



Evaluation of the Blooming West project 2020-21





Executive Summary:

The Blooming West project aimed to improve community connectedness, mental and social health through planting sunflowers in key locations within Rockbank and surrounding areas. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, regular social connection opportunities were disrupted as schools, sporting groups and community groups were forced to cancel face to face interactions. It was determined that a way to inject positivity and build community connection in a way that could maintain social distance if required was through planting sunflowers in key locations for viewing by residents and visitors.

Sites were initially chosen within the Rockbank township as well as promotion for households within Rockbank, Mt Atkinson, Aintree and Thornhill Park to participate with free sunflower seeds distributed through schools, Woodlea and the Rockbank Nursery.

Results of the project were mixed, with sunflowers in some sites thriving (Woodlea Town Centre, Aintree Primary, Word of Life Church, Rockbank Preschool) and other crops failing completely (Mt Atkinson Community Centre). Take-up from the broader community was minimal and there were changes to key sites due to lack of buy-in and communication from initial locations (Rockbank Train station was changed to Aintree Primary; Rockbank Primary/ CFA/ Ian Cowie Reserve was changed to Word of Life Church) which reduced the visibility of some of the sunflower displays.

Feedback for the large scale site of Woodlea town centre was extremely positive and far reaching. For Woodlea, the Blooming West project was highly successful, attracting visitors and media coverage as well as gaining positive feedback from residents. However, poor management of the promotional sites for Blooming West due to key staff changeovers meant that much of the potential momentum from this site was not fully capitalised upon to promote other sites and increase engagement for the broader project.

Overall, whilst the project has potential to grow into an annual event with a large number of sites involved and opportunity for broad engagement by both locals and visitors, the first year faced a number of challenges and learnings, and did not live up to the goals or targets set for the project which was to increase community connectedness within the Rockbank area through the planting of sunflowers in key locations and resident's homes.

Background and rationale

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 global pandemic, much of the year 2020 was spent in social isolation as with community activities that promote social connectedness were cancelled or moved online. This created numerous issues including loneliness, poorer mental health and disconnect within the community broadly. The Blooming West project was conceptualised to bring colour and connections within the community of Rockbank as a way to return positivity to people's lives after a difficult period.



The Blooming West project was led by Health Promotion at Djerriwarrh Health Services with key partners being Woodlea, We Love Aintree and Mount Atkinson Community Centre. Woodlea and Mt Atkinson both planted large fields of sunflowers for the project whilst in addition to promotion, We Love Aintree were contracted to build garden beds for key locations. Other agencies involved included Rockbank Preschool, Word of Life Church, Aintree Primary School and Rockbank Nursery.

The rationale of the program was to encourage connections through spending time outdoors and for Rockbank residents to be part of a larger project as a way to create a new experience within their local area.

Method

The initial planning phase commenced in August 2020 with key partners brought into discussions. The project was developed between August and September of 2020, where relevant groups were contacted to seek approval for locations for the sunflowers as well as promote the program concept.

Contact with some key decision makers was difficult to achieve for some sites, such as VLine, which meant that the wicking beds built by We Love Aintree that had initially been planned to be installed at the Rockbank train station were instead given to Aintree Primary School. The Sunflower beds intended for Ian Cowie Reserve were also relocated to the Word of Life Church grounds.

In terms of individual involvement, promotion of the program was done through letterbox drop (see appendix 1), monthly newsletters (appendix 2) and Facebook posts of relevant community pages. Packets of seeds were left at the Rockbank Nursery for anyone to collect free of charge, and seeds were also distributed through the Preschool and Rockbank Primary school

Rockbank Preschool participated through planting sunflowers in their garden beds and additionally in pots for students to take home. Bunnings donated the soil, pots and seeds for the children to participate (appendix 3).

Mount Atkinson Community Centre and Woodlea both planted large beds of sunflowers that would provide large spectacles in the hope of attracting large numbers of visitors. Mt Atkinson Community Centre's art group also facilitated painting workshops during the blooming period.

A website was also established utilising the free website building platform wix.com (<https://www.bloomingwest.com/>) to provide additional information on the project, how to get involved and how to grow sunflowers.

