



Annual Report

Executive Summary

Jan – Dec 2020

A full report is available for Members by emailing info@vinc.net.au

Overview

2020 was a challenging year for most, whether it be business, community organisation or individual. The fallout from the pandemic caused disruption and uncertainty and for many, the pressure seemed unrelenting. VINC was not spared from this chaos yet we, like much of the horticultural and environmental industry, fared reasonably well as a permitted workplace. Despite setbacks and changing circumstances, we were able to modify our working arrangements and continue doing what we do best: produce and supply locally provenanced indigenous plants that benefit the environmental for our passionate customer base. In doing so, we successfully came through the other end.

Following is a summary of our highlights and activities throughout the 2020 financial year.

Accomplishments:

- The April awarding of a minimum, 3-year contract for the supply of indigenous plants to the City of Moonee Valley was a big achievement for VINC, particularly at a time when the general economic outlook was unclear. This provided us with greater confidence leading into the traditional planting season. Supply of 17,500 plants followed in May.

It was gratifying to have larger quantities of plants going west, being an area with early historical connections to VINC. Apart from the important environmental benefits, the supply of plants enabled us to establish Seed Production Areas (SPA's) in new volcanic plains (basaltic soil) locations. With further support from council land managers, greater opportunities for seed collection and resulting plant supply will arise.
- COVID-related restrictions, lockdowns, social distancing and resulting workplace protocols, made day-to-day operations difficult at VINC. Working from home became the new normal for our Office Administrator, causing big adjustments for all. In addition, for several months, our volunteers were unable to work at the nursery. We were however able to overcome these obstacles by adapting. For a long period, we provided online ordering to our retail customers and delivered to those living at distance. We did similar things for some trade customers. We held onto stock for sometimes months longer than normal. Staff modified their work schedules and took on tasks generally done by others. We employed additional staff to cover lost volunteer hours (with a little help of rent relief, thanks to the Andrew's Government). It was a big effort and despite the restraints, we succeeded operationally, financially and most importantly, with a healthy optimism for the coming year.
- In a repeat from the previous financial year, VINC achieved record annual turnover and net profit. Not including government-provided cash flow boosts (COVID-related payments based on salary withholding taxes) total income derived from plant/product sales, services and membership subscriptions was \$682,000. This was a 14% improvement from that of 2019 and essentially duplicated the annual increase of the year before. It well surpassed the small income gain made from January's average 1.2% plant price increase. VINC derives more than 90% of its income from plant sales and it was encouraging to see such healthy growth from both trade and retail customer groups.

- For a few years, our enterprise has been in steady financial growth and this has accelerated much-needed capital expenditure. Apart from the installation in July of a large, shade structure (financed in late 2019), VINC invested in a large, “soil” bay (for bulk potting mix), more than 20m³ of aggregate for the yard, a propagation area bench, production trolleys, purpose-made shade covers and door fittings.
- In recent years, VINC has collaborated with several environmental stakeholders in the development of SPA’s of rare and/or threatened plant species. Via the VINC Environment Fund, two projects in 2020 (establishment of an ‘orchard’ at VINC, and supply of Arching Flax Lily to Boroondara Council) were completed. A third project - supply of advanced tubestock, involving Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC) and local community, was near to completion by December. We hope intensive collection of seed from the few remaining genetically diverse field plants will aid in their survival and we are proud to be involved in their conservation efforts.

We were also fortunate to receive federal funding in January for another SPA project on the Merri Ck. This project is ongoing and involves local community.

- VINC supplied more than 45,000 indigenous plants, comprising of mostly wildflowers (herbs, forbs, groundcovers) and graminoids (grasses, rushes, sedges) to the City Yarra via its environmental contractor, with whom we work closely. There are now four sites within a very short distance of VINC, planted with healthy quantities of genetically diverse and well-maintained plants, ideal for seed collection. Apart from the biodiversity values, strong relationships with land managers in local councils is vital for developing SPA’s and ongoing seed security of locally rare and threatened indigenous plants.

Challenges

VINC grappled with a few issues, which we were to varying degrees, overcoming.

- Space has become a major problem for VINC and we are at near growing area capacity. Demand is incredibly strong, particularly from local councils, and it is unfortunate that VINC cannot take immediate advantage of this. We are now at the stage where we cannot accept some orders early in the growing season. Cramped indoor space for propagation, office work and retailing (affecting productivity and contentment), is also problematic. Complex lease arrangements with Parks Victoria will make expansion difficult.
- We proudly produce plants of known provenance for customers from different locations in greater Melbourne. Rainfall, topography, soil type and aspect affect what plant species grow where and often populations of the same species differ in morphology because of this. This in part is what makes provenance so important – plants evolve and adapt to suit their environment and we supply those that are best suited. However, this dictates a diversity of product that can be difficult to manage for a small business such as VINC. Aside from the production and supply more than 260 species, different provenances and container formats ballooned our range to staggering 744 green-life products in 2020. We have slowly reduced our range (poor sellers and some difficult to produce species) over the past few years but continue to grapple with this conundrum.

