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## **5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victoria's Black Saturday bushfires**

### **\$1 million Community Based Gardening Project in bushfire areas culminates in launch of Victoria's new Community Gardens Manual**

### **New scoping study for Victorian community garden hubs announced as project Stage 2**

A \$1 million Community Based Gardening Project in some of Victoria's worst 2009 bushfire regions has resulted in a new 90-page Community Gardens Manual that will extend the original project into other regional areas of Victoria.

More than 300 requests have been received for the manual, which includes the bushfire community gardens in Toolangi & Castella, Jindivick, Yinnar, Beechworth and Yackandandah.

The Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, which funded the \$1 million project, today announced a Stage 2 scoping study to assess the need for and viability of regional Community Garden Hubs as a practical new resource for such gardens.

The Community Gardens Manual was today launched by the Independent MP for Indi, Cathy McGowan AO, in the Toolangi & Castella bushfire community garden (Kinglake area). Three of the five bushfire community gardens are in Ms McGowan's electorate.

"The Community Based Gardening Project has proven itself as an initiative that brings communities together across Victoria," Ms McGowan said. "It has demonstrated the importance of assisting rural community to heal after the impact of the February 2009 fires, and it shows how all our communities benefit greatly when individuals, groups, local government and philanthropic trusts work together.

"Special thanks and acknowledgement must go to the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust for the project vision, and for providing leadership, resources and the support to enable our garden communities to achieve their aims."

Coincidentally, Ms McGowan's sister, Ruth McGowan, was Mayor of Baw Baw Shire when the Gippsland bushfires struck. She became personally involved in the gardens project, with a community garden created near her home in Jindivick. A second Gippsland garden was created in Yinnar. Welcoming the launch of the Community Gardens Manual, Ruth McGowan said:

"When Mother Nature 'rips you up', destroys the local native forest and livelihoods and burns properties to the ground, it's no wonder that our community spirit took a beating. In this environment, in 2010, a community garden became a perfect focus for our community to build hope in the future once the immediate work of the first year of recovery was over."

The Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, which has a key focus on funding rural and regional Victorian projects, set aside \$2 million for bushfire recovery projects within 48 hours of Black Saturday. Mr Darvell Hutchinson AM, Chairman of HMSTrust, said \$1 million was granted to Sustainable Gardening Australia because the Trust could see significant long-term potential in the project.

“One of our key objectives is to fund projects which can gain their own momentum and continue to benefit communities well into the future. When the Community Gardens Manual was compiled, we took particular care in the development of organisational, governance and management structures that would establish formal processes and agreements, avoiding the ad hoc management which can lead to community garden failures.”

Mr Hutchinson said HMSTrust had retained Elaine Shallue, the gardens’ original Project Manager, to conduct the scoping study, which will assess the need, interest and viability of establishing new regional Community Garden Hubs. The study will look at an overarching strategy and the potential location of these regional hubs, as well as the provision of practical resources needed by rural community gardeners.

Local government was heavily involved in the development of the five community gardens (Toolangi & Castella, Jindivick, Yinnar & District, Beechworth and Yackandandah), and the President of the Victorian Local Governance Association, Cr Sebastian Klein, welcomed the launch of the Community Gardens Manual.

“Many communities and councils have been frustrated and surprised by how challenging it can be to create vibrant and active community gardens. The Community Gardens Manual provides an invaluable roadmap to accessing improved health and social connection through sustainable community gardening,” Cr Klein said.

The Toolangi & Castella Community Garden, the site of today’s launch, was established on a disused tennis court. Integrated into the bush setting, it has strong symbolism for the local community, with winding paths reminiscent of mountain roads, fallen logs from the forest and seats created from bushfire salvage timber by local artisan Jack Walhout, who is a member of the Toolangi CFA brigade and fought the Black Saturday fires.

It features many indigenous plants, including the locally endemic but critically endangered round-leaf pomaderris (*Pomaderris vacciniifolia*), and a thriving vegetable garden is now producing an abundant summer crop.

Tabitha Barclay, the designer and facilitator of the garden, said that the community garden has linked the geographically isolated hamlets of Toolangi and Castella and has become the living heart of the CJ Dennis Reserve, which was previously just a collection of buildings and hard landscape.

“It has brought many people back to the reserve by creating a pleasurable space for the community to meet, spend time and work together - our common ground. It has empowered the community to take on other projects such as the newly formed Men’s Shed,” Ms Barclay said.

“The Community Gardens Manual is a fabulous account of the learning which came from the Bushfire Community Gardens and POD project funded by HMST and project managed by SGA. It provides practical, invaluable, grass roots information, which is flexible enough to be applied to most communities.”

Free copies of the manual can be downloaded from the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust website, <http://hmstrust.org.au/noticeboard> or the Sustainable Gardening Australia website, [www.sgaonline.org.au](http://www.sgaonline.org.au)

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