

# Mount Annan Botanic Garden Site Master Plan Review

## Executive Summary

Mount Annan Botanic Garden in Sydney's south-west was opened as a Bicentennial project in 1988 as the Australian plant garden of the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust. Since its opening the Garden has developed a prominent position in the public domain as a regional botanic garden in a park-like setting. Now a well-established, integral part of the Botanic Gardens Trust, Sydney, the Garden displays an extensive living collection of Australian plants in the largest botanic garden in Australia.

After over eighteen years of operation, and almost six years since the completion of the Site Master Plan in November 2000, it is an appropriate time to review the Garden's progress and the recommendations of that Plan. There has been a notable realignment of the direction of the Botanic Gardens Trust, particularly since its incorporation into the Department of Environment and Conservation in September 2003. While the importance of botanic gardens as tranquil places of reflection and leisure, repositories of valuable plants and specimens, and research centres remains, these functions need to be interpreted for current application in today's climate. Emphasis continues on conservation of biodiversity and endangered plants and habitat. Strategically, however, there has been a distinctive move toward making the Garden more relevant to the community and in the current financial climate, better able to contribute to its operational costs.

The Site Master Plan 2000 comprises two volumes. The Site Development Plan presented a series of site planning principles and illustrated recommendations. The Site Management Plan Volume 1 identified a number of values for the Garden as the basis for a long-term plan including scientific, environmental, educational, cultural heritage, social, recreational, aesthetic and commercial potential. Key issues, opportunities and constraints were also identified and a vision statement developed. Based on eleven key considerations, a series of strategic objectives, programs and associated actions were also formulated and an evaluation plan, with time frames, provided.

In June 2005, Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust agreed there was a need for a review of the Site Master Plan. As an in-house project, key objectives of this review were to determine what progress had been made in the strategic programs recommended in the Site Management Plan Volume 1, how relevant they remain and what the key focus for the Garden over the next 6 years should be. The determined process included a broadly distributed questionnaire that focused on the identified eleven key considerations for the Garden, statistical analysis, a series of workshops and consultation with stakeholders and staff.

This document is a reality check and a simplified method of communicating what the Garden has achieved over the past six years, what the vision for the Garden must be to 2012 and beyond, and what priority must be placed on

identified key strategic programs to ensure the sustainability and contemporary relevance of Mount Annan Botanic Garden as a scientific and cultural institution meeting the needs of the local and broader community.

The Site Development Plan does not form part of this review, though remains an excellent reference document. The only background information element provided in the Site Management Plan which requires statistical updating, is the Garden Visitation and Use Patterns section (page 30 of the original document). Information provided on locality, regional site context, Garden establishment and the physical site in the original document has not changed. So the Site Master Plan 2000 remains a relevant document for background information.

The vision for the Garden has been changed from the 2000 version. It is more in touch with today's climate and more specific in its areas of focus.

Provided, in line with this changed visionary direction, is the updated proposed direction for the strategic future of the Garden and a blueprint for a full range of activities that are relevant today and will remain relevant into the next decade and well beyond. The proposed key focus areas, which appear in the updated eleven Key Objectives, provide keys to achieving that vision for at least the next 6 years. The Strategic Performance Evaluation Plan for the Garden will be the basis for assessing the real achievements of the Garden to at least 2012.

This review process has highlighted the need to focus on fun and other emotive experiences, promotion, sustainability, increasing visitation, access, expanding facilities to cope with regional demographic expansion, promoting an appreciation of Australian plants, becoming a cultural hub, protecting the natural heritage, and expanding the scientific institutional base while retaining a tranquil setting. Simple!

# Garden Visitation and Use Patterns

## Visitor Profile Summaries

In 2005/2006 approximately 90,500 people visited Mount Annan Botanic Garden. This represents a fall in visitation by approximately 3,500 people since 1999/2000 though an increase on 2004/2005 of 1500. Visitor data collected by Mount Annan Botanic Garden in 2005/2006 revealed as it did 6 years ago, that the visitation draws heavily from the local catchment area. Around 80% of visitors came from the outer Sydney region and a total of 95% from the Sydney Basin area. Weekends experience much higher visitation levels, as in 2000, with an estimated 80% visiting on weekends and public holidays and only 20% on week days. These figures are averages and reflect fluctuations due to poor weather impacts.

