Art Masterplan during the year. The critical next step is to move to implementation. To this end the Friends have funded Pamille Berg to undertake a feasibility study, which should move us to the point where we can call for specific proposals from selected artists for the first art works under the plan. The Friends have set up a small steering committee to work with Pamille on this feasibility study, which should be completed early in 2015. When it comes to the artworks themselves the Friends envisage contributing financially but other sources of funds will have to be found.

- The Gardens have received funding for development of a site Masterplan. This was strongly supported by the Friends. There will be a consultative group to work with the consultants on this Masterplan and the Friends will have a representative on that group. This is a significant development as major additions to facilities at the Gardens (eg a children's garden and play area) cannot effectively seek funding until this Masterplan is in place.

A few other observations for the coming year

- The full program of summer sounds will take place in January, underwritten again by the Friends. A move to a small entry fee (\$5 per head) has been agreed in place of the previous donation. A fair bit of work is also going into potential sponsors and hopefully that will bear fruit. I would urge members to be prepared to volunteer, even for one concert, as this is a really major event for the Friends and the gardens.
- We have agreed to provide guides and other help for the Enlighten program to be held in February and March. This will bring people after dark to the red centre garden area for drinks and walks to take advantage of the new lighting that has been partly funded by the Friends. We envisage one of these Enlighten evenings being specifically for sharing with the Friends of other national institutions through Friends Around the Lake.
- The Asteraceae garden will be opened by the Friends new Patron, Lady Lynne Cosgrove, on Monday 24 November. The Friends have provided funding and in kind support for this development, which should grow to be a showpiece.
- We continue to provide financial support to the ANBG library for purchase of books and publications. This is the last remaining library in the Department and funding for book purchase is virtually nonexistent from Departmental resources. A small consultative Friends group is being set up to liaise with the librarian on the choice of books to be purchased.
- The Botanical resource Centre continues to operate but we would like to see it used more frequently. Upgrading of the computers in the BRC, and in the Friends office will be considered in the coming year.
- We have also agreed to fund in 2015 development of a Plant Finder App and design and printing of posters and bookmarks promoting ANBG
- We have agreed in principle to provide significant funding for establishment of a Banksia garden but conditional on further information being available in 2015.
- We have moved towards including the orchid volunteers as a Friends group. This has still to be firmed up but we see the orchid collection as an important resource that the Friends can assist with.

It has been challenging in these years as Governments have squeezed resources for this vital national institution. We have made our views on this known. However this cannot go on without quite serious impacts on the Gardens. The Friends may have to become more outspoken on the issues.

I would have liked to make more progress on several fronts

- The management structure of ANBG is not ideal in my view. It is part of a large Government Department whereas I think it should be like the other national institutions and have its own budget line and Board of Management. As an interim position we have been pleading for many years for at least an Advisory Council for ANBG but so far to no avail, even though this was identified in the fairly recent Management plan.
- Progress on major projects for ANBG will not be possible unless there can be an effective means of tapping into significant non Government resources. We have something to sell I believe given the importance of native flora in a world of environmental degradation, climate change, resource shortages etc.
 - I have a passionate desire to see ANBG with a children's garden and play area. No one disagrees with that but no progress has been made. Just look at the Arboretum and Melbourne botanic gardens. Of course they received very significant outside funding but it proves it can be done.
- The role of the Friends has been changing in my time, driven largely by the fact that the Gardens have less resources. So far we have been able to respond to that in a positive way but as a purely voluntary organisation we are approaching the limit of what we can do effectively. I am sure we are going to have to face further requests for assistance and we should try to respond positively to that.
- I am also passionate that ANBG should be playing a greater role in research on native plants. To the extent that the Friends can help with this I think we should. This can be partly through funding (eg the alpine project) but also through in kind involvement.

I must thank most warmly all those who have helped while I have been President. There has always been someone to step forward when something needs to be done. Things have been harmonious and that is a great tribute to everyone involved. A number are stepping down from Council today – apart from me that includes Warwick Wright, Anne Campbell, Glenys Bishop and John Connolly. All have given great service and all are staying involved with various activities with the Friends. I note that Glenys Bishop is standing down to take on the major role of overseeing organisation of the National Guides Conference at ANBG in 2017.

Thank you to everyone in the Friends. It has been a great privilege to serve on Council for the past 8 years. I will be available to help as I am needed in the future.

David Coutts