Winner

2025 Environmental Sustainability Award

Botanic Gardens AUS & NZ

‘Australian Drylands’

Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria

Award Overview

The Australian Drylands project at Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria (RBGV) demonstrates leadership in climate adaptation, sustainable design, and long-term landscape resilience. The project transformed an underutilised 3,200 m² area of Melbourne Gardens - formerly the “Australian Bed” - into a landscape for the future showcasing native plants adapted to hot, dry environments. This required collaboration across state borders and collecting trips to source species new to Melbourne Gardens and, in some cases, new to cultivation.

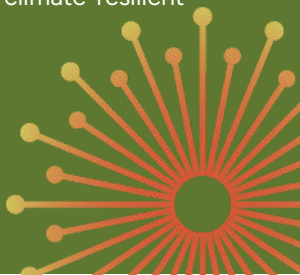
The reimagining and redevelopment of the site involved significant internal and external collaboration including new pathway design, interpretation and storytelling, through to tree assessments and the creation of expansive new planting opportunities. A comprehensive interpretation program brings together scientific research and Indigenous insight. The project reflects the spirit needed to respond to climate change - courage, research, cultural knowledge, and a willingness to design for future conditions.

Resource Efficiency
Australian Drylands emphasises water efficiency through plant selection suited to arid environments, reducing the need for excessive fertiliser and soil intervention. Recycled materials were used wherever possible, including seating made from fallen Eucalyptus camaldulensis timber. Mature cycads were translocated from elsewhere in the Gardens to provide structure without new materials. Many plants were grown onsite from seed, reducing transport needs and plastic waste. The landscape will require only low irrigation now and into the future, supporting long-term water efficiency.

Climate Adaptation & Risk Management
The project aligns with RBGV's Landscape Succession Strategy, which prepares Melbourne Gardens for the projected climate conditions of 2090. The planting palette was developed by researching species from regions across Australia that experience the hotter, drier climate expected in the future. Seed and plant material were collected from Queensland, NSW, Victoria, and WA, including specialised field trips. Succession is embedded both in plant selection and in staff knowledge-building, ensuring long-term capacity to manage these species under changing conditions.

Biodiversity Impact
A key goal was to increase biodiversity in an area previously underused. The project introduced 343 new species, including rare and threatened plants, across multiple vegetation layers to enhance habitat potential. Three meadow-style experimental zones were developed with the University of Melbourne to increase plant diversity and seasonal display under mature trees. The project has increased plant richness, improved soil health, and strengthened habitat for pollinators, birds, and other wildlife. Staff are expanding their knowledge of the site through monitoring and invertebrate bioblitz activities.

Public Engagement & Storytelling
A comprehensive interpretation suite enhances public engagement: the Palm & Cycad Node and the Fire Node. Themes include plant adaptation, fire ecology, landscape succession, and preparing for a hotter, drier future. Interpretation spans etched stone, visual signage, First Nations poetry, and digital layers. The site has seen increased visitation and new education opportunities. ABC Gardening Australia has filmed the Drylands, helping expand public understanding of climate-resilient landscapes.



Collaboration and Inclusivity

The project was developed through extensive collaboration, including a dedicated design and plant selection group, soil and irrigation specialists, and a landscape succession role focused on climate resilience. Interpretation was shaped across teams through a holistic engagement framework. Visitor engagement includes ongoing “How’s It Growing” QR-linked updates. The project also features in the Sonica Botanica audio series, including contributions from Wiradjuri collaborators Dr Jeanine Leane and Prof Michael-Shawn Fletcher.

Transferability

The Australian Drylands project is supported by tools and resources accessible to gardens of any scale. These include the Landscape Succession Toolkit, RBGV’s Landscape Succession Strategy and Master Plan, and the Climate Assessment Tool developed through the Climate Change Alliance of Botanic Gardens. A case study of the project was presented at the 8th Global Botanic Gardens Congress in Singapore and will be published to support replication across the sector.

Conclusion

The Australian Drylands demonstrates how research, Indigenous insight, sustainable design, and climate-ready plant selection can shape a resilient landscape for the future. It sets a model for botanic gardens seeking to adapt to climate change while enriching biodiversity, reducing resource use, and engaging the public in meaningful ways.