Results

Process evaluation:

Initial sites of Rockbank Train Station, Ian Cowie Reserve and Rockbank CFA were not used due to permissions, communication and timing. Instead, Sunflowers were planted at

the Word of Life Church and Aintree Primary School. These locations were not as ideal as they receive less foot traffic and therefore were less likely to be viewed by the public.

Feedback from the Rockbank Nursery found that very few people had taken packets of the free seeds. With 100 packets initially available, only 12 were taken. No follow up was established as to whether the seeds were then planted and grew.

Seeds were planted at the appropriate time of the year (November), with most participating groups successfully growing sunflowers with the exception of Mt Atkinson Community Centre due to suspected rodents. Despite this, Mt Atkinson Community Centre remained involved with the Blooming West project through their fortnightly art program.

Updates and engagement via social media, the Blooming West website and newsletters were interrupted. This was mostly due to the original Health Promotion (HP) Officer leaving her position in November 2020, and the new HP Officer not commencing until the beginning of February 2021. The lack of a project coordinator meant that further encouragement and promotional opportunities were missed over the months of the growing season.

Interviews with key stakeholders and participating groups:

Woodlea: For Woodlea, the project provided a lot of benefits. The site chosen at the town centre was strategic as the sunflowers would bloom in time for the opening of the Coles supermarket. It worked out cheaper than alternative landscaping (still approximately \$50,000 investment from Woodlea) and made use of an otherwise empty lot. Of particular benefit to Woodlea was the positive social media interactions, live media cross and blog post in [urban list](#), which they stated is very difficult for property developers to feature within. Woodlea would be keen to be involved again in future years if the project continues, would like to once again produce a large site but may run out of undeveloped space. It was also suggested that other developers in the area would be worth connecting with to see whether they would be interested to be involved.

Mt Atkinson Community Centre: The Community Centre planted a large bed of sunflowers by hand, and were very keen to utilise the sunflowers as inspiration for the Mt Atkinson Art group. Unfortunately, the seeds never germinated and it is suspected that they were eaten by mice or other wildlife (Mt Atkinson Community Centre is located amongst open paddocks currently with new developments occurring nearby which may increase the number of active rodents in the area). The Mt Atkinson Art group instead ran watercolour sessions for their art group at the Woodlea town centre and planned for a family art session to also occur but it was cancelled due to rain. If the project was to be repeated, Mt Atkinson would be interested to be involved again but would need to look at ways to avoid a repeat of their previous experience. Potentially planting in pots or building raised beds which may reduce the chance of wildlife invasions.

Rockbank Preschool: The Rockbank Preschool students each took home a sunflower in a pot donated by Bunnings. As the students had graduated from Preschool, they did not return in 2021 when the sunflowers were blooming however some parents sent through

photographs to the Preschool staff to show their children with their sunflower. Sunflowers were also planted in the garden beds of the Preschool, however these had begun to blossom over the summer break so weren't enjoyed in their full glory by the staff and students. Feedback from the Preschool was that maintenance of the sunflowers was easy, as they were basically forgotten about over the summer break and they still flowered. This is possibly due to a cooler, wetter summer than previous years.

Word of Life Church:

The sunflowers at the Word of Life Church provided a lovely site that was appreciated by congregation members. The sunflowers were left to allow the seeds to dry and be collected and the beds will now be used for vegetables to support Church activities with the opportunity to plant more sunflowers next season.

Aintree Primary School:

Media reach

With multiple Facebook pages and hashtags, the Blooming West project generated a great deal of attention online. This was supported by Woodlea town centre awarding \$20 gift vouchers to winners of an Instagram photography competition where the hashtag #woodleabloomingwest was used (see appendix 9). A breakdown of social media posts and engagement can be found in the appendices (appendix 10).

The Blooming West project gained broader Melbourne and Victorian attention through both featuring on the Melbourne with Kidz Facebook page and on the Urban List blog (appendices 7 and 8). These sites have much larger viewership and therefore exposed more people to the project. Further people also learned of Blooming West through a live cross from Melbourne's Channel 9 news.

Discussion:

The Blooming West project gathered a great deal of positive feedback and views through the Woodlea town centre, but the other locations did not gain the same viewership. With the locations not being well publicised by the agencies or the new Health Promotion officer, as well as the scale being much smaller at other sites. Benefits for the broader community from the Woodlea display was that it offered a free alternative to the commercial sunflower farm in Ballarat. Whilst visitors couldn't pick the sunflowers, they were still able to get their Instagram shots, and for families in the western suburbs it was an affordable experience rather than travelling to Ballarat to wait in line and pay money to participate. This received great feedback.

