Winner
2025 Education & Public Engagement Award

Botanic Gardens AUS & NZ

‘Raising Rarity’
Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria

Award Overview

The Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria (RBGV) has been recognised in this inaugural Education and Public Engagement Award for their Raising Rarity School Outreach Program - a conservation initiative that engages schools and communities in protecting rare and threatened native plants. Through hands-on plant cultivation, monitoring and seed harvesting, participants contribute valuable plant growth data and seed collections to the Victorian Conservation Seedbank. Aligned with STEM learning, the program provides authentic educational experiences that build scientific and horticultural skills while deepening environmental understanding. Operating through bioregional hubs in Victoria, Raising Rarity strengthens partnerships between schools, regional botanic gardens and local communities. By empowering young people to take meaningful local action, the program supports long-term species preservation and nurtures future environmental leaders.

Impact

Raising Rarity centres student and adult learners in real-world plant conservation, offering immersive experiences; species discovery days, measuring soil pH and soil moisture, tracking phenology and harvesting seed. These activities build ecological knowledge, horticultural skills and environmental literacy. By displaying threatened flora in public spaces, the program makes biodiversity loss visible, inspiring stewardship and behavioral change. Participants are encouraged as plant conservation ambassadors to amplify awareness, as a group strengthen community engagement, and working all together under Raising Rarity to address Victoria's unique biodiversity.

Excellence in Design

The project emerged from a shared commitment to plant conservation, uniting scientists, horticulturists, and educators at RBGV. This interdisciplinary collaboration broke down organisational silos to co-design a rigorous, engaging STEM outreach program. Creative use of financial, physical, and human resources secured pilot funding and long-term support. Iterative refinement produced tailored school resources, teacher training and access to real-world data, strengthening community engagement, and demonstrating how collaboration can drive meaningful conservation and learning outcomes.

Management and Maintenance
Over the next three years of funding, thanks to the generous support of The Ian & Shirley Norman Foundation, longitudinal assessments will measure participant-level outcomes and gather targeted feedback. These findings will inform the development of tiered engagement models, curriculum integration, educator training, and student leadership pathways across educational levels. The approach is supported by collaborative planning, dedicated funding, and trusted partnerships, ensuring continuous improvement. By aligning conservation education with evidence-based practice, Raising Rarity evolves with purpose - guided by community voices and measurable impact.

Evaluation and Continuous Improvement
To ensure Raising Rarity remains impactful and responsive, the team have embedded a rigorous evaluation framework. In Year One, Monash University conducted an independent assessment titled "We're going to check on the plants everyday" (Welch et al., 2024), capturing insights from educators, RBGV staff and community partners. This evaluation established a strong baseline of program effectiveness.

Inclusivity and Accessibility
Raising Rarity promotes inclusivity through a flexible, tiered engagement model adaptable to schools and community settings. Accessible from Foundation to Tertiary levels, it supports meaningful participation across ages, abilities and backgrounds from whole-school programs in remote communities to TAFE horticultural courses and adult learners in Neighbourhood Houses. This adaptability allows organisations to choose activities that match their capacity and learner needs, ensuring equitable access to hands-on conservation education and broadening community understanding of Victoria's rare and threatened flora.

Conclusion

The uniqueness of Raising Rarity lies in its ability to immerse students in real-world problem-solving. They become a member of a collective solution, supported by experts in horticulture, soil science, and seed ecology. The data they collect helps inform RBGV's research and management of ex situ plant collections – serving as a backup for species at risk in the wild. This process not only sparks curiosity but also builds a deeper understanding of plant conservation, science communication, and horticultural practice. Students develop a keen sense of ownership in their learning, discovering how the plant sciences are dynamic, and an ever-evolving field in which they can actively engage. For more information check out the RBGV website.

Reference Welch et al., 2024