



*Society for Growing Australian Plants  
Cairns Branch*

**NEWSLETTER**

*Newsletter No 248*

*March, 2025*

President                      Stuart Worboys  
Vice President              Rob Jago  
Secretary                     Helen Lawie  
[Secretary@sgapcairns.org.au](mailto:Secretary@sgapcairns.org.au)

Treasurer                    Val Carnie  
Webmaster                  Tony Roberts  
Librarian                     Coralie Stuart  
Newsletter Editor         Pauline Lawie  
[lawiepm@gmail.com](mailto:lawiepm@gmail.com)



*SGAP Cairns Branch - Outing Sunday 16 March, 2025.*

This month we are privileged to have permission to meet in the airconditioned comfort of the Mulgrave History Museum, 60 Gordon Street, Gordonvale. This is our AGM where members have the opportunity to suggest places for us to visit this year. Have you seen or heard of somewhere you would like to investigate? Would you like to show off your garden or, perhaps, get some invaluable advice on what would be the most suitable natives for you to plant? Now's your chance. Meet for lunch at 12 noon. After the meeting we will be able to visit the Mulgrave Landcare facility at the old fire station.

The Museum is opposite the Mulgrave Sugar Mill and next door to the Mulgrave Rambler station, diagonally across from Norman Park



*Report on our visit to the  
Herbarium*

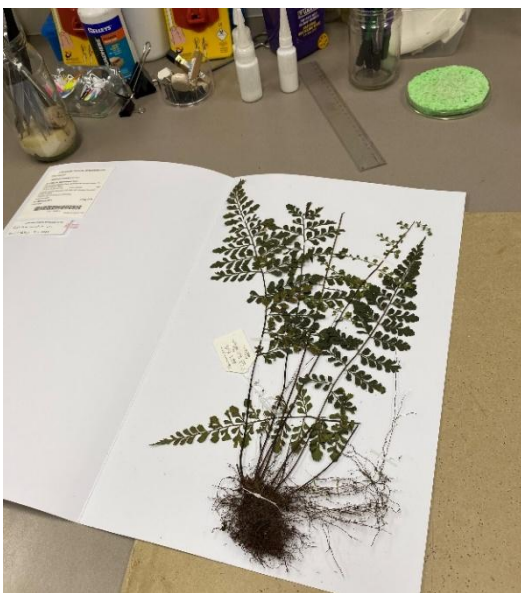
Helen Lawie

Our February, 2025, gathering was at the Australian Tropical Herbarium at James Cook University Cairns Bada-jali campus. Our guide was SGAP Cairns President, Stuart Worboys, who assists with the curation of the Australian Tropical Herbarium collection, amongst his many other duties and passions in all things botanical.

Although I had visited the Herbarium once before, I gained new insight into the dynamic nature of a working collection at the highest echelon of scientific endeavour. Public access to the catalogue, upgrading digital technologies, and ever evolving taxonomy developments are all in addition to a base line of maintaining the collection.

On arrival at the herbarium physical plant specimens are first placed in a dehydrator, then frozen. They are mounted onto acid free paper with museum quality archival techniques. The hand stitched or taped specimens are carefully labelled with species name and the date and place they were collected. The location includes latitude and longitude, and the vegetation type.

For example, the sample photographed has noted “Lowland complex mesophyll vine forest with abundant exposed granite boulders. Lithophytic fern in rainforest understory. Locally abundant.”



*Asplenium cuneatum*

Photo: Helen Lawie

The time honoured process has been repeated precisely for each specimen so each item adds to a network of information, stretching over decades, even centuries.

Housed in a beautiful silky oak display box are two plant specimens collected by Banks and Solander and team back in 1770. Their presentation is immaculate, and the format is identical to specimens mounted today. Of course over the intervening years botanists have adapted to GPS locations, and notations from the 80s, such as ‘logging track’, have been refined. The old maps stacked in drawers are still referred to from time to time in the process of identifying locations where names, access routes and even vegetation types have changed.



Stuart Worboys displays a very large book on Grevilleas by Alex George and illustrated by Celia Rosser

Photo: Helen Lawie

The priceless digital camera that is being used to scan the collection piece by piece is an incredible advancement in technology. It contrasts vividly with the way plants are collected in the field: visceral expeditions of leeches, crocodiles and helicopters, depending on a target species.

From the gumboots in the dirty room to hand painted rare books. From old-school colour to scientific colour charts. From collectors’ best estimation to cutting edge investigation of known and unknown species. We truly enjoyed our behind the scenes visit to this incredible resource.

Apart from the national and international value of the work done here is the immediate value that anyone is able to go there and peruse any of the folders kept in the public section of the Herbarium.

