



# Annual Report

## Executive Summary

Jan – Dec 2024

A full report is available for Members by emailing [info@vinc.net.au](mailto:info@vinc.net.au)

### Overview

VINC continues to champion the environment and local communities through its production and supply of naturally occurring plant species, indigenous to Melbourne's (Naarm's) northern/western grassy plains, north-eastern foothills, and inner Yarra Valley. We are immensely proud of our efforts in maintaining the growing of flora from many local populations containing unique characteristics, sometimes found nowhere else. Our nursery provides a highly specialized service that very few other nurseries of our scale and larger, offer.

In 2023, VINC distributed nearly 360,000 plants to land managers, supporting numerous planting initiatives across the local region. Beyond the social advantages, these revegetation efforts bolstered seed orcharding, biodiversity enrichment, wildlife corridors, and urban cooling across a record 13 local council areas within greater Melbourne. Renowned for our dedication to delivering locally sourced, premium quality plants with robust genetics, we continue to elevate biodiversity and preserve local provenance. This is evident in our achievements.

Despite a maturing of the revegetation industry and the efforts of many people advocating for the environment, the conservation status of many indigenous plant species, remain at the very least, rare, or vulnerable on local government levels. Much of what VINC's grows and supplies falls within those categories and several of its species are listed as critically endangered in State and Federal environmental Acts. Their distribution is what makes VINC's work so important.

To that end, following is a summary of what we achieved, last financial year.

### Accomplishments:

- VINC's non-executive (voluntary) Board of Directors continue to be highly active towards our organisation's ongoing successes. Without their expertise, guidance, and sound governance, VINC would not exist as the reputable co-op (and now, charity) we are today:
  - ✓ VINC celebrated its first financial year as an ACNC-registered charity following its successful application late in 2022. This platform has enabled our organisation to maintain its Environment Fund, an instrument that will facilitate donations of monies for special projects that foster the preservation of local biodiversity. During 2023, VINC received multiple donations including two generous amounts, that will aid the establishment of seed production areas of rare and/or threatened species.
  - ✓ VINC's Co-op Rules, largely unchanged since the organisation's formation several decades ago, were reviewed extensively early in the year after deficiencies with its ongoing functionality were discovered late in 2022. Progressive draft changes made throughout the year has resulted in a document that is now thought to be relevant to the organisation's requirements and one which complies with environmental regulations and relevant current State Act. A final draft was to be proposed early in 2024 with the intention of having it adopted at a Special Meeting prior to VINC's AGM that year.

- ✓ A key outcome of VINC's 3 to 5-year Strategy Plan, implemented in late 2021, was the formation of several sub-committees, to enable us to address current organisational needs. Given VINC's physical space and leasing predicaments, our Future Growth committee became VINC's driving focus in 2023. Early in the year, a prospectus, highlighting VINC's environmental credentials and achievements, was created. This valuable tool enabled our nursery to succinctly promote ourselves to stakeholders, raising our profile whilst fostering stronger connections and partnerships within our industry and local community. It was also used as a way of introducing our organisation to parties unfamiliar with VINC's scope, resulting in meetings with parliamentary leaders, government agency officials, and businesses connected to VINC. This process is ongoing, but we trust our efforts thus far have given us the grounding we need to build an exciting and sustaining future for our nursery.



*Parliamentary nursery visit, Dec 2023 - L to R: Rhys Dale (VINC Director), Hon Ged Kearney MP (Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care / Member for Cooper), and Mark Hursch (VINC Manager)*

- Apart from the type of plants produced and supplied by VINC, we are renowned for our involvement with local community:
  - ✓ We continued actively encouraging volunteer assistance throughout the nursery. Not only does their involvement greatly support the work we do, it also provides many people, particularly students, the opportunity of gaining essential environmental sector experience for entry into the workforce. We took great pleasure having people visit us after finding employment, thanks to their time volunteering at VINC. Others benefit from the social interaction, working alongside people wanting to do something positive for their local community and the environment. It's truly motivating to witness the active involvement and enduring interests of so many people. Their ongoing efforts continue to propel our organization forward, enabling us to achieve our positive goals.
  - ✓ In the wake of the successful recovery from the pandemic in 2022, there was a notable surge in community planting initiatives and council-led environmental programs last year. We contributed over 200,000 plants, either directly or indirectly, to numerous schools, community groups, local councils, and other organizations engaged in various community projects throughout the year. Major events such as World Environment Day, National and Schools Tree Days, Naidoc and National Reconciliation Weeks, and National Volunteer Week, (all coinciding with the busy autumn/winter planting season), were catalysts for some of the largest planting activities during the year.

