Winner

2025 Horticulture and Landscape Award

Botanic Gardens AUS & NZ

‘Dry River Bed’

Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, Cranbourne

Award Overview

The Dry River Bed (DRB) at Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, Cranbourne, is a 3,300m² curved, sunken precinct between the Red Sand Garden and the Eucalypt Walk. Originally planted with dense woody shrubs, the area suffered extensive dieback caused by Armillaria spp., reducing its horticultural and visual quality. Full soil removal was not feasible due to the scale and complexity of the site.

A plant-based solution was adopted, replacing shrubs with herbaceous perennials, grasses, and flowering monocots, all Australian native species. This created a resilient, visually striking herbaceous border and introduced new planting typologies for sustainable landscape management. The DRB now offers an innovative Australian approach to the perennial border concept and enhances the visitor experience.

Excellence in Design

The redesign addressed site failure while respecting the original TCL landscape inspired by inland river systems. In collaboration with TCL, RBGV Landscape Architect Andrew Laidlaw refined the river-like bed forms, increasing depth and scale for better performance. Species selection focused on non-woody Australian native plants that aren't impacted by Armillaria, resulting in a high-impact perennial border with strong seasonal colour. Tall native grasses restored enclosure and improved immersion. The project shows best practice in site-responsive design, resilient species selection, and creative adaptation of Australian flora.

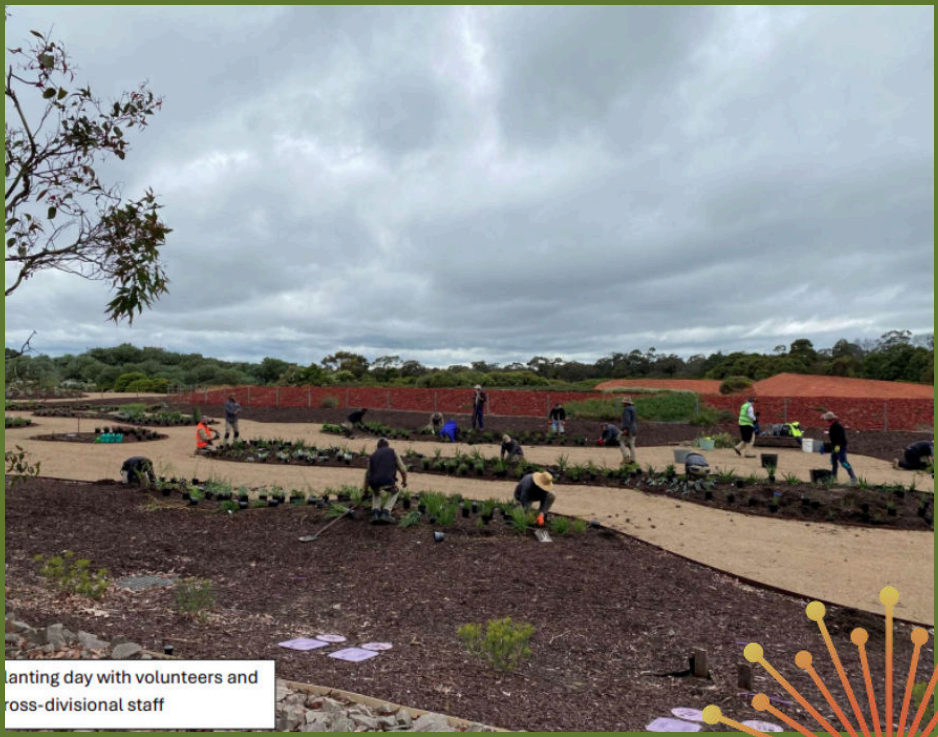
Enhancement of Biodiversity and Broader Landscape

More than 6,746 plants representing 88 taxa were introduced, increasing species diversity and attracting more pollinators and beneficial insects. The large use of Poaceae species added important habitat and food sources not previously present at this scale. Plant-based soil health strategies supported long-term resilience. The DRB presents native flora in an accessible, engaging way, enriching the broader landscape and promoting ecological awareness.

BEFORE:
Dry River bed aerial in 2022 - 3300sqm precinct. Significant dieback due to Armillaria. Note the flowing garden beds inspired by inland rivers.

Innovation
The project turned a complex Armillaria challenge into an opportunity for innovation. Replacing woody shrubs with herbaceous perennials, grasses, and monocots avoided the need for high-impact soil removal. Fibrous-rooted species helped prevent further fungal spread while providing texture and colour. Collaboration between design and horticulture teams produced a resilient and distinctive Australian herbaceous border, supported by seasonal annual displays.

Sustainable Management and Maintenance
More than a decade of research informed RBGV Cranbourne's Armillaria management approach. As eradication was not possible, the team developed a scalable, low-impact strategy. The shift to non-woody species reduced disruption, resource use, and long-term intervention. The resulting landscape is resilient, supports soil health through root diversity, and uses water efficiently, demonstrating best-practice sustainable management.



anting day with volunteers and
oss-divisional staff

Stakeholder and Community Engagement
The project involved close collaboration between horticulture staff, landscape architects, and internal specialists, ensuring alignment with the Australian Garden's vision. Consultation with Traditional Owners and the design team supported a culturally informed outcome. The new planting has strengthened public engagement by offering an immersive, accessible way for visitors to connect with Australian native plants and sustainable horticulture.

Conclusion
The Dry River Bed project shows how resilient plant selection, informed design, and sustainable management can transform a complex site into a healthy, long-lasting landscape within the Australian Garden.

AFTER: Nov 2024, the DRB completed in peak flowering.