

# The business of beekeeping while healing Country

## Case Study

### garinga djimbayang

Lee James is a proud Yorta Yorta man who manages the Starritt Road Farm in Mooroopna

The 40-acre farm is owned by the Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative. Lee, along with local workers, has been working to regenerate the land with a focus on planting local species, harvesting wildflowers and botanicals, and keeping bees to produce honey.

## New skills and ancient traditions

*"When we first started, the farm had been dormant for ten years, so we spent most of six months just cleaning it up." Lee says. "At the moment we have 38 different varieties of plants that are native to the local area."*

Four years in, setting up the new venture has been an exciting and challenging learning curve for Lee and his small team. Together, they've each undertaken a Certificate III in Horticulture, learning about soil,

plant identification and propagation, along with the intricacies of beekeeping and honey production.

Harnessing technology is also part of the plan for the farm, and the team has undertaken training in automated irrigation systems and solar pumps with Swinburne University of Technology. They've also completed a drone course with the view to potentially use the technology in the future to check the hives.

## Growing the bees and growing futures

Under Lee's management, the farm is starting to produce honey, harvest native wildflowers and establish a nursery. Starting with 14 beehives in 2022, Lee is hoping to add *"another 30 hives to the property and another 70 out on other paddocks."* In the shed, they are busy building the hives themselves. Biosecurity training and management has also been key, as pests like varroa mite and wax moths pose a significant risk to the wider Victorian beekeeping sector.

Propagated local species such as river red gums, golden wattle, gold dust wattles and saltbush will be planted to help regenerate the farm's biodiversity, provide nectar for the growing bee population and, in time, be sold on to local gardeners and landowners. *"With our native and local species, we are slowly bringing them back. We're in the process of growing what was local,"* Lee says.

## Working on Country and reconnecting to culture

Rumbalara has traditional history dating back thousands of years. After the Cummeragunja Walk-Off in 1939, this name came to define the river flats







along the Goulburn River between Shepparton and Mooroopna. In Yorta Yorta language, the river has several names including *Gaiyila* – Father of Waters.

The Rumbalara Co-op was established in 1980 to be a place of gathering and connection for locals. Today the Co-op provides community-controlled, whole of life services that support, honour and respect First Nations people. Starritt Road Farm is just one way Rumbalara is helping build sustainable local employment and engage the community in meaningful work opportunities.

### **Bringing skills and experience to a new role, with a focus on agriculture**

Lee hasn't always worked on the land. He first joined Rumbalara around 10 years ago as a mentor which led to time spent as a case worker in family violence support. Around 5 years ago, Lee changed roles to become a maintenance worker for the Co-op's aged care and disability facility. When Rumbalara was preparing to launch the farm project, Lee's practical skills, local knowledge and mentoring skills landed him the role of Farm Manager.

### **Feeding the community**

Lee also has plans to establish a community vegetable garden to provide fresh produce to Rumbalara's aged care facility and other people in the community. "Hopefully, we can look into bush tucker and traditional plants, like lemon myrtle, wattleseed and all that."

*"I'm hoping, when our vegetable garden is up and running, we will have our local mob out here working beside us, learning with us and us learning with them."*

### **A pilot and partnership**

The Rumbalara Farm project is part of a pilot program of Follow the Flowers, a major initiative of Outback Academy Australia. The Academy is a not-for-profit, majority Aboriginal-led organisation, driving innovative approaches to accelerating economic freedom, employment and wellbeing for Indigenous Australians.

'Follow the Flowers' was established with the aim of helping farmers return Country and communities to health, while building self-determined, locally owned agricultural and horticultural businesses. And that's what Lee is doing at Starritt Farm.

**"What I've heard about my family, back in the day they were good farmers, you know. They didn't have the machinery we've got now, and they did it hard, but they also had good processes, good crops and all. We can learn more from the experience of Traditional Owners and our Elders."**

For more about Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative, visit [rumbalara.org.au](https://rumbalara.org.au)

For more about First Nations peoples' connection to agriculture, visit [agriculture.vic.gov.au/garinga-djimbayang](https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/garinga-djimbayang)