Much of the social media commentary indicated that the Blooming West project was an enjoyable experience that created excitement and spread happiness. However, the goal of the project was aimed at increasing social connection and participation within the Rockbank and surrounding communities, which was mostly unsuccessful apart from the families of the children at the Rockbank Preschool. It is possible that if the project was run again, there would be greater uptake as we can assume that there is a higher level of awareness of the



project now than before. It may also allow for some of the initial sites that were hesitant or unavailable to come on board to do so due to the initial sites having positive responses from the community and a greater amount of lead in time allowing for processes from each organisation.

Conclusion and recommendations

The aim of engaging the Rockbank community through planting sunflowers in key locations within Rockbank as well as in local resident's homes was not fully met with just two public sites within Rockbank (the Preschool and the Word of Life Church) and little evidence of whether locals planted sunflowers in their own gardens.

However, other benefits of the project were found through the increased visibility and joyful interactions within the west more broadly, with Woodlea residents and the developer being the main beneficiaries of the project.

Future opportunities for the project include utilising the publicity gained from the Woodlea site to attract other property developers such as Stockland at Mt Atkinson to be involved in the next growing season. With evidence of positive engagement and under the assumption of the Linking Rockbank project being in a position to support smaller sites within the Rockbank township with funding (part or whole), there could be potential for further engagement through the next growing season.

Appendices



Blooming West

October 2020 -
March 2021

Help grow sunflowers at home and across the local community

Contact us to get involved:

- * Keep updated about this project
- * Receive some free sunflower seeds to plant at home
- * Help to shape and prepare gardens
- * Volunteer to help with caring for sunflowers in public spaces.

✉ healthpromotion@djhs.org.au

📘 [LinkingRockbank](#)





Appendix 1: Blooming West letterbox drop



Linking Rockbank community members with one another and with the surrounding areas



Just as a sunflower turns to face the sun to capture the energy it needs to thrive, in times of hardship we need to find ways to turn to one another for strength.



Blooming West is supporting the community across the Rockbank area to design, plant, grow and harvest sunflower plots at home and within key local settings.

Sunflowers will be planted near the Woodlea Town Centre and the Mt Atkinson Community Centre.

Sites that have been confirmed or are being explored in Rockbank include:

- Ian Cowie Reserve (behind the netball court)
- Rockbank Station (opposite side to the car park)
- Rockbank CFA (in the planters out the front)
- Word of Life Rockbank (along the fence line)
- Rockbank Primary School
- Rockbank Preschool



We have 100 packets of sunflower seeds (50 giant and 50 dwarf) available for FREE to residents of Rockbank, Aintree and Mt Atkinson.

All you need to do is visit the Rockbank Nursery and show your identification that shows you live in one of these locations (such as your licence) and fill in your suburb and email address to collect your FREE preferred packet of sunflower seeds to plant and grow at home.

COMMUNITY NOTICEBOARD

Community Connector Hub

Timbertop Children's and Community Centre
Fields Street, Aintree

Help for food relief, mental health and other support. For more information contact Inderdeep on 0439 327 716

Drive Through Testing for COVID-19

A drive through testing clinic is available at Melton Health and Community Services, 195-209 Barries Rd, Melton West.

Please check Facebook for further details:
www.facebook.com/DjerriwarrHealthServices

Extra free packets of sunflower seeds

If you are part of a local group, club, business or organisation and would like to hand out FREE sunflower seeds, please let us know. We will have at least 500 packets of special Blooming West sunflower seeds to be handed out by groups. Visit www.bloomingwest.com or email healthpromotion@djhs.org.au

LOCKDOWN ART

Friendly, welcoming and relaxed art lessons for adults online.

Free



Join us each Monday morning from 10am for a FREE SESSION of Lockdown Art!

Activities so far have included: mandalas, stippling, watercolour painting, weaving, mixed media, paper quilling and acrylic painting

Please visit

www.facebook.com/HealthPromotionatDjhs to keep updated and to find the link to this FREE online activity!

