



Annual Report

Executive Summary

Jan – Dec 2021

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

Overview

VINC, over its 35+ history, particularly during its earlier years, has endured some challenging times. Lease tenure concerns, seasonal cashflow pressures, infrastructure limitations and 2020's pandemic have all played a part. However, 2021 was arguably its most arduous and demanding. Multiple staff were away on sick leave for long periods of time including the Manager, who fell ill early in the year and was absent for a large part of it. Volunteers were not able to attend work at the nursery due to COVID restrictions and VINC was only able to offer a click/collect service to its retail customers for months at a time. In autumn, major capital improvement works occurred and recruitment of replacement staff happened twice during the year. Additionally, considerable disruptions to our electricity and phone services arose in May and June.

The level of unprecedented turbulence was disruptive to those remaining at VINC, with many staff stepping outside their normal duties and fulfilling dual roles, including the Production Co-ordinator, who became acting Manager.

This ongoing situation was gruelling but despite the constant pressures, we did get through it with many positives, thanks to the dedication of staff and the strong and active support of the VINC board. Fortunately, VINC was able to operate as an essential business during pandemic restrictions and the manager worked remotely from home for a time while recuperating. We were able to employ casual staff to help during peak sales. VINC achieved record income in May during its peak sales period, its second highest yearly income ever and a modest profit to show for our hard work.

VINC remains committed to growing and supplying for its wide customer base, locally rare plants of known provenance for revegetation to enhance biodiversity. Following is a summary of our highlights and activities throughout the 2021 financial year.

Accomplishments:

- VINC's Board of Directors are highly supportive of VINC's ongoing success. To this end, they (in collaboration with management and coordinators) created a 3–5-year strategy plan following internal financial analysis and market research including an extensive member survey. In keeping with VINC's purpose and its aims, this plan identifies key areas of the business that have potential for further development. As an outcome, several sub-committees (comprising of board members, outside experts and staff), were formed to address the plan's project priorities for 2022 and beyond. Subjects include those for members, future growth, education, and seed offerings. The term of each committee is approximately 12 months, and we hope to have an effective action plan for each area at the end of the term.
- VINC became a paid member of the Nursery & Garden Industry of Victoria (NGIV), the peak industry body for the state's horticulture sector. This provides us with many benefits including free technical advice and information, on-site visits, networking opportunities, e-learning/training, and access to other industry-related professional services. Membership has also allowed us free access to the peak national body – Greenlife Industry Australia. We used the services of both organisations' multiple times through the year and the support received has already proven invaluable for our nursery.

The revegetation industry is maturing and evolving rapidly. If VINC is to maintain its good stature in the sector, we must take advantage of the professional resources available to us so we can grow with it.

- VINC was awarded a 4-year contract by North Western Program Alliance (NWPAs) to produce and supply *Geranium sp. 1*, listed as critically endangered under the Victorian government's Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. Seed was collected by NWPAs staff from parent plants which would be destroyed by a level crossing removal project in Glenroy. We have propagated plants resulting from each individual parent plant and will create in house SPAs and collect seed for a period of three years. Tubestock will also be grown with intention to supply between 2022 and 2024 for planting in a managed grassland within Melbourne's west.



Dianella longifolia SPA at VINC



Our staff, particularly seed collectors, are utilizing VINC's nursery-based containerized and planted seed production areas (SPA) to great advantage. This is financially beneficial to VINC as it entails less admin and travel time plus maximises what can be collected during a narrow collection season. It's also an environmentally better approach, reducing the need to access remnant bushland areas that are becoming increasingly depleted and stressed. Their usefulness became particularly evident late in the year and in some cases, has increased our ability to produce popular species by more than 500%.

Unfortunately, VINC does not have the space to develop SPA's within its leased area further. We therefore need to find space externally and seek ways to develop partnerships with those who manage open spaces locally. Our sub-committees are currently exploring opportunities for this.

- VINC's financial position has improved steadily over the past few years, and this has enabled us to invest in much-needed capital works in recent times. Growth has been modestly gradual over the past three years but thanks to 2020's record healthy profit, it was accelerated in 2021.

The most exciting project to occur was the replacement of two cramped and deteriorating greenhouses with a multi-span structure befitting a plant production environment. This purpose-made greenhouse contains compartmentalised areas for seed germination, cuttings and the growing on of tubestock. Temperatures are now better regulated thanks to improved design; this has improved the reliability and quality of our plants overall. Additionally, the growing/ holding capacity has been increased by 30% without infringing on other production areas; a huge win for VINC.

Furthermore, new benches were purchased to fit 30% of our total greenhouse space. Rounded corners and having more plants at staff working height has improved manual work practises. This has also aided plant health; our ability to monitor and maintain them to a better standard has increased markedly. Having juvenile seedlings at an elevated height is also conducive to faster and more consistent growth, translating to swifter turnarounds/shorter lead-times.

Newly installed Greenhouses, (internal & external views) and some new benches ready for seedling tray rat-proofing cages.



