BUSH TECH #37

Smart desert gardening

INTRODUCTION

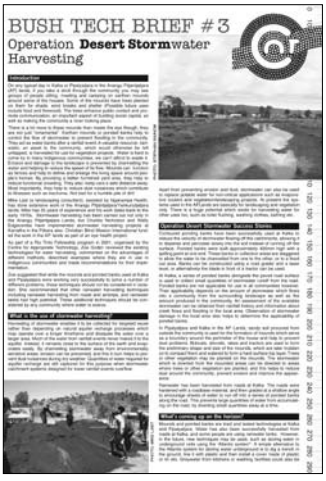
The climate of Central Australia presents some unique challenges for gardening including hot summers, frosty winters and inconsistent rainfall. The high mobility of residents in central Australian Indigenous communities means a different approach is needed to gardening and landscaping in Indigenous communities.

Community members in remote areas have expressed a desire for a garden or landscaping of some sort including vegetables, bush tucker gardens, fruit and vegetable gardens and planting to control dust in and around the houses.

The most important element to a healthy and sustainable desert garden is smart and efficient use of water. It is clear that many community members have a sophisticated understanding of the quality and quantity of the water available to them in their community. The biggest obstacle to sustainable gardening projects seems to be the mobility of residents. If a garden project is planned knowing that the primary gardener/s may not be there all the time then the chances of success are greatly improved.

There seems to be four key ingredients for smart gardening in remote Indigenous communities:

- **Plant appropriate species.** Local species of plants will be the most likely to survive and flourish with less water. Vegetable gardens are high maintenance but will have a better chance of surviving if they are located within a short distance of the gardener's living quarters and when the gardener is likely to be in the community for at least a year.
- **Manage the water.** Use waste water from the community as much as possible eg. locate plants under dripping taps or air conditioners. Earthen mounds harvest stormwater and store it for emerging seeds or seedlings and have proven to be successful at Kalka and Pipalyatjara. They generally require access to a bobcat, or a team of willing shovellers, and a landscape designer. Dripper systems can be very effective but require long-term maintenance. Water bags, available from hardware stores, store water that is gradually released in order to keep plants alive without regular watering. If only going away for a few days poke holes in the caps of old soft drink bottles, fill with water and turn upside down into a small hole at the base of the plant.


BUSH TECH BRIEF #3
Operation **Desert Storm**water Harvesting

LEFT: The Centre for Appropriate Technology's Bush Tech brief 3: "Operation Desert Stormwater" provides an overview of how earthen mounds are designed, shaped and used.

- **Work with the seasons and the weather.** The best time to plant seedlings is from March to early October particulary if there's some rain heading your way! Watch out for frost from May to August and make sure the garden is especially well watered from November to February (Forth and Vinter 2007).
- **Be there in the 'tender' stages.** That is when the plants need extra water and protection from animals, sun or frost. Try and be in the community for at least a couple of months. Care for the seedlings long enough for them to establish themselves and be rewarded with beautiful foliage when returning to the community.

The following photographs show some examples of smart gardening that has been occurring in six remote outstations, Alatyeye, Arrunge, 10 Mile Outstation, Bonya, Pulardi and Urlampe. The landscaping has sometimes been initiated by community members and other times by organisations such as Tangentyere Nursery.

References:

1. "Bushfires & Bushtucker" (Peter Latz) IAD Press 1995
2. "Native plants for central Australian gardens" (Felicity Forth and Andy Vinter) Greening Australia 2007

TOUGH PLANTS FOR TOUGH CLIMATES

LEFT: An acacia in full flower at Arrunge.
RIGHT: Shade tree at 10 Mile Outstation

SMART USE OF WATER

LEFT: An aloe vera plant catches the drips. Aloe vera is used to treat burns and cuts. RIGHT: Climbing plants can provide some shade from the afternoon sun. The rinse water from washing art brushes is used here to keep this vine healthy.

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PLANTING IN THE RIGHT PLACE

FROM TOP: A line of established trees form a windbreak to residences. PHOTO: PETER RENEHAN

A Bonya resident beside her well protected seedlings that are within a short walk of her sleeping and living areas.

KEEPING DUST AWAY

FROM TOP: Shrubs planted along the fenceline at Bonya provide some protection from the dusty and hot winds.

Urlampe's lawn helps to keep the dust down, but does use a lot of water. Try low water use ground covers. PHOTO: SONJA PETER

BE THERE IN THE BABY STAGES

FROM TOP: A bough shelter gives some welcome shade and support to this sapling.

Young saplings at Bonya will provide some welcome shade to the playground in the future.

FURTHER RESOURCES

NURSERIES
Tangentyere Nursery
(08) 8952 3257
Greening Australia nursery
Charles Darwin University
off Grevillea Drive
(08) 8953 2882
Alice Springs Nursery
Ross Hwy Alice Springs NT
(08) 8952 5055
Bloomin Deserts
14 Hele Crs Alice Springs NT
(08) 8953 0655
Ilparpa Nursery
Lot 7789 Webb Rd
Alice Springs NT
(08) 8952 8725

BOOKS
"Native plants for central Australian gardens"
(Felicity Forth and Andy Vinter)
Greening Australia 2007

HARDWARE STORES
Mitre 10
Cnr Wilkinson St & Milner Rd
Alice Springs NT
(08) 8953 3141
Home Timber and Hardware
7 & 11 Smith St Alice Springs NT
(08) 8952 2488

ORGANISATIONS
Greening Australia NT
(08) 8953 2882
live.greeningaustralia.org.au
Tangentyere bush management
(08) 8953 3120
Landcare@tangentyere.org.au
Land for Wildlife and Gardens for Wildlife
Alice Springs (08) 8955 5222
lfw@lowecol.com.au
Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC)
(08) 8952 2497
www.alec.org.au