

### Werribee Park Heritage Orchard Revival

JUST two years ago, Werribee Park's orchard was almost a forgotten place. Untouched for nearly 40 years, bar the occasional mow, it had been ravaged by drought, pests and neglect. Sparse and spindly fruit trees - some hardy quinces and a few brave apples and pears - grew out of baked clay soils which resembled cracked terracotta. Feral poplar trees invaded one side of the property and rabbits ran rampant everywhere else, ringbarking trees.

It was a far cry from the horticultural showcase that pastoralists Andrew and Thomas Chirnside had designed in the 1870s and which had boasted upwards of 400 trees by its peak in the 1930s. With only about 60 remaining, many half-dead, it seemed like an orchard that only Mother Nature could love.

Luckily for it, and for fruit lovers everywhere, there were some who saw its potential.

"If you weren't into gardening, it probably looked like a couple of wiry-looking quince trees up one end, some half-dead apple trees in the middle with a bare patch down the other end," says Cecilia Egan, of Melbourne. "But to us it looked like a beautiful remnant orchard. I think we all put those rose-coloured glasses on and just imagined, visualised what a spectacle it could be, given the right amount of care."

"It certainly needed a lot of work at the start - the old trees were on their last legs," says Werribee retiree Richard Hawkey.

Cecilia and Richard are part of a group of community volunteers which is bringing this historical orchard, and its heritage fruit varieties, back to life. The orchard, just a few hundred metres from the mansion, was built to support the Chirnside's giant farm workforce which back then worked pastures covering 30,000ha west of Melbourne. At a size of 20ha, and set between the



Peachy keen: Local "peach king" and orchard volunteer Richard Hawkey at Werribee Park.



Plum position: Committee members Richard Hawkey, Cecilia Egan and Kris

mansion and the nearby Werribee River, a veritable fruit salad of varieties was planted with no quarantine restrictions holding the Chirnsides back. Among the apple trees alone, the volunteer group has so far discovered Rome Beauties, Northern Spies, Sturmer Pippins, Jonathons and Yates with many fruits yet to be identified.

The estate was sold in the 1920s and bought by the Catholic Church, who turned it into a seminary. The priests of Corpus Christi then toiled the rows for decades, until it was sold to the Victorian Government in 1973. While the rest of the estate flourished as a tourist attraction - the National Equestrian Centre, State Rose Garden, mansion and Werribee Open Range Zoo are well-known attractions across Victoria - the orchard was abandoned. But those who knew about it understood its potential and, in 2009, Parks Victoria, which runs Werribee Park, secured a \$50,000 state government grant to bring it back to life.

Werribee Park's senior horticulturist Adam Smith visited the Heritage Fruits Society to request advice about the old orchard and there met Peter and Silvia Allen, of Telopea Mountain Permaculture Farm, who were keen to be a part of any restoration. They were soon joined by Hawkey, known as the "peach king" because he grows 56 different varieties, Cecilia, Werribee permaculture enthusiast Kris Patten and several others.

By October last year, the Werribee Park Heritage Orchard group was launched. With a core committee of 10, the group's membership has since ballooned out to 50 as word of mouth has spread among the green-thumb community.

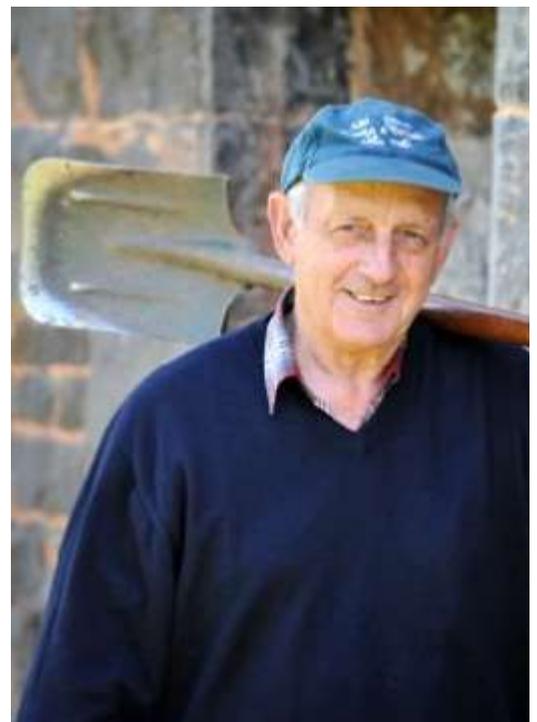
"Everyone brings something different to the group and we come in all shapes and sizes, but the common denominator is a love of plants," Kris says.

The aims are to rejuvenate and replenish the orchard and then share it with the world, either by showcasing the skills needed to propagate trees or by selling the ready-made grafted plants and fruit for people to take home. It's an idea that has appealed to the fast-growing communities surrounding Werribee Park, with Adam reporting "an awful lot of interest"

Patten.



Adam Smith, senior horticulturist with Parks Victoria



from people looking to plant in their own backyards".

"There's no doubt that this type of thing, growing your own, is undergoing a resurgence," Cecilia says.

With monthly meetings and almost fortnightly working bees, the group set to work, and Cecilia says they are about halfway to bringing their vision to fruition. The first thing that had to be done was to bulldoze the poplars and build the rabbit-proof fence. Rain from the roof of the mansion was then harvested and a 100,000-litre water tank installed. Horse manure from the mansion's equestrian centre continues to rejuvenate the soil and irrigation lines are in the process of being installed. Scion wood from the trees has been taken and grafted on to root stock planted in the estate's market garden, while some remnant pieces of the orchard's once lush hawthorn hedge are being nurtured in the hope it can return to its full glory.

A Heritage Victoria permit acknowledges the land's original indigenous custodians and complementary heritage varieties are being sourced from across the state for replanting in the orchard. Plans are in place for beehives to be installed as well as a vegetable garden.

"It's very laid-back and relaxed and we have a lot of fun ... we are just very, very happy to meet like-minded people who are all keen to grow fruit," Richard says.

Already, the group has hosted several grafting days and orchard tours and the hope is to step it up further next March with a harvest festival. There, the public will be able to prune and graft, take a tour, learn the history and, most importantly of all, taste the wonderful fruit on offer.

"These days we have such a monoculture, but back then they had so many different types - juicy, sweet, spicy and bitter," Cecilia says. "Just in apples, the range of flavours is quite stunning. You can have an aniseed tang, or strawberry, pineapple, and vinous flavours. The aromatics are so strong that you're breathing in this perfume the same time as you are eating it, which is pretty nice." And there's the freshness factor.



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"There's nothing quite like picking that first fresh pear of the tree, it's like nothing you've ever tasted before," Richard says. It is believed there are 18 different quince types, 20 pear varieties and 26 types of apple in the orchard. "Just over 50 per cent are estimated to be 40 to 60-years-old, with about half of these pear and half apple," Mr Hawkey says. The quince trees are estimated to be 80 to 100-years-old.

Restoring the orchard has kept the group busy but the work is half the pleasure. The group says the perks of the volunteer work are many, learning about fruit trees, the fresh produce, the savings and nutritional benefits, as well as being outside and able to "appreciate the seasons". "But also, it's just a very peaceful place to be," Kris says