Recently, VINC has investigated a new, cloud-based computer package (specific to production nurseries) that integrates with accounting software. We have high expectations this will improve the administrative side of managing a big product range from seed collection, to production to point of sale.

- Our continual reliance on polystyrene is cause for concern. While it is reasonably sustainable for us to use tubes and pots made from PP Plastic, (recycled material being a part component and customers return for re-use or further recycling), polystyrene boxes that hold these tubes are less so. Regrettably, we now purchase new as suppliers of pre-loved fruit/veg industry boxes no longer exist. Degrading boxes shed micro particles and despite multiple re-use, ultimately end up in landfill. Unfortunately, only one purpose made PP plastic tube crate is available on the market but these are of poor design and lead to excessive water use. We are in preliminary discussions with a potential supplier, but unless there is uptake from other nurseries, immediate solutions are unlikely.

- Pests and weeds continue to be hindrances for VINC. Rats were a major concern and their management, resource-intensive. Purpose-made cages protect some sown seedling trays but further investment is required if we are to properly manage all vulnerable material. Provenanced seed is a precious and finite resource that without, VINC cannot function. Also targeted as a food source, were freshly produced plant stock. To better their protection, infrastructure upgrades are essential.

Weeds are a perennial problem for all nurseries but at times, their presence at VINC were excessive, resulting in reduced productivity. Increasing hours of yard staff helped with outdoors stock control however, other measures such as volunteer assistance may be required.

Notwithstanding these challenges, VINC has achieved so much and the results are testament to our overall success.

Seed Collection

The 2019/20 seed collection period was rather poor due to very low rainfall the previous winter and spring. However, we are increasingly collecting from revegetated sites in which plants are often more vigorous than within remnant sites, and therefore produce plentiful seed. As a provenance based nursery this brings on the massive challenge of attempting to identify the 'original' provenance of propagation material. While the propagation coordinator and seed collectors have attempted to find simple solutions to this challenge, it has become a very time consuming and difficult task, one which was not required when collecting from remnant sites. Further work on establishing dedicated seed production areas rather than revegetated sites would greatly assist the increasing burden of this task.

While the 2020/21 seed collection season should have proved abundant due to the generous rainfall over the year, one of our seed collectors did not come to Melbourne due to border closures. We recruited a few seed collectors who worked hard to fulfil many of our requirements, however due to inexperience they have not been able to fully meet these requirements. We are currently working with our experienced seed collectors to deliver the support and training to future seed collectors to ensure the plentiful supply of seed in future years.

Volunteers

At the beginning of 2020, 20 volunteers assisted us in the propagation shed over three days, directly supervised by the Propagation Coordinator. We did not have volunteers working with us during lockdown periods, and when volunteers returned it was at a reduced rate to allow for physical distancing. Most of the volunteers returned in November, and we now have four volunteers working with us in propagation three days a week.

At the end of the year, we also had two volunteers working alongside the Retail Co-ordinator, and for a short time we had a volunteer working in the yard with the Stock Coordinator.

VINC's Directors are also volunteers of significance. They provide governance to VINC and have legal responsibilities unique to our co-operative business model. Without their guidance and hard work, VINC could not have functioned nor prospered.

Grants

Due to COVID, we did not complete the triennial grant with Boroondara, as it involved community-planting events. One more is to be done, and will be completed in July 2021. At the beginning of 2020, we received a \$3000 grant from the Communities Environment Program funded by the federal government. This project was to involve volunteers in collection of material for seed production areas, as has been extended for completion by mid-2021.

Partnership

We again collaborated with MCMC in supplying local volunteers with containerised plants for seed production of locally rare species. While the delivery of this project was delayed due to COVID lockdowns, plants were supplied and further care and seed collection training will happen in due course. The seed from these species will go towards re-establishing large wetlands in Melbourne's north.

Personnel

We thank all who worked tirelessly for VINC during 2020, whether it be in a voluntary or paid capacity. We would not have achieved what we did without their significant efforts, especially given the extraordinary challenges faced during the year.

There are too many nursery volunteers to list by name but we are grateful to each and all. Representing VINC, below is a list of Directors and staff (alphabetical order):

Directors	
•	Reappointed at June AGM: Susan Stanes, Andreas Wenzel
•	Appointed in 2020: Michael Ballock, Georgina de Beaujeu, Robert McMillan, Caroline Sheehan
•	Retired at June AGM: Michael Coleman, Ingrid Klein, Jenny Suann.

Staff	
•	Manager: Mark Hursch
•	Co-ordinator (Propagation): Naomie Sunner
•	Co-ordinator (Stock/Sales): Lloyd McRae
•	Co-ordinator (Retail): Antoinette Celotti
•	Propagation Assistants: Julie Cannon (temp), Jo Clark, Emma Hammel
•	Nursery (Yard) Assitants: Jenny Harrington, Bessie Richards
•	Retail Assitants: Marg Allan, Rowena Groundwater. Bessie, Emma & Jo (dual roles)
•	Seed Collectors: James Kidman & Pin Rada (Coordinators), Ian Hawkins, Claire Ranyard

Report Prepared by:

Mark Hursch, & Naomie Sunner,
VINC Manager Propagation Coordinator

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