VINC's plant derived income from public schools and community groups is minor compared to that received from councils and environmental contractors, however the support we offer is proportionally much higher. While we realize the financial impact to us without any outside assistance is resource-demanding, we also understand the immense positive impact it has on the community and to the environment. Hundreds of people volunteer their time and efforts to these activities and VINC is proud to support these groups in that regard. This goes to the very core of what VINC stands for.

- In 2023, VINC supplied approximately 37,000 plants and 135 species to 28 community groups spanning over 60 individual projects! Some of the more prominent projects that VINC was involved with included those undertaken by Abbotsford Riverbankers, Collingwood Childrens

Farm, Green St Revegetation Group, Kooyongkoot Alliance, Koala Clancy Foundation, Lalor Landcare, NECCHI, Rewilding Stonnington, Whittlesea Community Connections, and Yarra Riverkeepers. We also had strong support from countless small (but very active) 'Friends Of' groups that do local plantings within Melbourne's local water catchments such as FO Edgars Ck, Glenbervie Station, South Surrey Park, and Wilsons Reserve.

- Supporting environmental and educational projects and programs such as those procured through government funding initiatives (e.g. Junior Landcare), VINC supplied 25 schools (and other educational institutions) with more than 8,000 plants and at least 120 species spanning over 50 individual activities! In many instances, VINC aided with plant selection to optimise positive outcomes for schools given limited knowledge of those seeking stock. Notable projects include those at Brunswick SW PS (Revegetation Project – April), Sunshine Height PS (Wilderness Area – May), Thornbury PS (Junior Landcare Grant – May), Aitken College (Revegetation Project – June), Brunswick East PS (Junior Landcare Grant – July), Melbourne Girls College (National Tree Day planting) and Brunswick NW PS (Yakai Barring planting project – Sept).
- VINC continued its successful consignment program, supporting school and community group fundraising initiatives, by supplying sale-on-return plants at discounted rates. VINC provided almost 1,000 plants throughout the year, helping generate valuable revenue to those seeking essential funds for community benefit.
- VINC actively supported many other community-based programs, either directly with community groups or through those run by local councils and agencies. We were instrumental in directly assisting with advice, information, selection, and supply of plants (some specifically grown) that facilitated wildlife friendly gardens, biodiversity corridors, and urban sustainability. All these programs had a strong educational focus (some including nursery tours and voucher schemes), and it was immensely rewarding knowing our involvement cultivated awareness of the environment and following in the footsteps of first nations peoples, the caring for country.

Some of the more prominent initiatives that VINC was involved in included City Boroondara's Backyard Biodiversity program, CERES Schools for Wildlife, Brunswick Communities for Nature, Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne children's educational/well-being/first nations/nature program, and City Moonee Valleys' Childhood Services Wildlife Packs project.



Boxes of mixed indigenous grasses and wildflowers for distribution to 18 Childhood Service Centres in City Moonee Valley, April 2023

- ✓ We have no formal partnership arrangements with indigenous groups, but this is something we wish to explore soon, particularly with reference to caring for country. However, for some time we have supported local groups with donations of plants for small projects or events that often coincide with Naidoc Week. In July 2023, we scaled this up by attending a joint celebration of Naidoc Week and 50-year anniversary of Aboriginal Hostels Ltd at the William T Onus Hostel in Northcote. VINC donated 30 plants and three hours of staff time, providing information about local plants, and assisting First Nation hostel residents with planting of indigenous flora in their garden beds.

## Challenges

- Climate change has instigated the desire of some influential bodies to introduce indigenous plants with stronger climate adaptations from areas occurring much further afield, to some local populations. Whilst we support species resilience through mixing of populations from within close

geographical locations or the same catchments, a more extensive approach is likely to have adverse implications for local genetic diversity and biodiversity, which is at odds with VINC's broader aims and objectives.

- Demand for our plants from a wide customer base has increased steadily over the past decade and we now regularly supply more LGA's than ever before. While this is heartening news, the flip side is that VINC is no longer able to meet this growing demand due to the relatively small size of our nursery. Expansion has not been possible and for least three years, we have functioned at capacity levels. VINC therefore has not been able to grow additional plants during its peak production cycle (Oct-March) because there is simply no more outdoor space available. Additionally, other production areas and working and storage spaces are too small to adequately meet the needs of our operations, affecting workflow and output. And regrettably, we cannot allocate enough additional space within our nursery for seed production areas of rare and threatened plant species, essential to VINC's ongoing viability and wider environmental aims.