Onsite surveys undertaken in April, May and June 2006 revealed the adult visitor age profile:

18-25 years	6%
25-40 years	21%
41-55 years	33%
55+ years	40%

This indicates that almost three quarters of the Garden's visitors are over 40 years of age and over 90% are between the ages of 25 and 55+. This contrasts with the surveys undertaken in January and February 2000 which revealed that almost half of the Garden's visitors were between the ages of 25 and 40. The fact remains, however, that the Garden is a place mostly visited by mature adults.

## Reasons for Visiting

Questionnaire responses for the Master Plan Review in November 2005 indicate the three key reasons for visiting the Garden are:

Recreation	70%
Plant appreciation	21%
Education	7%

Recreation included activities such as bike-riding, playground use, bird and wildlife appreciation and walking.

What they most liked and valued in the Garden were:

Australian plants	19%
Physical beauty	17%
Fresh air	13%
Remnant natural areas	13%

Fauna	10%
Walking trails	9%
Recreation facilities	8%
Shopping	3%
Restaurant	3%

General visitor surveys collected on the estate in 2006 revealed the following reasons for visiting:

General visit	51%
An event (private, public)	14%
Education	1%
Recreation	27%
Other	7%

Visitors who have membership with the Friends of the Gardens (either individually or household membership) gain free access to the Garden between dawn and sunset for walking and cycling. During operating hours entry is free for members in their cars.

Surveys reveal the majority of visitors who travel to the Garden by vehicle still tend to stay three hours or longer.

The questionnaire associated with the Site Master Plan Review was distributed to a very broad base of people in the local area, Sydney basin, New South Wales and interstate both electronically and in hard copy. Further detail about the respondees and results can be read in Appendix B (Survey Summary) and specific responses and comments in Appendix C (Statistical Analysis).

### **Places visited in the Garden**

Results from the Master Plan Review questionnaire corroborated by standard estate surveys, identified the most visited areas of the Garden are as follow:

Theme Gardens	51%
Terrace / Connections Garden	22%
Children's Playground	8%

One third of respondees expressed an appreciation of less developed areas around the lakes and elevated sites with scenic views.

The key difference between these responses and those of surveys conducted early 2000, is that people are prepared now to go for walks and spend time in the natural (conservation) areas. And while the Children's Playground is a favourite, as a targeted visitation spot, the figures compared with 2000 have halved.

## Visitor Responses

Visitors also made some general comments on aspects of the Garden they believed could be improved, which have been documented as follows:

Food outlets	15%
Signage	14%
Walking tracks	12%
Education / conference facilities	12%
Garden presentation	10%

**Note:** Comments about garden presentation specified the desire for more floral displays and larger, shadier trees.

Where people were invited to write a comment rather than answer a multiple choice about suggestions for garden improvements, the restaurant and kiosk featured quite heavily. The need for a kiosk to operate separately from the restaurant, and for simpler and cheaper food through that smaller outlet with better coffee were targeted comments. Others related to control of African Olive and gardens for the elderly, disabled and children.

**Note:** The numbers of people who wrote a comment accounted for only about 29% of all respondees. However, the fact that they took the time to write at length their comments indicates their strength of concern.

Questionnaire responses indicated that key priorities for future planning should be:

- **Attractions:** Fauna related displays / activities, more annual events especially for family groups; more art works and more bus tours.
- **Garden plantings:** More Australian plants in established displays; more shady trees; finish project work; and continue to manage the Garden well into the future.
- **Facilities:** Improved facilities for research and education; a conference centre / multi-function centre including a wedding centre, a visitor centre, an auditorium and undercover outdoor venue; a bigger shop; more parking; better lighting, more shady barbecue facilities; more seating; more toilets; a bigger restaurant; a separate kiosk.
- **Natural areas:** Keep the Garden as natural as possible; protect the Cumberland Plain Woodland and fauna; control weeds like African Olive.
- **Atmosphere:** What visitors like best is the peace and tranquillity of the estate and a place they see free from rubbish and graffiti. The majority of people expressed a wish to keep it as it is and never make it a 'commercial' theme park. They want it to remain a safe, relaxing and welcoming green oasis.

