

# Hawthorn eradication - an Aranda Bushland story

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Sometimes diligent weed control is all that's needed to take a Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and Briar (*Rosa rubiginosa*) thicket back to diverse Box Gum Woodland. This story celebrates twenty years of dedicated parkcare focused on weed control without recourse to planting. It tells how Friends of Aranda Bushland demolished a 300 x 100 m Hawthorn thicket in 1992, continued intensive action for three years, then three yearly Hawthorn hunts, blitzes of subsequent weeds and a project to tackle Hawthorns in the adjoining rural lease slowly to ensure natural regeneration of wildlife habitat.

## Hawthorn patch project

Friends of Aranda Bushland started in September 1990 when cattle appeared in the eucalypt forest behind homes in Aranda, a Canberra suburb next to Black Mountain Reserve. Apparently, the Bindubi Street wooded slopes were rural lease rather than Aranda Bushland Reserve. Parkcare was then a new Landcare initiative in the ACT and well supported by Parks & Conservation Service. Our inaugural convenor, Merilyn Evans set high conservation and rehabilitation aims so we followed the Bradley philosophy of working from the best and weeding rather than planting. We started by removing Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster glaucophyllus*), Pyracantha (*Pyracantha* sp.) and Pampas Grass (*Cortaderia* sp.) to give natural regeneration a chance.

By January 1992, our lobbying had helped double the size of the reserve taking in all of the wooded slopes. However, the new part was much weedier with great tangles of Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and Briar Rose (*Rosa rubiginosa*) on the lowest slopes. These were the plants of the early settlers. Our first foray into the new site was April that year in the triangle east of the Hawthorn thicket - the least weedy patch. There are great pictures of Briar tangles, the head ranger, Tony Brownlie with his trusty chainsaw and his Anzac Day workparty. The Gang Gangs were so drunk on Hawthorn berries that they would not move and it felt cruel to be removing their tucker.

No one believed we would conquer the 300 m<sup>2</sup> Hawthorn thicket, but Pam and Colin Macdonald led the first attacks in November when it was in full flower. It was all cut and dab with pink poison (government issue Roundup/Zero with beetroot colour). Colin produced the crosscut saw

for the big ones when there were no chain sawing rangers available. Perhaps we were not true Bradley. However, we continued enthusiastic work parties until we had demolished all hawthorn and briar rose infestations within eight months.

It was great fun and I still rate challenging Hawthorns above planting trees. Our large working parties exposed magnificent Apple Box (*Eucalyptus bridgesiana*) and Candlebark (*E. rubida*) on the flat with Broad-leaved Peppermint (*E. dives*) at the forest edge. Brightly flowering *Hibbertia* spp. still flourish as does the *Microlaena* grass.

In hindsight, I can see that this success bred confidence. Once our patch was 90% free of woody weeds, we realised how special it was and embarked on an ambitious project to document its diverse flora, map the area, create herbarium specimens and publish a field guide. We lobbied to protect our bushland against high impact recreation, obtained heritage listing for Aranda Snow Gums and National Heritage Trust (NHT) funded signage for our self-guided *Frost Hollow to Forest Walk*.

There were downsides in demolishing so much at once. We lost bird cover and created a fire hazard as debris was not removed quickly. We missed some woody weeds and they reshooted and more came up. We faced issues of subsequent weeds, long term seedbanks and neighbouring infestation and thus decided to move slowly to allow for habitat recovery.

## Diligent weed control

Followup from 1993 to 1996 included tackling Honeysuckle, Thistles, White Violets, Sticky Weed (Crowsfoot), an experimental burn (that didn't help), utilising conservation volunteer and 'naughty boy' teams as well as many parkcare work parties targeting seedling Hawthorns and reshooting Briar. One can never catch the Briar on the first go. The debris was removed at last in a joint work party with parkcare, rangers and community workers in June 1996. After that the old Hawthorn patch was looking good – dedicated individuals and work parties kept it so. My photos show the value of intensive follow up for the first three years then Hawthorn/Briar hunts every three years. Our May 2012 work party took out scattered knee high Hawthorns and Thistles.



(left) This is indeed a woody weed – second attack on thicket 14 Nov 1992. (right) Seven years later – eucalypt regeneration, Pam Macdonald, Bill Packard and our field guide. Photos: Jean Geue

An unexpected subsequent weed cropped up when *Phalaris aquatica* (that had just been along the creek) flourished after the old Hawthorn patch was waterlogged in the wet winter of August 1998. We discouraged *Phalaris* with ‘bringing in the hay’ work parties in August 2005 and May 2006. The drought helped, but *Phalaris* flourished again when the rains came in 2010-12.

#### Rural lease work parties

Tackling sources of weeds on the adjoining Glenloch rural lease started with a Weedbusters Week event in October 1998 as the six years since the initial project had allowed habitat regeneration. During our negotiations in 2000 for a public corridor through the rural lease for our interpretative walk, we committed to an annual well-advertised parkcare work party. Our June 2012 work party should see the end of the chainsaw size hawthorns. We continue to watch and hunt subsequent weeds and trust, one day, the adjoining rural lease paddocks with their high conservation value Box-Gum Woodland will be taken into reserve.

#### Control techniques

Friends of Aranda Bushland’s weed control techniques have concentrated on cut and dab with big loppers and handsaws. We prefer to dig and remove the bulk first. Contract spraying of Hawthorns and Briar in the early days was not effective as we had to come back later. We advertise digging without poison so kids and their parents can contribute. Occasionally, chainsawing rangers are able to help. Our Hawthorn hunt work parties call ‘to seek and destroy knee high Hawthorns’. Thistles continue to rear their nasty heads but are easy to chop out or poison when small. Unfortunately, it is much harder to sell follow up

weeding than to sell planting parties. Weeding results can be amazing, but they take time and long term commitment.

In the early years we used Roundup/Zero in spray bottles but adopted the more precise Zero wands with great enthusiasm in the early 2000s. By 2010, we had access to parkcare ChemCert training for broadleaf spraying of Brushhoff and Starane which made us more effective. We can often respond in a more timely fashion than government contractors. In the same year, Colin (who is no longer fit enough to use a crosscut saw) used his digital camera, GPS, Google maps and email to alert younger parkcarers to hit isolated Hawthorns and other woody weeds.

#### What we learnt

What we learnt was that diverse natural regeneration is possible without planting if remnant bushland is nearby and a native seedbank still exists. Removing challenging Hawthorns is fun but, if done too quickly, reduces habitat. Debris provides habitat, leaky weirs and protection of regeneration from grazing – pity we did not know that earlier. Persistent long term follow up is critical and the weed seedbank must be managed. Parkcare convenors need a break to avoid burnout. Delicious morning teas build teams and it’s great to be out in the bush.

Parkcarers can make a difference.

#### Find out more

[www.FriendsOfArandaBushland.org.au](http://www.FriendsOfArandaBushland.org.au)

Friends of the Aranda Bushland (2007). *Our Patch; field guide to the flora of the Australian Capital Region*. 2nd ed. Friends of Aranda Bushland, Canberra.