

DESERT SONG

RAIN HAS COME TO THE DRY HEART OF AUSTRALIA, TRANSFORMING A PARK THAT LEADS THE WORLD IN REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE BOTANICAL GARDEN.

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Ptilotus polystachyus (Mulla Mulla) and *Enneapogon polyphyllus* (Woolly Oat Grass) thrive on rocky hills in the woodland habitat.

"IN THE DESERT WE HAVE A BOOM AND BUST CYCLE — AND THIS YEAR IT'S BOOMING!"

IN THE RED HEART lies a garden... The Alice Springs Desert Park may look more like 1300 hectares of semi-arid land rather than something planned and cohesive. But add a key ingredient — plentiful rain after years of drought — and it explodes into colour and renewal. As the prophet Isaiah says in the Bible, *The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.*

Rejoicing has been the order of the day here recently at the foothills of the MacDonnell Ranges. Last year's rainfall was only a meagre 62 millimetres, but by mid-October this year, the total was already 765 millimetres, the highest recorded since 2000.

"In the desert we have a boom and bust cycle," says the park's senior horticulturist, Gary Dinham. "And this year it's booming!"

However, there's more than a riot of growth to be impressed with at the park. Look beyond the vivid flowings and a rich structure of interlinked habitats emerges, a showcase for more than 400 plant and 100 animal species.

The whole operation is carefully designed to give visitors an understanding of how life interacts in this quintessentially Australian landscape. Within the core exhibit area of 50 hectares lie the three different habitats: sand country, desert rivers and woodland.

"We show people the main indicators for these three," Gary says. "For example, in the river country, the river red gums are the key plants; once you identify the trees, you can follow a watercourse, whether it's dry or flowing... Melaleucas and grasses are other defining plants.

"In the sand country, there are more ephemeral growths — many of the perennials, such as pink everlastings, that spring up after rain — but it's predominantly mulga and spinifex; the typical look of arid country. And in the woodland, you find what we call the re-sprouters — the ghost gums, hakeas, ironwoods and acacias."

The boundaries between habitats aren't rigid, and nothing about the park suggests the conventional botanic garden with beds and open spaces crisscrossed by paths. But there's nothing haphazard about which plants are encouraged and which removed, and every bush, tree and clump of grevillea is entered on a GPS map and corresponding database. "It's accurate

down to 30 or 50 centimetres... We can click on any point on the computer map and immediately know what's growing there, all its vital statistics," Gary says.

The park shares its knowledge with institutions around the world, and participates in research, such as the Millennium Seed Bank Project. Run by the UK's Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, this focuses on long-term conservation of plant varieties.

"We've taken the rule book for botanic gardens and thrown it out the window," park director Gary Fry says jovially. "For example, we open at 7.30am, before the heat sets in — daytime temperatures can reach 46 degrees — and we have nocturnal tours, too."

Launched in 1997, the park attracts about 100,000 visitors each year and the guided night tours are popular — after all, in the desert, much of the animal action takes place when the sun goes down. The integration of flora and fauna, and a respectful presentation of their place in traditional lore alongside the science, is, according to Gary Dinham, the way of the future. Gardens from South Africa to Tucson, Arizona have studied the Alice Springs model, and Gary recently returned from the Middle East where he was advising on the multi-million dollar set-up of the Oman Botanic Gardens.

"It was quite challenging," he says. "It's an even harsher environment — the rainfall is even less than ours — and, of course, the land has been goat-flogged for thousands of years..." But the central idea of presenting plants, animals and the context of traditional history in habitats — "the whole landscape rather than the individual plant" — appears to work wherever it's applied.

As Gary Fry says: "We want visitors to enter the park, gain an understanding of the desert and then exit into the real desert, knowing more than they did before, being able to recognise the kind of country they are driving through."

The blending of park and surroundings is deliberate. "Although we are a botanic garden, a lot of the gardening we do tends to be different," says Gary Dinham. "Forget the pruning saw and secateurs — here it's correct to tear branches from the big gums, to break off small tree limbs and leave them to die in our efforts to simulate nature.

"Weed management and watering, though, are still similar — the thistles and imported grasses run amok >

TOP ROW, FROM LEFT Typical sand country habitat; *Grevillea juncifolia* subsp. *juncifolia* (Honey Grevillea); spinifex forms a subhabitat of its own with *Triodia longiceps* (Bull Spinifex) in the foreground and *Callitris glaucophylla* (White Cypress Pine). MIDDLE ROW A water dragon suns itself on a termite mound; *Ptilotus polystachyus* (Mulla Mulla). BOTTOM ROW *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, var. *obtusa* (River Red Gum) is a dominant feature of the desert river habitat; *Eucalyptus pachyphylla* (Red-Bud Mallee); *Schoenia cassiniana* (Pink Everlasting).

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in the wet." Mention of the wonderful wet raises the question of how the park survives during the long dry. To the surprise of some visitors, the park does have an extensive drip watering system.

"We try to replicate the deep, infrequent watering of nature and let the water get way down to plant roots," Gary Dinham says. "After all, we hold some precious botanic collections here: we have to look after them."

Some of these collections are still growing. Gary, who likes to balance staring at a computer with field trips, has added three new plants to the 2000-plus identified as belonging to the region, though with quick modesty he attributes the achievement "to the whole botanical section". That's more than a dozen co-workers, and altogether the park employs nearly 50 people.

While they're always on the lookout for a thrilling discovery, the park staff are more likely to spy something new and unwanted. "This is farm country," Gary says. "We get a lot of pasture grasses infiltrating... which would be fine if we were raising cows. But we're not."

So, just like the smallest suburban garden, the Alice Springs Desert Park has to keep on top of the weeding. Drought is no real relief — "During the dry we're still out there, slashing and chipping" — and when the rare rains come, every plant races to flower.

But that, of course, was one of the desert's spectacular attractions even before Old Testament times. *

The Alice Springs Desert Park is six kilometres west of Alice Springs, Northern Territory. (08) 8951 8788; www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au

Acacia kempeana (Witchetty Bush) and *Acacia aneura* (Mulga) stretch towards the MacDonnell Ranges on the horizon.