## **Relative values of the Garden**

Workshops with representatives from local Councils, neighbours, planning authorities, local residents, State Government Departments, Friends of the Garden, interested groups and staff assisted with establishing the continuing relevance of the Garden, its values and reasons for significance. There was no significant variation from what was established in the original Site Management Plan as being the key values of Mount Annan Botanic Garden.

The values discussion (pages 37 to 41) in the Site Management Plan remain valid. To summarise they are scientific, environmental, educational, cultural heritage, social, recreational, aesthetic and commercial values.

## **Key considerations for the Garden**

The Botanic Gardens Trust Sydney continues to be responsible for realizing the objectives for which Mount Annan Botanic Garden was dedicated to the public. As custodians of the site, the Trust is charged with protecting the values of the site, responding to community expectations and ensuring the Garden reaches its full potential.

Key considerations listed in the Master Plan document in 2000 have been reviewed and remain the drivers for strategic, site-specific decisions. The key considerations include:

- Growth of the Garden
- The presence of the Garden
- The physical site
- Living collections
- Right of access
- Natural systems
- Recreation opportunities
- Adjoining land uses
- Establishing cooperative partnerships
- Site management
- Commercial activities

The strategic framework identified in the original Master Plan 2000 (pages 59 to 66 of the Site Management Plan volume 1) remains current, and includes the identity of the Garden's customers, services and products, the Garden's values and goals to achieve viability and recognition, both nationally and internationally, and the strategic drivers.

The assessment criteria for future Garden management and development have not changed and are critical to the future of the Garden. Summarised, any future management actions and / or development proposals must:

- be consistent with the core attributes of a Botanic Garden
- contribute to community appreciation and ownership of Mount Annan Botanic Garden
- contribute to the development of a strong identity for Mount Annan Botanic Garden
- successfully sell these messages as part of an identity for Mount Annan Botanic Garden
- work to heighten the profile of the Garden
- increase the diversity of activities available in the Garden
- enhance the educative values of the Garden
- contribute to the increasing financial self-sufficiency of the Garden.

## A Vision for the Garden

Mount Annan Botanic Garden's vision in the Australian context in 2000 was noted in the Master Plan:

***As an integral part of the Australian Botanic Gardens network, Mount Annan Botanic Garden will become a leader of Australia's Botanic Gardens to wholly realise the shift from a traditional scientific base to one that encompasses stronger environmental, cultural, educational, recreational, economic and tourism use.***

That vision was meant to apply to Mount Annan Botanic Garden to at least the year 2020.

However, it is deemed more appropriate to replace that vision with:

***By 2016 Mount Annan Botanic Garden will be a highly valued botanic garden and sustainable parkland embraced by the community and recognised both locally and internationally for its botanic, cultural and natural landscapes.***

It is believed more appropriate to concentrate on becoming well known in the local context (Macarthur region and the Sydney metropolitan area) first. And the year 2016 is considered appropriate considering the project planning by the Botanic Gardens Trust for the organisation's bicentenary celebrations in that year.

Local people regularly comment, anecdotally, that they've often driven past signs and wondered what the Garden was like. So the first priority target will be to fully capture that local market, to achieve a strong visitation base. National and international recognition will become priority goals after 2010.

To achieve this new vision, heavy reliance will be placed on the following:

- **Changing attitudes:** The Garden will become the equivalent of Centennial Park (with more evocative plantings and natural Australian flora and fauna) and the focus of major community events in the Macarthur region. Politicians will become ambassadors for the Garden and local Councils will support the use of the Garden for large combined events rather than persevering with smaller, competing outdoor venues. Provision of good value experiences for all will be a key focus.
- **Access:** As the focus for cultural events, the Garden will be easily accessible by public transport, particularly buses. Combined bicycle and green space links with the University of Western Sydney, new residential developments like Spring Farm and Menangle, the Nepean River, Camden and Macarthur Railway Station will be essential targets. And longer term, these bicycle links may connect beyond the



Macarthur region. A new entrance off Narellan Road will also facilitate increased visitation and a sense of arrival.

