

CASE STUDY:

GREEN ARMY FIGHTING BUFFEL GRASS IN ALICE SPRINGS



“WE HAVE THE SKILLS
HERE BUT THE GREEN
ARMY PROVIDES US
WITH AN ENTHUSIASTIC
LABOUR FORCE TO GET
THINGS DONE”

IAN COLEMAN, CURATOR,
OLIVE PINK BOTANIC GARDEN



LOCAL PEOPLE, LOCAL PROJECTS



HOST

Olive Pink Botanic Garden



LOCATION

Alice Springs, NT



ACTIVITIES

- ✓ Weed eradication
- ✓ Landscaping and public access control
- ✓ Mulching
- ✓ Planting and watering
- ✓ Installing an irrigation system
- ✓ Fencing sensitive vegetation

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This is an important restoration and garden rejuvenation project for the Project Host organisation, Olive Pink Botanic Garden. The Green Army team has achieved impressive environmental outcomes by controlling invasive weeds and landscaping high-use areas of the gardens to protect native vegetation.

A RELIABLE WORKFORCE

'We've got this wonderful estate without the resources to really be able to invest and progress it.' Libby Prell, chair of the Olive Pink Botanic Garden Board for more than 10 years. She remembers tackling a sea of waist-high buffel grass as a volunteer. 'At that stage it was literally volunteers arriving with their mattocks and digging, so it was very ad hoc.'

The gardens have just two full-time employees: Garden Curator Ian Coleman and horticulturalist Doug McDougall. Libby estimates that at least two more would be needed to do the estate justice. From her point of view, the Green Army has rescued the situation by providing a reliable workforce that enables the Garden to plan strategically and know that the planned activities will be implemented.

Ian Coleman agrees. 'We have a skill base here; what we lack is an enthusiastic labour force, which the Green Army provides. So it's a perfect fit for us really.' The current team is the second for the Garden.



SUPERVISOR SUPPORT

Quietly spoken supervisor Sara Weir exudes competence and has shaped the team into a cohesive unit. She came to Alice Springs from Sydney for this project and intends to stay in the Northern Territory and learn more about Indigenous land management. She has established a close rapport with each participant. 'I've seen a really big change over the course of the project. They've come out of their shell and I've found that they're much happier people. Working in nature has that effect, and as part of a team.'

Apart from some intensive on-site training provided by Charles Darwin University in workplace safety, plant recognition and weed treatment, the team has learned everything on the job, led by Sara and advised by Garden staff.

ENTHUSIASTIC PARTICIPANTS

All of the participants are happy to be working outside with their hands. 'That's what I like about it: being outdoors, seeing nature', says team member Dereece. They would all like to continue with this type of work if possible, perhaps with an Indigenous ranger programme.

'What we've had is consistent work of a good quality and a lot of enthusiasm, and a very well-run operation by Sara', says Garden Curator Ian Coleman.



GARDEN REJUVENATION

Garden Curator Ian Coleman has nothing but praise for the Green Army team and intends to enter the project for landcare awards.

Controlling the buffel grass infestation in a large area of the site has allowed a diverse range of native plants to flourish.

Another standout achievement is the fencing of a 65m x 20m area containing Olive Pink's original plantings, to keep out pest animals. The Green Army team did it all by hand and regularly got up at 5.30am to start work before the summer heat got too intense.

They have also installed an irrigation system and landscaped an extensive area of garden beds and paths to control public access in a high-use area and protect the plants.

FUTURE GREEN ARMY PLANS

Garden Curator Ian Coleman looks forward to the third Green Army garden rejuvenation project.

Beyond that, Ian hopes to initiate a project to restore one of the most significant sacred sites of Mbantua, the country where the gardens sit: a soak where people have been digging for water for 40,000 years. Traditionally this area was not burnt and was very ecologically diverse, but hot buffel fires have turned it into a monoculture. Ian wants to work with the custodians and the Green Army to restore the site's ecological diversity and protect its endangered species.

'One of the key things in central Australia is that it is a difficult environment to work in. We've got some things here working well, so we want to continue to do them.'

ABOUT THE OLIVE PINK BOTANIC GARDEN

Described by renowned botanist Peter Latz as a 'globally unique treasure', Olive Pink Botanic Garden is a not-for-profit community organisation funded by a state government grant and supporter donations. A 16-hectare area on the bank of the usually dry Todd River, it has some 50,000 visitors a year. The gardens were established in 1956 thanks to lobbying by Olive Pink, anthropologist, campaigner for Aboriginal social justice, artist and gardener. At that time the site's vegetation had been compromised by grazing. Overcoming drought and lack of funding, Miss Pink and her Warlpiri assistants planted and nurtured a collection of trees and shrubs native to central Australia. The gardens were opened to the public in 1985 and listed on the Register of the National Estate in 1995.



A DAY IN THE FIELD

'We have a war against buffel. Everyone's gotten so used to seeing buffel grass around here that they've forgotten what it looks like without the invasive grasses.'

Green Army team supervisor Sara Weir points out two hills either side of Olive Pink Botanic Garden in Alice Springs. One is covered with identical, nondescript grassy clumps: buffel grass, an aggressive weed that grows vigorously after rain, displacing native vegetation, and burns much more fiercely than the softer native grasses. On the hill opposite, the gentle greens of a variety of native shrubs and smaller plants complement the red soil. The contrast is stark. Sara's Green Army team is entirely responsible for transforming that second hill.

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