

# Web Sight

John Nurick



## Botanic Gardens Trust

[www.rbgsyd.gov.au](http://www.rbgsyd.gov.au)



One of the most satisfactory websites I know is [www.rbgsyd.gov.au](http://www.rbgsyd.gov.au), which belongs to the Botanic Gardens Trust, an arm of the New South Wales Department of Conservation and Environment, which manages Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens and the Domain, the park that surrounds them.

The Domain – superbly located on Sydney Harbour – dates from 1788, the beginning of British settlement, when it was taken as the first colonial governor's private reserve. The first known farm in Australia was on this site – although it failed because the English crops didn't take to the native soil. The Botanic Gardens were established as early as 1816, and a Colonial Botanist appointed the following year. (One might ask why it took so long, given the great scientific interest in Australia's unique flora and fauna in late 18th-century Europe.) By the 1830s the Domain had become a public park in much the same way as London's Royal Parks. Like Hyde Park it has long accommodated lovers, orators, and big public events including exhibitions, festivals and concerts.

In the 1980s two more gardens were created: one at Mount Tomah, a thousand metres above sea level in the Blue Mountains inland from Sydney, for cool-climate plants, and the other, at Mount Annan to the south-west, for native plants. There are already 4,000 species in cultivation at Mount Annan out of a total of some 25,000 Australian species. In the Domain, the Trust maintains an important botanical library – bona fide researchers only, please – and the Australian National Herbarium. In addition to the scientific and conservation work there are, needless to say, education programmes, a Friends organisation, restaurants and kiosks, and corporate events.

Fitting all this into one elegant and effective website is no small achievement. I think it has been achieved by focusing very carefully on users' needs and interests. One aspect of this is the consistency of page design and the ease of navigation.

Almost every page in the site has a similar layout and an identical set of navigation controls:

A menu bar just below the title area keeps the page uncluttered but provides direct access to information about each of the three gardens, about plants generally, and about the trust's other activities (see small screenshot).



Each garden's and each department's pages share the standard layout, but each has its own distinctive colour scheme.

A strip at the bottom of the page contains links to administrative and functional areas (e.g. venue hire, the online shop, privacy and copyright policies, and the site map).

Finally there are two search controls at top right. One is for searching the site generally and the other links to a page of searchable botanical databases.

When you're away from the home page, further navigation controls appear to show where you are in the site and provide links to deeper information.

The constant presence and consistent layout of all these controls make it very easy to move confidently around the site. You're never forced to backtrack in order to get to a page from which you can set out to a new destination. The site map is very good – but it's scarcely needed. Users can find the information they need without having to invest effort in learning how to find it.

Another aspect of the focus on typical users' needs shows up when you 'drill down' into the site looking for detailed information. Click on 'Information about Plants' on the home page and you're taken to a page that boasts

'We have a HUGE amount of information about plants that is available to both the general public and scientists alike. This is the place to start, but for more specialised scientific information go to conservation & research' and continues with links to gardening information (although 'we do not provide a gardening advisory service'), botanical information, pests and diseases, and so on. There is also a link to the part of the site devoted to the Wollemi Pine, a rare and ancient conifer from a genus that had been thought extinct for millions of years. There, you can read about it, look at pictures, and even put your name down for a seedling when they become available.

The Wollemi Pine also stars in case studies illustrating the Trust's scientific work in conservation, taxonomy, ecology and plant pathology.

Enough about the website. The gardens are pretty good too. And if you want an outdoor wedding with a view across the water to the Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge, just click on Venue Hire and book the Fleet Steps Lawns for your marquee.

**John Nurick is a Senior Consultant at Locum Destination Consulting.**