

## A SPECIAL PLACE IN OUR MIDST

Words by Gillean Dunk

For the last few years or so something very interesting and actually rather lovely has been happening in the south-east corner of Cox's Reserve in East Coburg. If you go to the reserve only to play basketball, or to push a toddler on a swing you may not have noticed this special place.

But if you venture down to its corner of the Reserve, you will find a pretty garden spilling out into the Reserve from the once austere walls behind the Community Centre. Venture closer and you will see that the walls are now covered in a lovely garden-inspired mural, its organic shapes in shades of green varying from deep blue-green to warm yellow. There are now pathways lined with flowering plants and native grasses to take you out into the Reserve and its inviting open spaces. There is a thriving vegetable garden to which you may help yourself, a café that serves excellent coffee, and, under the canopy of several grand eucalypts, plenty of places to sit while you meet up with friends or quietly take time out of your day. (Don't bank on solitude for long, though, because this is a very lively and friendly place and you are sure to be caught up in what is happening around you.)



Wayi garden in 2022, Photo courtesy of NECChi.

So, what is this place? Is it a secret? How did it come about?

It's a community garden and is part of the Newlands Community Centre, which, together with another community centre in East Coburg, make up NECCHi. The Newlands Community Centre is on Wurundjeri Country and has been there for some time; the community garden, the Wayi garden, only since mid-2021.

The garden's initial design was developed by the whole NECCHi team, and much of the early planting was done in response to an online survey that established what the locals wanted. Together they knew they wanted to create a community garden, as well as a play space for kids and an area in which to run workshops.

Essendon-based landscapers Bunya Designs did the basic design and earthworks, and before too long there was a garden.

The garden co-ordinator, Kate, works with a team of volunteers who assemble each fortnight to tend to the garden and keep it thriving. "These folks turn up not just to garden, but to offer a lot of creative input into how the space is evolving. We aim to keep the morning casual and fun and always allow time for cups of tea," Kate says.



L-R. Gardeners taking a break. The garden flows out into the reserve. Photos courtesy of NECCHi, 2023.

It's not just basic gardening that is happening here. There are talks and walks to inform anyone interested in growing native plants about the geology and the soil of the area (the area is a volcanic plain and was grassland before European settlement). The Merri Creek Management Committee, which has been so effective in the restoration of Merri Creek, plays a valued part in informing these walks and talks.

The raised vegetable-growing beds are a feature of the garden. Here you will find an impressive number of thriving seasonal vegetables and herbs to which you are invited to help yourself, as long as you take only the leaves and not the whole plant. Kate says that it's always interesting to see when she arrives in the morning what has been taken for the cook-pot the night before.

And it's not always the usual edible greens that grow here. Given that the Centre is at the heart of an area where people from a wide range of cultures live and work, you will find a comparable range of vegetables and herbs. And some experimentation. At the moment, there are some green tea plants (*Camellia sinensis*) that the team hope will, come harvest time, produce some tea for the café. Speaking of the café: Brewlands under the watchful care of its talented barista Oli already serves several herbal teas that are grown in the beds just beyond its doors and they are very popular.



*A crowd enjoying Brewlands café. Photo courtesy NECCHI, 2023.*

So the secret is out. Just follow the pathways through beds of flowering plants and native grasses. Or let the sounds of laughter and chatter lead you there. Or follow the enticing aroma of brewing coffee and you will find yourself in this very special and welcoming place.