

STEP Newsletter June 2026



From the President

The unusually warm and fine autumn days have been a delight, and STEP is showing the benefit of them. While we have been doing a little “top-up” watering for the newly planted, STEP is looking particularly good. And it is attracting many, many visitors (and their dogs): this was particularly so on ANZAC Day and Mother’s Day. The STEP picnic table has been a good draw card, with visitors taking advantage of the serene setting.

This recent period has also been a sad time for STEPpers, with Tony Lawson, a very long-time member, and Jennie Widdowson’s husband, Mike, passing away. Our sympathies go out to Tony’s family and to Jennie and her family. Many STEPpers will remember Tony and Mike with great fondness.

David, Judy and Jane were guides for people wanting to visit STEP during Tree Week in early May. While numbers of people were down from last year, those that attended were given an excellent briefing on the many different eucalypts and other tree species in STEP. One of the visitors was a young woman who uses eucalypt leaves for dyeing – so that was a very interesting exchange of information.

We continue to have very constructive bi-monthly meetings with the Arboretum staff on matters relating to our patch. A big focus of recent meetings has been the various infrastructure projects we have in the pipeline – namely the irrigation project, the refurbishment of the water tank and outside storage area by the shed, and the “re-skinning” of the main sign at the Mesa Oaks entrance.

The Arboretum guys have also been helping with the refreshing of the “rollovers” along our two main paths. These are important in order to reduce heavy rainwater scouring the paths.

We have also had discussions with Prof Brad Pillans and the National Rock Garden (NRG) people, together with Arboretum staff, about the creation of more formal paths connecting the NRG and STEP when Stage 3 of the NRG is being established. We see this as an important link that will bring more people in to experience our area.



Bill Handke
STEP President

News from Forest 20

At this time of the year (autumn) Forest 20 displays some of its less noticed flora – the grasses. Our ‘Grasses Gallery’, with its lines of different species shows well the different seed heads after flowering earlier in the year. Noting the difference between Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) and Barbed-wire Grass (*Cymbopogon refractus*) is a useful start – superficially similar until a closer look clarifies the difference.



Barbered-wire grass (L), Kangaroo grass (R)



Red-leg grass across lower slopes of Forest 20

Also striking at this time is the large area of Red-leg grass (*Bothriochloa macra*) that looks quite red at the moment and is soon to drop its seed. Red-leg grass is a fast growing, clumping perennial useful as an accent in native landscapes. It is bird and butterfly attracting, a lizard habitat and used by birds for nesting material. In some conditions at Forest 20 STEppers have been detecting a fragrance, which seems to be a characteristic of other species in this genus. At Forest 20 we wait until the seed has dropped before we ask the Arboretum’s mowers in.

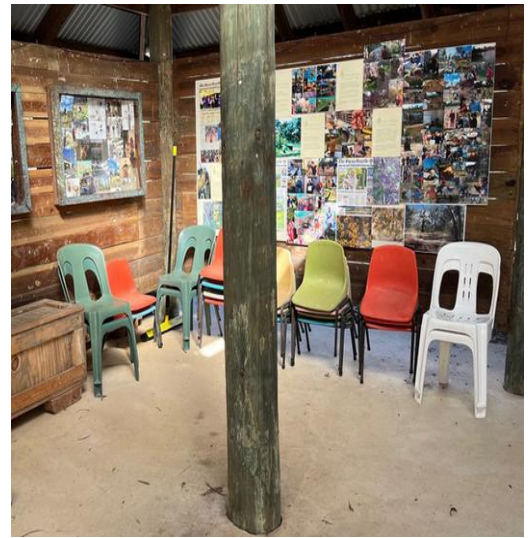
Although we have experienced a prolonged dry period over the last few months, STEppers have been working hard with maintenance tasks, including weeding, pruning, collecting fallen twigs and small branches, re-planting, and repair of gravel paths. In the She-Oak Nook, the first constructed gathering area in Forest 20, STEppers worked with Arboretum staff to refurbish the sitting area with a smart new gravel surface.

In the last little while we have noticed that more visitors are ‘discovering’ Forest 20 for the first time, now that Forest 20 is better connected to the carparks and Visitor Centre. As well, the newly constructed National Rock Garden is providing an almost adjacent second destination for gentle walks on good surfaces. Plans for a more obvious, connecting pathway are progressing.