Contact Michael for more information
email: mnaismith@edmundrice.org
phone: 0466 597 145

✉ Healthpromotion@djhs.org.au
 📺 [HealthPromotionatDjhs](https://www.facebook.com/HealthPromotionatDjhs)
 ☎ (03) 9361 9377





Appendix 3: Bunnings donation for Rockbank Preschool.



Appendix 4: Mt Atkinson Art Group water colour paintings



Appendix 5: Aintree Primary School Sunflowers



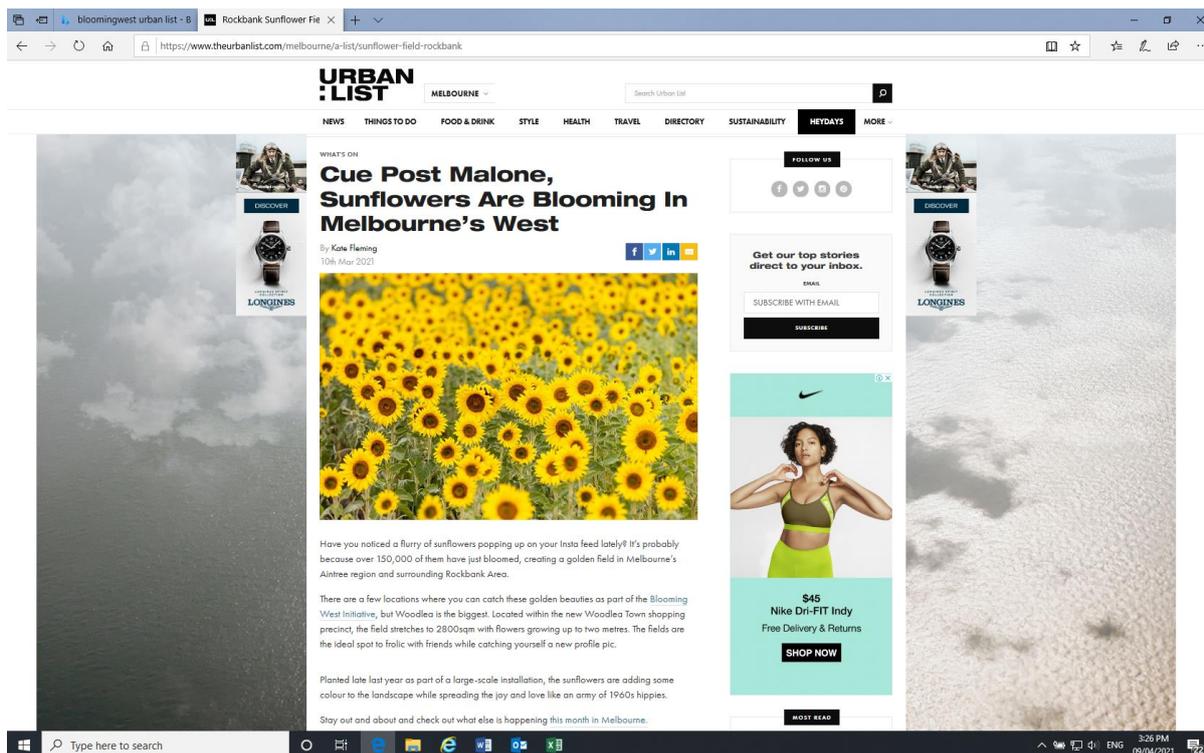
Appendix 6: Woodlea Town Centre sunflowers



