

GARDENING



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Riverside renewal

A dedicated team worked with nature to transform an unruly patch of land on the banks of the Yarra.

Riding his bicycle alongside the Yarra River in East Kew about eight years ago, Stanley Barker was struck by how abruptly the landscape shifted from well-mown lawn to thigh-high wandering trad (formerly know as wandering jew). One push on his pedal and he was on carefully managed riverbank and the next in a neglected weed free-for-all.

The demarcation line was the Burke Road bridge. Its footings on the Kew side of the river marked a boundary as clearly as any fence. On one side of the footings was council land and, on the other, Crown land.

Where the council conducted regular maintenance, the abutting Crown riverbank received no attention at all. It was smothered in tradescantia, blackberries, African boxthorn, hawthorn, willow, moth vine, Chilean needle grass and more. It was mayhem and it was exactly what Barker, in the midst of an RMIT conservation and land management course, was learning about.

He approached the Department of Sustainability and Environment about the possibility of rehabilitating the unruly spread. He, his RMIT teacher, Helen Corney, and a band of students and volunteers then turned 10 hectares of denuded urban land (it had been both a dairy farm and a tip) into a slice of natural-looking, remote-feeling bush.

They have killed hectares of weed, planted thousands of indigenous seedlings and attracted growing numbers of native birds and other wildlife. Although these banks are just metres from the Eastern Freeway, they contain picnic areas, woodland tracks and one of the Yarra's few remaining natural billabongs.

The 1.5-hectare billabong was dry when Barker first rode along here in 2007 and he and Corney thought it would never fill again. But fill it did when the drought broke, with the late 2010 rains prompting the entire reserve to, as Corney puts it, "wake up" with regenerating native bush. "It was exactly textbook and very, very exciting," she says. The billabong has been intermittently wet and dry ever since and like the rest of this land has been extensively weeded and planted by volunteers.

The evolution of the whole reserve is a story of how a small community of people – in the midst of a drought and with no money – took it



upon themselves to restore urban land to something nearing how it might once have been.

While they have now received funding from a number of public and private outfits, Barker began by growing plants at home and trading them for a wider variety of species with the Victorian Indigenous Nurseries Co-operative (VINC). He was dragging a wheelie bin to the river and filling it with water so he could irrigate newly planted seedlings. He and others were spraying *Tradescantia fluminensis* and later rolling it up like carpet and placing it under the bridge in mounds so high they almost touched the road above.

Their work has been documented on the Burke Road Billabong Reserve's website that Barker established at the start. The site notes how one day last month, for example, seven people weeded, spread mulch on cardboard that had been applied as a weed mat, and planted 50 *Poa labillardierei*, 40 *Linum marginale* and 40 *Brachyscome multifida*.

The jobs can seem endless but Corney insists that, gradually, the workload is lessening, the aim being to get to the point where the reserve can survive on the level of maintenance devoted to other urban parks.

But this park has the added bonus of allowing people to connect with the Yarra River. Just as Melbourne's city centre is increasingly being designed to include the river, work on the Burke Road Billabong Reserve is largely about encouraging people to engage with the water.

Corney says she and Barker both often talk about how the reserve has surpassed what they thought it could ever be. "One of the students once said to me, 'why would you bother?' I said, 'because it's doable'." So it has proven.

Progress underfoot: Stanley Barker and Helen Corney at the Burke Road Billabong Reserve, which they have helped to revegetate over the past eight years. PHOTOS: WAYNE TAYLOR/GETTY IMAGES

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