Renewed gravel surface at the She-oak Nook.

A recent visit to the Euroa Arboretum in Victoria (conveniently adjacent to the Hume Highway), provided an opportunity to buy some plants and renew connections with the staff there. Recently they have created a display of their community planting activities and publicity. Perhaps this is the start of a project to establish a noticeboard at the STEP shed that might showcase similar themes, and perhaps including a photographic record of the changes in Forest 20, since we started planting in 2009.



Euroa Arboretum community noticeboard



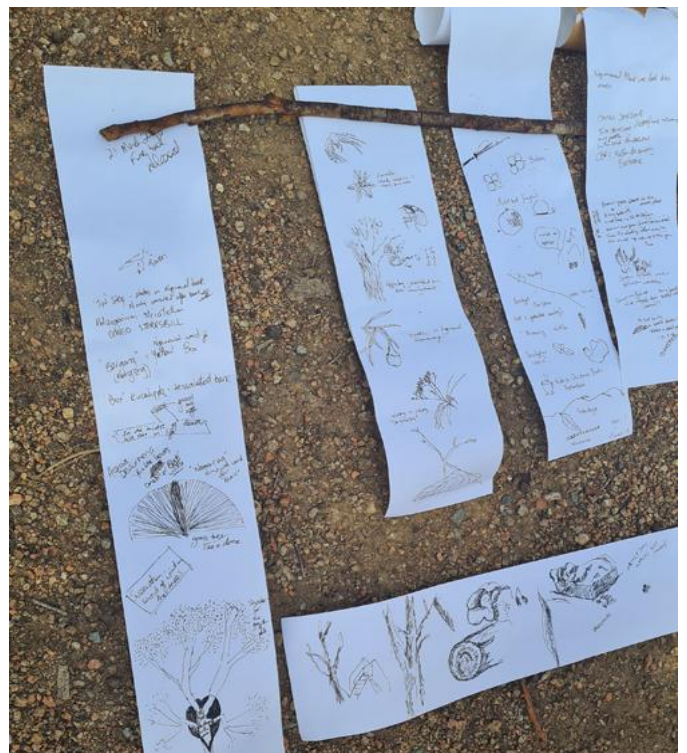
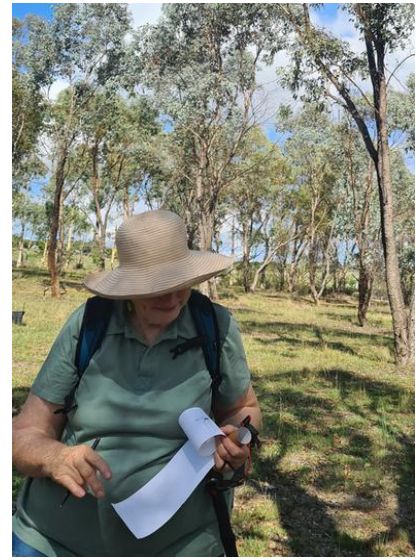
General view through Forest 20

David Shorthouse

More news from STEP

International Women's Day (IWD) walk

On Friday March 6 (IWD), fifteen ladies from Molonglo Conservation Group visited STEP for an interesting activity. Each lady was presented with a small paper scroll in a cardboard tube (from toilet rolls) and asked to draw or record what they found interesting while on a slow amble through STEP led by Jane Cottee and Jennie Widdowson. This was like a mini form of journaling with some interesting notes and sketches made on the scrolls.



Tree week walks

Tree week is held in the ACT each year in the first week of May to celebrate Canberra's urban forests. STEP provided two walks around Forest 20.

Although Tree Week activities were not well advertised, a number of people attended each walk. The first walk was led by David Shorthouse assisted by Judy Smith while the second one was led by Jane Cottee and Bill Handke.



JS

Native Bluebells

We are lucky that the common native bluebell (*Wahlenbergia stricta*) is well established in patches in STEP gardens, grassy areas under trees and the Bush Tucker Garden. This hardy little plant provides a beautiful flash of blue flowers, often in unexpected places. A less common (though nonetheless still native) variety has white flowers and has the common name "White Mist". Our White Mist plants are just coming into bloom in the garden near the main entrance.