Custom-made rat-proof cages were also bought to protect germinating seedlings. These acquisitions were critical and without them, losses encountered to that point had been environmentally and financially unsustainable.

Additionally, late in the year we engaged a builder to construct a weather shelter for retail customers, immediately in front of the indoor shop space. This was to mainly benefit customer comfort/experience and to help protect staff by providing an alternative payment space during COVID-risk situations. It also offered more retail marketing opportunities for VINC and aided privacy for office staff. Complimentary to this work, the outdoor retail space was modified, greatly improving aesthetics and customer usability.

- Throughout the year, VINC made several operational improvements that boosted efficiency and security:
 - Cloud-based computer files with support from a local IT provider. Files can now be accessed and edited by multiple users and remotely. Our old server was unstable.
 - A telephone system with menued departments for retail and trade. Automatic message bank when either are closed for trading.
 - Security cameras with remote access and support. Burglaries have stopped since installation.

Challenges

Due largely to the obstacles faced during 2021, several ongoing challenges persist.

- Space remains the biggest issue and while we have nibbled away at elements, we're constrained from doing much given that our growing area is near capacity. We have no room to expand, even though demand exceeds supply. Storage and work areas are also compromised. We will keep working on this problem and perhaps some hurdles will be overcome via initiative solutions stemming from our strategy plan. However, major change may not happen for a few years until we can try and negotiate more space under a new lease agreement with Parks Victoria. Regrettably, we now find ourselves in a designated sports precinct, which does not favour environmental activities.

- When factoring in provenance for the approximate 250 species produced annually, our range balloons to over 750 grown items and 1,000's more on our database. This has made for unwieldy administration, storage, and handling. To address this, we made plans to simplify provenance categories, which were to be adopted for use within a newly subscribed cloud-based stock management system. The package (specific to production nurseries with considerable support) manages seed collection and plant production records with point of sale. However, workplace pressures outlined in the overview stymied our ability to take advantage of it. There is much to learn about the program, and we may need to seek help from a third party (volunteer?) to get it up and running.

Seed Collection

The 2020/2021 seed collection period was disrupted due to COVID lockdowns. One of our experienced seed collectors could not come to Melbourne, and our new collectors were not able to take as much advantage of the good seed season for some basic species such as Kangaroo grass as we hoped. However, they did collect plentiful seed of some wildflowers, such as peas, Drumsticks and Billy buttons, which we have subsequently produced (and sold) in large numbers.

For the 2021/2022 season we hired two experienced seed collectors who, with the support of one of our previous seed collectors, took advantage of the good seed year due to good rainfall in spring. We now have more seed than ever to clean over winter and will have excess seed for future years of some species we have always struggled to supply due to seed constraints.

While collecting from both remnant and revegetated sites provides most of our seed, our in-house seed production areas (SPAs) have continued to supply us with harder to source seed of numerous species and are a vital contribution to securing VINC's future seed supply. This year we also collaborated with one of our directors who laboured during a lockdown to create a SPA for three species on her nature strip, which has already supplied us with a crop of seed.



Cleaned Dianella seed, ex nursery SPA – early 2021

Volunteers

Yet again, our volunteer program in 2021 was disrupted due to numerous lockdowns. However, in between lockdowns our volunteers returned eager to assist us with propagation, retail stock management and yard work. In addition, we recruited extra volunteers over the summer of 2021/2022 – increasing propagation volunteer days temporarily from three to four days a week and retail volunteers to three days a week, with volunteers in the yard remaining at one morning a week. We began a placement program for students from Melbourne Polytechnic, and the six students rotated between propagation, retail and the yard assisting us with various duties.

VINC staff - especially Mark and Naomie – have felt greatly supported by our board over this last year. We wish to extend our appreciation to their continued support for us.



Volunteers and staff – seed cleaning and seedling pricking

Personnel

We thank all who worked tirelessly for VINC during 2021, 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:

Directors (Reappointed AGM, May 2021)
● Caroline Sheehan (Chair)
● Michael Ballock (Secretary)
● Georgina de Beaujeu
● Robert McMillan
● Susan Stanes
● Andreas Wenzel

Staff
● Manager: Mark Hursch
● Co-ordinator - Propagation / Acting Manager: Naomie Sunner
● Co-ordinator - Stock & Sales: Lloyd McRae
● Co-ordinator - Retail: Antoinette Celotti
● Propagation Assistants: Jo Clark, Emma Hammel, Rowena Groundwater (temp)
● Nursery (Yard) Assistants: Jenny Harrington, Bessie Richards (Jan-Mar), Emma Sorrentino (April-Dec)
● Retail Assistants: Marg Allan, Rowena Groundwater, Bessie Richards, Emma Hammel
● Seed Collectors: James Kidman (Coordinator), Pin Rada (Coordinator), Thomas Dell 'Oro, Ian Hawkins, Claire Ranyard, Rani Sherriff

Report Prepared by:

Mark Hursch, VINC Manager & **Naomie Sunner, Propagation Coordinator**

May 2022