The final revelation was that a computer program, The Australian Virtual Herbarium, is available to any interested individual. Through this one can find where any particular plant was found, plus a great deal more information about it, and who collected it.

[avh.ala.org.au](http://avh.ala.org.au)

## *A Message From Our President*

Stuart sent the following message to past and current members for all to consider.

SGAP Cairns branch is at a crossroads. Our membership is aging, and our numbers are declining.

We have a proud history in the Cairns Community of promoting the propagation of native plants. In her short history of the group, Mary Gandini writes:

"Plant stalls were held at various venues, not only to provide plants for sale, but also to raise money for the club... Nurseries were made aware of the need to also source native plants. For many years, the club was very active in selling plants at the Tropical Garden Expo and the Botanic Gardens festival, as well as mounting a display at the Cairns Show horticultural display...

"Community work in fostering interest in native plants was undertaken. The group undertook regular plantings at Centenary Lakes, Carpentaria Home, several schools and park areas around Cairns. Some years later, this function was taken over by other community groups, school environment studies and the City Council."

Times have changed, and other community organisations have taken on the roles with the propagation and planting of Australian Native Plants. People's gardens are smaller, and access to wild propagation materials is harder. I've attached a short discussion document which suggests three ways forward. None of these solutions are easy. None are business as usual. Perhaps none are right. But you are the members, and the decision lies with you. I welcome your comments and ideas, and I welcome your involvement in deciding what to do next.

Regards  
Stuart

For discussion. The question, what is the future of the group?

2025 poses questions for SGAP Cairns Branch. We have an aging and declining membership who have strong skills and interests, a small but useful kitty in the bank, and a small library. We also have good relationships with Cairns-based organisations whose interests align with ours, and quite a few people who follow our Facebook group.

A reminder of our organisation's motto. We are a community-based organisation committed to growing, conserving and studying Australian plants. Do we have the energy and resources to maintain the Cairns Branch beyond 2025? In our current state, the answer is no. I suggest three possible ways forward:

Solution 1  
Fold.

Sell any assets the Branch holds. Donate our accounts to similarly aligned local organisations. Ensure the Cairns Regional Council library has copies of our newsletters and plant survey outcomes. Have a small party and say farewell.

Solution 2 Run a membership drive and continue.

Advertise widely for members. I believe our target audience ought to be middle aged and retired plant cultivation enthusiasts. We might place posters at the Botanic Gardens, advertise more reliably on Facebook, and approach Council friends groups (e.g. Friends of Cattana). Each of these tasks would need to be delegated. Meetings to be held at the usual, easily accessible locations. But they must have a plant show and tell on the agenda no matter where they are held.

The target membership should be 15 new members by the end of the year. If this fails, then see Solution 1.

Solution 3

Change the way the Branch operates, and continue. In addition to Solution 2, I suggest being more ambitious. Spend money on hiring a hall for speakers. Run active and energetic

nature walks. Organise a couple of propagation workshops.

A possible program might be:

March - Outing to Cattana Wetlands, hosted by a friend of Cattana

April - Botanical walk to Emerald Creek falls

May - Orchid propagation workshop

June - Talk at Botanic Gardens Visitor Centre

The unique mountain flora of the Wet Tropics by Stuart

July - Botanical walk on road to Irvinebank

August - Cutting propagation workshop

September No. 1 - Stall at Carnival on Collins on Fathers Day

September No. 2 - Joint activity with Tablelands branch and so on...

I understand some of these activities are easy, others logistically challenging. I can take the lead with some of these things, but not all.

The target membership should be 15 new members by the end of the year. If this fails, then see

Solution 1.

Stuart

Four members of SGAP Cairns visited Cooktown, in November, 2024, to attend the launch of the second edition of Vera Scarth-Johnson's book,

### *National Treasures. Flowering Plants of Cooktown and Northern Australia.*

*National Treasures* showcases the art of renowned botanist and watercolour illustrator Vera Scarth-Johnson OAM (1912-1999).

Vera led an adventurous life, and did not settle in Cooktown until after she turned 60. Vera was captivated by the flora of the Endeavour River Valley and set out to collect, record and paint the plants of the area. She managed to paint 160 specimens before Parkinson's Disease ended her quest. Vera donated 140 paintings to the residents of Cooktown. These works are held and displayed in a dedicated gallery at Nature's Powerhouse in Cooktown Botanic Gardens.

*National Treasures* presents these artworks with additional information, such as the artist's notes, indigenous names and uses, horticultural information and whether the species was collected by Banks and Solander in 1770.

The new edition boasts higher resolution prints, current nomenclature and updated indigenous information. Several members of SGAP Cairns were involved in the production of the new edition, updating names and correcting identifications and horticultural information.

The new edition is available from Nature's Powerhouse by ringing 4069-5673.