Wahlenbergia stricta 'White Mist'

JS



Wahlenbergia stricta Tall bluebell

JW

Judy Smith

A Small Surprise – but one to savour



While tending the Gallery of Grasses recently, Wal chanced upon a small patch of an easily-overlooked scrambling groundcover native pea called *Grona varians* (Slender Tick-trefoil). Some of you may know it from its former name, *Desmodium varians*. It looks not unlike the glycine that we have growing naturally across parts of STEP.



This little plant, while widespread across eastern Australia, and sighted quite often in the ACT this year, is not common. So how delightful it is to have it spring up in STEP. One of the specimens from this patch now has been transplanted, of course, in the Parade of Peas.

Bill Handke

Identifying weeds – traps for young players

I well remember the time when I took out almost a whole bed of tall sedge (a native) in the belief that it was 'Dirty Dora' (sic) (a weed). I hope David, in his charitable way, has forgotten this.

To save anyone else from the mortification of my experience, here are a few common weeds which have similar native counterparts:

African Love grass (Eragrostis curvula) and Common poa (Poa sieberiana and Poa labillardierei)

African love grass is very pesky weed which is rapidly taking over most of the grassy roadsides in this area (*see article below Ed*). The tussock has a bluish look and the flower spikes are open and feathery. Common poas have tussocks that are both much less blue, and are generally taller when fully grown.



African love grass Eragrostis curvula

JW



Common tussock grass

Poa labillardierei

JW

Dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*) and flatweeds (*Hypochaeris radicata*): compare with Yam daisies (*Microseris lanceolata* and *Microseris walteri*)

In the past, some STEP person, who shall be nameless, was found busily digging out a row of newly planted yam daisies, thinking they were dandelions, so I'm not the only one! The plants can easily be confused but belong to completely different families. Yam daisies have broader leaves, often ribbed or toothed. They have longer flower spikes and their buds are drooping. Plus they have a yam (*a large tuber*) growing under them (as part of their root system), but don't dig them up to find out!



Dandelion



Yam daisies

JW

Umbrella sedge (*Cyperus eragrostis*) : Compare with tall sedge (*Carex appressa*)

These two plants are easy to tell apart when flowering, but not otherwise, although *Carex* is taller when fully grown.



Umbrella sedge in flower

JW



Carex appressa in flower

At STEP, Umbrella sedge (an environmental weed) is often mistakenly called Dirty Dora. However, this is the common name given to *Cyperus difformis*, a native which also looks very similar. Dirty Dora is not common in the ACT and is more commonly found in coastal areas while Umbrella sedge is very common. Dirty Dora can become an environmental weed where rice is grown. (Ed)

Buckthorn plantain/ ribwort (*Plantago lanceolata*): compare with native plantain (*Plantago varia*).

The native one has broader, paler hairy leaves, often toothed, and longer flower heads



Ribwort



Native plantain (l) toothed leaves (JW), (r) broader leaves

Paspalum (*Paspalum distichum*) – unmistakable!



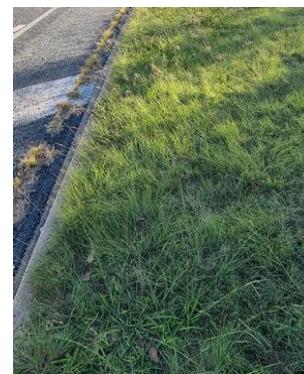
African Lovegrass – not loved!

African Lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*) is a highly invasive pest grass species. It has become rampant this year, occupying verges, open spaces, parks and median strips. As it grows to waist height, drivers are reporting that this scourge impedes vision when approaching roundabouts and turning onto divided roads.



2 trugs full of ALG seedheads ready to be bagged

At STEP we are having a blitz on this grass, digging out tussocks from Forest 20. Eagle-eyed STEP volunteers are becoming quite adept at identifying the tussocks even when the seed heads are not present. We are also attempting to remove seedheads of Lovegrass growing in the allées between STEP and The Mesa Oaks Forest, and along the southern bank leading to the dam. This will be an ongoing task as seeds (light and easily wind-blown) can remain viable in the soil for up to 17 years.



JW

Seedheads and tussocks are carefully placed in bags and disposed of in the garbage skip, keeping them well separated from green waste. Thank you to the NAC Horticulture crew for their assistance with this task.