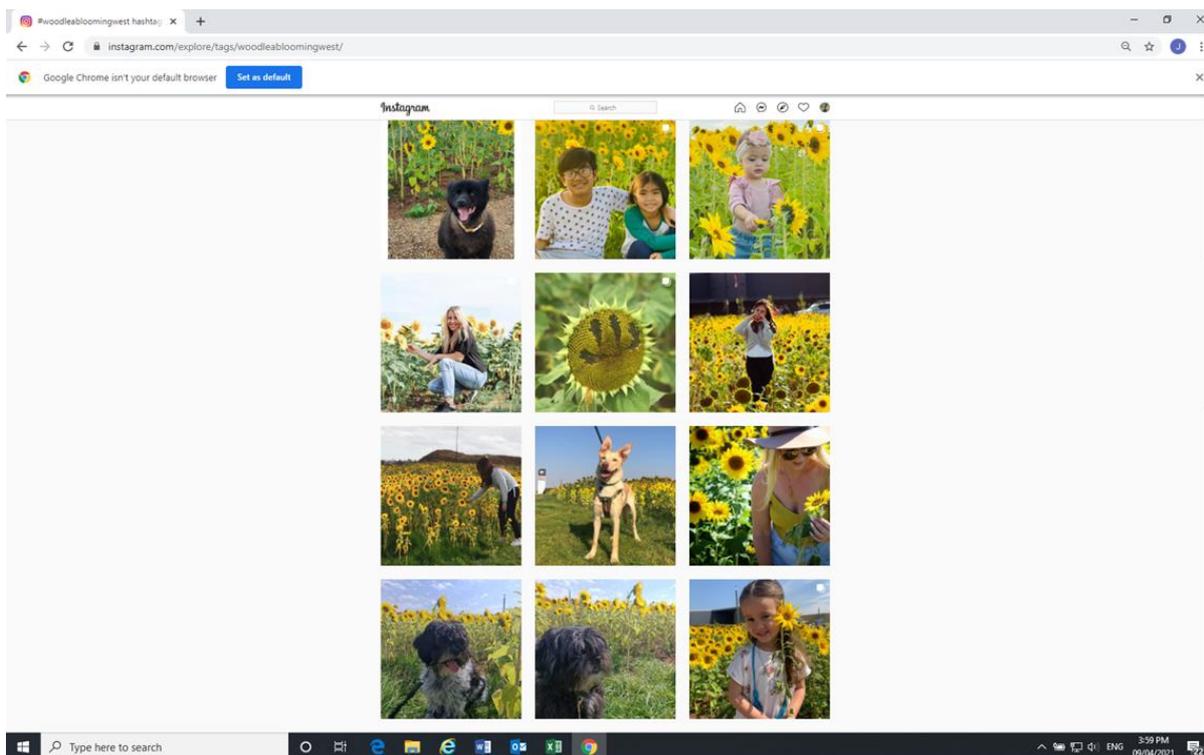
Progress shot, Woodlea town centre.



Appendix 7: Image from Melbourne with Kidz Facebook page (Location: Woodlea town centre).



Appendix 8: Urban list article, published 10th March 2021



Appendix 9: Sample of photographs with the #woodleabloomingwest tag.



Appendix 10:
Blooming West Facebook page statistics.

Topic	Post date	Reach	Engagements	Shares	Comments
	29/09/2020	183	2		
	29/09/2020	160	2		
First status	30/09/2020	268	1		
Album of potential sites	14/10/2020	224	5		The first roundabout when you enter Woodlea would look amazing with sunflowers
Confirmation of Word of Life site	09/11/2020	231	2		
Updated profile picture	09/11/2020	269	0		
Updated website address	09/11/2020	288	1		
Shared Mt Atkinson plot	18/11/2020	338	4		
Woodlea progress shot	08/02/2021	241	10		
February Linking Rockbank Newsletter	22/02/2021	261	3		
Mt Atkinson art group event	26/02/2021	286	10		
Woodlea in bloom	04/03/2021	375	45		"Perfect we can go take photos and come home", "XX I wanna go see the sunflowers"
Shared Melbourne with Kidz post	05/03/2021	353	28	3	
Mt Atkinson art group event	10/03/2021	162	2		
Linking Rockbank March newsletter	11/03/2021	174	5		
Photos of Mt Atkinson art group	16/03/2021	163	42	1	"Name tagged"
Linking Rockbank April newsletter	06/04/2021	71	2		
			164		



Woodlea Facebook posts		Likes	Shares	Comments
Blooming West has officially bloomed!	05/03/2021	86	11	53
Mt Atkinson Art Group event	08/03/2021	2		5
Check them out	13/03/2021	29	1	4
Have you been?	18/03/2021	5	1	
Take them home	22/03/2021	35	2	27

Hashtags:

#woodleabloomingwest

Facebook 22 posts
 Instagram 134 posts

Most liked post from @keep.calm.and.mommy.on had 4806 likes and 928 comments

#Bloomingwest

Facebook 15 posts
 Instagram 20 posts

Most liked post from @isheabear with 261 likes and 10 comments