

Darwin City Council

50 years
2007

From market plot to gorgeous garden

**This week
we look at
Darwin's
George
Brown
Botanic
Gardens as
part of a
series of
weekly
columns
depicting
the people,
places and
projects
from our first
50 years.**

The Darwin Botanic Gardens were established on their present site in June 1886.

At that time, the town of Darwin was 16 years old and the establishment of the gardens was the third attempt to select a site suitable to grow plants that would provide an economic benefit.

The area where the gardens are today was once very swampy.

The site was chosen after several Chinese gardeners had achieved success with crops in the area.

The emphasis then was on economic gardening.

The ornamental plantings which are a feature of the gardens today, came much later in the 1900s.

For the first 30 years, the gardens thrived under curator Maurice Holtze and then son Nicholas.

For many years, labour was supplied by prisoners, mainly Aboriginal, with occasional Europeans and Chinese.

As well as market gardening, over the years the area has been used for experimental crop farming, cattle grazing and as a garbage dump.

During World War II, the gardens were used for military purposes and contained an anti-aircraft battery.

By 1944, the gardens were in total disrepair. Curator Jack Agostini, who worked at the gardens before the war, had the unenviable task of restoration.

His efforts were successful so much so that when the gardens came under the control of Darwin City Council in 1957, they were described as the city's most attractive feature.

Severe tropical storms and cyclones in 1897, 1937 and Tracy in 1974 have wreaked havoc in the gardens.

After Cyclone Tracy, Darwin Botanic Gardens lost 89 per cent of its trees, the fern house, nursery and the original Holtze Cottage.

After "Tracy" the opportunity was taken to begin a program of establishing collections of

plant families, particularly of fig and palm varieties.

It was very successful and by 1979 the gardens had 20 per cent more plants than before the cyclone.

Much of the restoration work after Cyclone Tracy was carried out by George Brown, under the management of Darwin City Council.

After arriving in the Northern Territory on a golfing holiday in the late 1960s, George decided that this part of the world was where his future lay.

Brown started work for Council in 1969 as a foreman at the Botanic Gardens and was appointed Curator in 1971.

He remained Curator until the gardens came under control of the Parks Northern Territory Government in 1990.

In 1992 George Brown was elected as Lord Mayor of Darwin in a landslide victory.

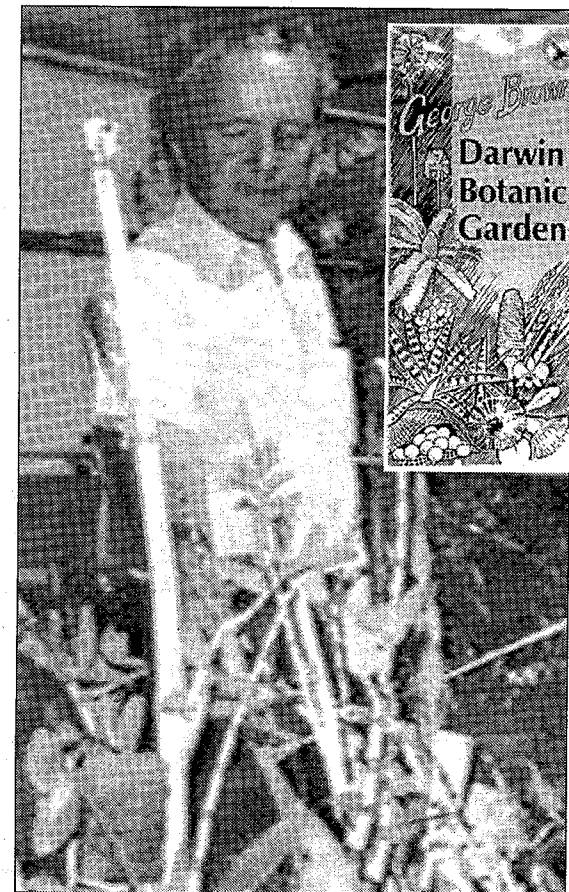
He remained Lord Mayor up until his death in January 2002.

Right up until this time, George continued to walk through his beloved gardens nearly every day.

In recognition of George Brown's contribution and 32 years service to the development of Darwin and the gardens, the Northern Territory Government changed the name of the "Darwin Botanic Gardens" to "George Brown Darwin Botanic Gardens" in 2002.

Today the gardens contain a varied collection of some 800 individual Australian and exotic cycads; 450 species of palm; eight species of Baobab tree; a plant display house and a remarkable collection of tropical gingers and heliconias.

They are an important part of Darwin for locals and tourists alike and are used for picnics, barbecues, weddings as well as community events such as the Darwin Festival, Teddy Bears' Picnic and Tropical Garden Spectacular.



George Brown in the Botanic Garden's orchid house in 1976 - pic courtesy NT Library

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