Relying on field populations, some of which are natural, comes with greater risk as we have little control over their management, particularly when other factors such as climate change are considered. We are greatly concerned of the implications this will have on our ability to supply genetically diverse plants to those undertaking important environmental projects. If we cannot address the increasing urgency for properly managed SPA's, genetic health of some local species is likely to decline further contributing to populations possibly becoming functionally extinct.

- As VINC drew nearer to the half-way point of its short 10-year lease, there was increasing awareness that our tenure at Yarra Bend Park was narrowing. Our organisation strives on maintaining an important role within the environmental sector however 10 years provides us with little security. We've previously had little support from our statutory authority landlord and whilst more recent engagement (Oct '23) with the Regional Director and others in higher hierarchy were broadly encouraging, VINC's ongoing tenure at the park is far from assured. We hope that further discussions including those from Minister's departments, yield us with greater certainty in reference to being given loose support to obtain a longer lease term and use of additional space for SPA's.

## **VINC Environment Fund**

VINC's charitable status allowed it to maintain its Fund, vital for supporting environmental projects that would otherwise be challenging to finance independently. Prior to 2023, the Fund had proven useful for raising capital for several small projects over the years however it was largely being underutilized. Last year, our aim was to revitalize the Fund to offer greater opportunities for our organization. Various project options were considered, and it was agreed that expanding seed production and banking for security and sustainability was to be prioritized.

In mid-2023, we obtained five donations for the Fund, amounting to \$11,629. Two significant contributions from generous benefactors were received specifically to reinvigorate the Fund while a third came about due to VINC providing its propagation facilities to a community group one Saturday. All donations were given with the clear understanding that the funds would be allocated for projects related to seed orchards, focusing on rare, threatened, and challenging-to-source species from the regions where we distribute indigenous plants to.

Monies totaling \$3,000 via a grant received in July 2017 for the establishment of a seed security orchard at VINC, were released from the Fund at the end of the year. A full costings and activity report, detailing work achieved between mid-2017 until completion in late 2021, was distributed to the board in December. The project, while modest, has been a success for VINC, yielding us with precious seeds that otherwise would

have been problematic to collect in the field. Apart from providing some ongoing seed assurance for our nursery, the area offers educational and working opportunities for volunteers and others in the community.

At the end of FYE December 2023, total funds in the VINC Envirofund account were \$13,527.

## **Volunteers**

VINC would not be able to achieve the bulk of the work that's done without the hands-on help from our dedicated and passionate volunteers who continue to lend their support every week.

Over December and January we opened up an extra day of volunteering, as per the previous year, for horticulture/conservation students to assist in propagation. We offered students the opportunity gain experience in propagating indigenous plants and to gain insight in the often overlooked behind the scenes of revegetation. The experience benefits both students seeking experience in the industry and nursery staff during peak production season, and multiple students have since expressed interest in further volunteering on a regular basis.



*Staff and summer student volunteers in our propagation area, December 2023*

extend an enormous thank you for all of your hard work, support and dedication. Not only is the work you put in crucial to what we are able to achieve, you provide a sense of community and passion for conservation that is invaluable.

## **Personnel**

We thank all our workers – both volunteer and paid - for their personal skills, efforts, and dedication they brought to VINC throughout the year. Without them, our organisation would not have achieved the level of success we enjoy today. Their commitment and passion have been instrumental in driving our mission forward and making a difference to the environment and community.

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 (non-executive) and staff:

**Staff:**

- **Manager:** Mark Hursch
- **Co-ordinator – Propagation:** Paddy Leahy (commenced June) Naomie Sunner (finished mid-April)
- **Co-ordinator - Stock & Sales:** Lloyd McRae
- **Co-ordinator - Retail:** Antoinette Celotti
- **Office Administration:** Mary Ann Townsend
- **Propagation Assistants:** Jo Clark, Emma Hammel
- **Nursery (Yard) Assistants:** Jenny Harrington, Tim McKay
- **Retail Assistants:** Marg Allan, Sam Boyd (commenced July), Jake Duyvestyn, Sarah Garrett (finished June) Emma Hammel
- **Seed Collectors:** Rani Sherrif (Coordinator), Thomas Dell 'Oro

**Directors:**

(all reappointed at May AGM, 2023)

- Caroline Sheehan (Chair)
- Michael Ballock (Secretary)
- Rhys Dale
- Natasha Freeman
- Robert McMillan
- Rowena Scheffer

**Report Prepared by:**

**Mark Hursch,                      Paddy Leahy,**  
**VINC Manager                      &                      Propagation Coordinator**

**April 2023**

*VINC is located on the lands of the Wurundjeri people, and we acknowledge them as the Traditional Owners of this land. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and future.*