



OPEN GARDENS CANBERRA: ESTABLISHING A NEW COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

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Abstract

Pursuing a passion, the issues involved in establishing a new community association and the difficult process of finding gardens to open will be the focus of my presentation. A huge range of questions confronted me. What kind of organisation? Is it possible to have an elegant Constitution? How do you create a committee in an organisation that isn't interested in meetings? The optimistic art of delegating – to whom? And finally the difficult process of finding gardens to open, and the benefits of being a member of Open Gardens Canberra.

Background

Open Gardens Canberra will commence opening gardens in the Canberra region to members and the public in Spring this year.

In July 2014 I first heard that Open Gardens Australia was closing down and I felt a great sense of loss. I had been selecting gardens for Open Gardens Australia for eight years, with a strong focus on native plant gardens. After a short period of grieving, I decided someone had to do something to continue the tradition of open gardens in the Canberra region.

Pursuing a passion

That someone ended up being me. My life and my own garden have been on hold for the past 9 months while I've been working to establish Open Gardens Canberra.

Pursuing a passion that combines multiple lifelong interests is both exciting and exhausting. When do I find time to empty the dishwasher? bring in the washing? sleep?

Being aware of my stress levels has been critical. The ability to fully relax and meditate has been a major factor keeping me going, as has getting grounded every now and then by visiting really good friends.

The issues involved in establishing a new organisation

Is there a demand?

The response from people in the Canberra region has been overwhelming and inspiring! Now that Open Gardens Australia has actually closed down, the demand is even

stronger. By the end of 2014, I had 200 people on my email lists, and six months later I have well over 400.

Finding a good name

The name of a new organisation is important. It needs to state exactly what the organisation is about, in very few words. To pick on some historical association names from the public records of the ACT Office of Regulatory Services, I wondered what the names *ORT Australia* or *NOSAL* or *Tarlina* mean. An organisation's name also needs to be readily found in lists, which names starting with "The" or "Australian Capital Territory" are not.

For me, the name Open Gardens Canberra was the obvious choice, although I sacrificed some detail for the sake of simplicity because we actually cover the Canberra region.

Deciding on the type of organisation

In setting up Open Gardens Canberra I was seeking to create a sense of community in the Canberra region, and that means having a membership-based organisation. It is true that having a membership base gives us funds upfront to cover costs we will incur before any gardens open, such as insurance, and that is a secondary advantage of having members.

Our role in building community is subtle and will develop slowly. We are already well on the way to creating a community of garden lovers. "Garden lovers" includes people who have a lovely garden, people who like to look at lovely gardens, people who like to share their lovely garden, people who would love to have a lovely garden, people who have just started to make a garden, people who are in the middle of creating a garden, people who have a tiny garden of one pot of basil on the window sill etc etc.

Another advantage of being a community association is that the *Associations Incorporation Act 1991* and *Regulation 1991* is only 174 pages and that includes 26 pages of Model Rules that associations can adopt or modify to suit their *modus operandum*. Compare that with the *Corporations Act 2001*, which has 4,420 pages and no easy guide for new starters.

Writing an elegant Constitution

I wanted Open Gardens Canberra to have a beautiful and elegant constitution. With some constraints, that is possible.

Let me give you an example of a truly awful clause in the Model Rules, clause 28(1):

"A question arising at a general meeting of the association is to be decided on a show of hands and, unless before or on the declaration of the show of hands a poll is demanded, a declaration by the person presiding that a resolution has, on a show of hands, been carried or carried unanimously or carried by a particular majority or lost, or an entry to that effect in the minute book of the association, is evidence of the fact without proof of the number or proportion of the votes recorded in favour of or against that resolution."

I wanted to delete that clause but our solicitor committee member said no.

However we do have this:

A notice of meeting may be sent by such means as the committee determines is appropriate.

Instead of this:

For these rules, the association may serve a notice on a member by sending it by post to the member at the member's address shown in the register of members.

We also have a lovely Rule that allows all or some of the committee to attend a meeting by phone or other technology. Many committees do it but very few have a clause along these lines:

A committee member who is not physically present at a committee meeting may participate in the meeting by the use of technology that allows that committee member and the committee members present at the meeting to clearly and simultaneously communicate with each other.

