Visit to Merici College

Our cover story

Photos and story: Walter Steensby

On Tuesday, 18 June COGS members and people from other organisations including Fusion Australia, the University of Canberra, and the UC Kaleen High School, were treated to a tour of Merici College’s Sustainability Program facilities.

Merici College is a private Catholic girls’ high school located in the Canberra suburb of Braddon. It covers years 7 to 12.

The College has a strong policy towards achieving sustainability. In 2012 it won the ACT Sustainable Cities Award for its kitchen garden program as one outcome of deciding in 2009 to take over running its own school canteen to provide healthier eating for the students and the staff. To quote extensively from the College’s website, the key aims of the Healthy Canteen Project are to:

- provide affordable healthy food
- enable vocational students to get industry experience while studying
- encourage girls to sit and eat in a social environment
- reduce the amount of processed and packaged foods and drinks consumed by students

- enable the college to take positive steps towards sustainable practices to reduce, reuse and recycle.

This project has led on to further sustainability initiatives such as a vegetable garden, an elective in sustainability, and ways to reduce waste in the school.

[For more complete information visit www.merici.act.edu.au/node/86]

We were met by the Acting Principal, Dr Ann Cleary, the Bursar, Keith Vardenega, and Science Teacher, Fiona Buining. Our first stop was the canteen where the manager, Virginia McLeod, gave us a talk on the history and progress of the canteen project.

In particular we learned that the behaviour of the girls changed after the new canteen started operating: instead of congregating in small and socially isolated cliques in the open quadrangle, they now tend to mix freely within the canteen, treat each other more as friends than strangers, and positively enjoy the now-healthier...
diet of school-grown, school-prepared food.

Next we were shown a near-new extensively automated glasshouse to gladden the heart of any gardener.

It has an enormous heated sprouting tray; it can automatically open or close roof panels and can extend or retract an overhead horizontal reflective curtain to reflect excessive sunlight. A splendid asset indeed!

For the COGS members at least, the beautifully built vegetable garden was the highlight of the tour. The garden was opened in May 2011 by Costa Georgiadis, the well-known compère of the ABC’s Gardening Australia TV program. It was built on a disused netball court by the College’s Maintenance Team, with about 20 large raised beds, plenty of maneuvering space between and around the beds, a good solid chain link fence and, most usefully, chicken wire netting over the entire area. Not only does this keep possums out, it reportedly excludes white cabbage moths even though the mesh size seems too big. The vertical parts of the fence have been painted black and this simple treatment makes the fence hard to see from a distance. How nice it would be to re-fence some or all of our COGS gardens the same way, although I hesitate to think what the cost might be! One day ...

Here some of the students gave us a talk on what they were growing and how they were getting along with it. To judge by the brassicas and lettuces and onions in the various open beds and under the polytunnels, they are doing quite well indeed. So are the chickens whose run is within the safety of the fenced-off garden. A former COGS President, David Odell, gave a chook lesson to two attentive and interested young students, showing them how to hold a chicken so that it tries not to escape—take its legs between your fingers and tuck its head under your elbow—, where to palpitate its nether regions to check for eggs—hard to describe in a few words but it works—, and how to treat scaly leg mites—a solution of potassium permanganate (Condy’s crystals) painted no higher than the knees. It was good to see this dialogue, however brief, between a long-experienced organic grower and the up-and-coming generation. It would be good to see even more of it.

The last part of our visit consisted of lunch served in the restaurant part of the canteen building. Thirty-odd diners agreed that the meal was delicious and well-presented. The vegetables came straight out of the garden and they, the viands and dessert were all prepared in the magnificent kitchen. This is a real, fully-equipped kitchen with a multi-million-dollar investment in equipment intended to give the girls training and work experience in this aspect of the hospitality industry.

The number of skills that can be learned from the ‘simple’ growing, preparation and serving of food is quite remarkable: soil preparation, species selection, garden design, cultivation techniques, water management, recycling, composting, tool selection and handling, biodiversity and outdoor exercise to name a few. When you add the skills involved in preparing and serving food, the list becomes long indeed. Food hygiene
alone is an entire topic area in its own right.

Our visit to Merici College has reinforced my feelings that something very positive is happening in Canberra right now. I think the public are becoming aware of the challenges posed by peaks of a variety of important resources, and they are moving to do something about it.

The growing interest in urban agriculture reflects a growing interest in public and personal health which, one hopes, will feed into making sustainability an integral part of our public and private lives.

I would like to continue building upon the foundation laid on this visit. If nothing else, the broader ACT community needs to become aware and supportive of what is being done at Merici College—and elsewhere, for this is not the only such program in Canberra. So, as a start we propose to invite some of the Merici sustainability students to make a presentation at a future COGS general meeting. They need and deserve to know that the people of Canberra are behind them and appreciate their efforts.

Another good way to continue the building is via COGS' membership of Urban Agriculture Australia (UAA), the fairly new peak body coordinating collaboration between 12 community-based urban food farming and other environmental groups in and near the ACT. [For the complete list visit www.canberractyfarm.wikispaces.com/urban+agriculture+Australia]

While none of these includes Merici College or other academic institutions, UAA will provide a forum which can expand to include more participants.

With urban agriculture on its way to becoming an entirely new category of statutory land use in the ACT, these are exciting and interesting times for both COGS and like-minded organisations.