- **Built environment:** Physically the Garden will retain large natural areas, healthy fauna and smaller cultivated sections. The Central Precinct will be the focus for construction of a research centre, a multipurpose centre for exhibitions, undercover performances, accommodation and a restaurant able to cater functions for over 300 people, including wedding receptions, international conferences, live-in seminars, training programs and workshops. A new visitor centre, a joint project with Campbelltown City and Camden Councils, will be located to the north of a new entrance off Narellan Road. This will directly link to the Macarthur Centre for Sustainable Living and beyond to the Garden. The estate will display thoughtful, sustainable building designs that maximise interaction with the surrounding natural and cultivated landscape e.g. a stage built over the water at Lakeside; buildings set into the side of hills or earth houses.
- **Purpose:** As custodians of the land, the Botanic Gardens Trust will ensure the future of this Garden by providing positive experiences for visitors. Provision of free barbecues, picnic shelters, clean facilities, playgrounds and events with broad appeal will continue to be the focus. Current facility levels will be expanded (at least doubled) over the next 15 years to balance the impact of increased visitation numbers. While passive and active recreational opportunities must be provided, ambience and a sense of space must be retained. Positive and emotional experiences will contribute to continued support.
- **Relevance:** The Garden will be meaningful and relevant to visitors, the local populace and statutory bodies. It will have broad appeal to a wide audience and plants will always be part of the experience, though not the whole experience. Cultural events ranging in purpose and size will fulfil community needs. The Garden will retain a rustic feel beyond the central hub. Attractions will not only be horticultural. Over time a collection of large sculptures that reflect the cultural heritage and future of the Garden will enhance developed areas. Conservation (particularly Cumberland Plain Woodland) areas will be expanded, but not overtake the open mixed grassland areas which provide that sense of space. Expanded tree plantings will provide pockets of shade, especially along well marked and maintained walking trails. Key walking trails will be sealed to ensure all weather use and availability and link where appropriate with a regional cycle way.
- **Scientific and ecological research:** The Garden will become a centre for cutting edge technology and expanding research into Australian plants. This will be facilitated by the construction of the future Centre for Plant Conservation. The Garden will become a venue for large botanic garden conferences, regional, national and international. The Seed Bank will continue to expand its collection and remain integral to future collection programs, partnerships and propagation.

- **Sustainable horticulture:** Australian plantings will inspire by volume, beauty and specialised selections e.g. rare and endangered and the most spectacular New South Wales specimens. The Wollemi Pine Walk of Discovery will develop over time with African Olive nursery trees removed, understory plantings established and natural regeneration occurring. These plantings will last for hundreds of years and more. The estate will also become a water and energy efficient estate, maximizing water collection and reuse. Collection of solar energy will allow power to be fed back into the grid after all needs are met. Close association, support and joint programs with the Macarthur Centre for Sustainable Living will enhance opportunities to promote sustainable horticulture. While there may be the opportunity to plant exotic plants for the sake of educational comparison or contrast, Australian plants will always remain the key focus.
- **Messages:** Additional to interpretation and directional signage to communicate stories and information, photographs and cartoons will be employed as will tours led by rangers and volunteer guides. DVDs, sculptures, good brochures and educational activities like school curriculum activities, Indigenous cultural classes, adult classes in botanical illustration will enhance learning opportunities. Audio centres at individual Garden locations will make information available to a range of media apparatus. The key messages of the Garden will focus on sustainability; best practice in horticulture; conservation; biodiversity; the potential impact of individual efforts; and reduction, reuse and recycling.
- **Partnerships:** These are the key to sponsorship, information, cultural and staff exchange programs, expanded networks and information based developments. Partnerships with neighbours, stakeholders, local businesses, local Councils, like minded institutions, community groups, Macarthur Centre for Sustainable Living and more will contribute to a strong operational foundation for the Garden.

The assessment of the strategic programmes that follows in the next section of this review, indicates the importance of future focus on specific strategies to achieve this vision.