And we have a very beautiful Flying Motion clause, that allows the committee to make a decision by email or other technological means. Again, many committees do this but very few have an enabling clause.

The Flying Motion

If an urgent item of business requires a resolution of the committee and it is not possible for a committee meeting to be called in time—

- (a) the secretary must provide all committee members with a document setting out:
 - (i) the proposed resolution; and
 - (ii) the date by which committee members who wish to vote on the resolution must notify their vote; and
 - (iii) the manner in which a committee member who wishes to vote on the resolution must do so.
- (b) several copies of the document may be used provided the wording of the document is identical in each copy;
- (c) the resolution is passed if a majority of committee members have voted in favour of the resolution in the manner and by the date as notified.

Open Gardens Canberra was approved as an incorporated association on 8 May 2015. We have already met my initial goal of opening 10 gardens in the coming season, we have a committee, an email address and we will soon have a website.

Our objects are:

1. to open gardens in the Canberra region for viewing by the public;

2. to promote the enjoyment, knowledge and benefits of gardens and gardening for all;
3. to promote garden design and ecological sustainability;
4. to promote understanding of nature and the human relationship with nature;
5. to build public support for good design and sustainability in both private and public gardens in the Canberra region; and
6. to support charitable organisations.

The optimistic art of delegating

When an association is very new, you would have to be a total optimist to think you might have people to delegate to. I am looking forward to the first list shrinking as the second list grows:

Now I am the leader, the driver, the planner, the graphic designer, the website designer, the publicity officer, the membership officer, the policy writer, the database manager, the spokesperson, the newsletter editor, the policy developer, the financial planner, the garden selector.

But I am not the database developer, the insurance advisor, the receipt writer, or the website developer.

Working with people you don't know

I have had to relearn the knack of slowing down to give people time to grasp the essential philosophy of the organisation and how everything fits together. It's difficult when I have tight deadlines to meet now!

I have also had to remember and accommodate people's individual differences in working style. Working with volunteers is a subtle act very different from working with employees.

And volunteers? Well even in the short time I've been creating Open Gardens Canberra, I've had volunteers who evaporate into thin air at the first mention of doing something concrete. And I've had volunteers who emerge like beacons from the fog!

Most gratifying of all have been the incredibly positive and re-energising messages from unknown supporters and long lost friends that I receive almost every day!

The technology that fails you

I've had disappearing emails, website logins that refuse to work and of course, brain cells that switch off when you want them to remember something! The biggest challenge was perhaps how to get my lovely green banner drawn using CAD software to magically turn into a jpeg. It wouldn't. I first had to convert it to a pdf and then use Photoshop to load the pdf!

As the last straw in technological failures, the little movies intended to enliven my presentation failed to work. My son told me I need to install vnsd'kNBNrA#[and then do eq<oLM?bt4DvF7bjpDdp?ErCSMZ followed by o9fo4NSJbV20MBKAcXC@s*1]c+u6H.

I'll try that next time.

The difficult process of finding gardens to open

Finding gardens to open is of course essential for our *raison d'être*. As a garden selector for Open Gardens Australia for 8 years, I did have a little stock of potential

gardens that I've been keeping an eye on from a distance. I cruise the streets whenever I'm in a different area to see what looks interesting.

I continue to ask friends and supporters even though very few people seem to be prepared to nominate a garden. This year I have been writing to garden owners who have opened their gardens before with Open Gardens Australia and that has put me in touch with a lot of wonderful gardeners!

I am also talking to garden designers in the region. One of our objectives is to promote good garden design and promoting professional garden designers is in keeping with that. I have also been training new garden selectors, one-on-one.

And then I'm back to begging friends and supporters, and more cruising the streets.

Gardens in the Canberra region opening in 2015-16

My presentation included photos of the 10 gardens we are opening in the coming season, and I'm sure there will be more!

To view some of these photos, go to our temporary website at <http://www.designingbush.com.au/open-gardens-canberra.html>

You can also look for us on Facebook!

Gardens opening elsewhere around Australia

Since the closure of Open Gardens Australia, two other community organisations have also been established to continue opening gardens around Australia: Open Gardens South Australia (<http://opengardensa.org.au/>) and Open Gardens Victoria (<http://www.opengardensvictoria.org.au/>).