Judy Smith
Assistant editor

In addition:

ALG is native to South Africa and was accidentally introduced to Australia in the 1800s. Initially, it became established along coastal areas but gradually spread inland. It grows well in acid, low fertility soils. It is dormant and dies back in winter forming a thick thatch which is highly flammable. Plants grow and mature rapidly over summer, especially after storms, producing up to 10,000 seeds per seedhead. These are mainly spread by human activity, animals and their feed, wind and water.

In 2000, in the ACT, there were just a few isolated patches of ALG, mainly growing along the Murrumbidgee river corridor. However, it spread rapidly through southern Canberra and by 2011 could be found in most suburbs of South Canberra, being especially noticeable along median strips of the major roads. Its invasion continued and seems to have happened even more rapidly since 2020, possibly caused by good rainfall. This environmental weed is now becoming established through the northern areas of Canberra. Hence the valiant efforts of STEPpers to keep it at bay.

If you want to read more, there are 2 locally written articles, one by Sarah Sharp in 2011 and the second by Stephen Saunders for the Native Plant Society in January 2025:

Ed.

<https://www.sactcg.org.au/files/domain-6/SACTCG%20African%20Lovegrass%20Survey%20Report%20Sharp%20Dec%202011.pdf>

https://nativeplantscbr.com.au/journal_articles/the-canberra-threat-of-african-lovegrass/



JW

“Eucalyptus” Published by Reaktion Books, London,2025

Reviewed by Max Bourke AM

Wow and wow again! I thought over my 84 years I had read most or many of the great works about trees and specifically about the genus eucalyptus. But this slim volume is not only the best but the deepest in time and space.

It is part of a series of botanical books by Reaktion Press which I now will want to read.

Written by one of Australia’s most brilliant botanists, Stephen Hopper, I guess we should expect no less. With eight books and over 200 scientific publications to his name he is a well-versed writer. This book not only reflects that but in its concise, though dense contents it is truly brilliant. I went through the bibliography looking for an important work about Australian trees and specifically eucalypts and could find none missing!

Steve Hopper might be best known for the fact that he was the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Though I first met him when he was the Director of the Kings Park and later CEO of the Botanic Gardens in Perth. In 2009 he developed the OCBIL theory (old, climatically buffered, infertile landscapes), proposing evolutionary and ecological processes distinctive to ancient, nutrient-poor regions. A theory which makes a lot of sense to this author.

In a little over 200 pages Hopper covers, and this is certainly unique, the botanical knowledge of Indigenous Australians on eucalypts through western science on biogeography, to genetics of the genera, “How Australia made the eucalypts” (his OCBIL theory), cultivating eucalypts abroad and the conservation status of the genera. A big task but done well.

It has many good photographs and a great bibliography and index.

But if you read nothing else the cultural history of the eucalypt from the first Australians to the present time is definitely worth it. When I last heard Steve Hopper speak some 12 years back he had not long moved to Albany where he continues his research. But at that time he gave an insight into the rigorous and wide-ranging research he was doing into Indigenous knowledge and here he presents that as it relates to eucalypts in all states and it is definitely worth reading closely for many reasons.

Whose Hat is That?

STEP volunteers are usually creatures of habit, frequently wearing a favourite “working” hat.

How well do you know your colleagues, based on their head gear? There are 6 hats shown below – can you identify their owners?



Or test you powers of observation with all 14 of these.



Judy Smith
Assistant editor

Thank You

Thank you to all the volunteers who willingly take on tasks big and small to ensure STEP is well maintained and flourishing. Thank you to Cathy for sorting out the tree guards and putting out the broken ones to be taken away by the NAC crew to be recycled. Thank you also to Digby, Mike S, Mike H, Hugh and Dom for the heavy work required to move damp crushed granite and compact it to remediate eroded paths. Another compacting task taken on by Bill and Digby was to fill in holes along the base of the shed concrete pad where rabbits have begun to create burrows.

Don't forget, as a thank you from the Arboretum in Volunteer week, all Arboretum volunteers (this includes STEP volunteers) can collect a voucher from the Information desk which entitles them to a free cup of coffee. Vouchers can be collected until June 21.

The STEP Newsletter is produced quarterly in March, June, September, and December. Contributions, comments and suggestions are welcomed. Email widjennie@gmail.com

Thank you to Max Bourke, Jenny Andrews and Bill Hanke for their contributions this month. This newsletter has been edited by Jennie Widdowson and Assistant editor Judy Smith.

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