

Cultivating skills in a native nursery

Case Study garinga djimbayang

Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Co-operative CEO, Chris Sheppard is growing community and careers from the ground up.

Chris Sheppard is a proud Gundidjmara man living and working on Gundidjmara Country. The achievements of Worn Gundidj have been an amazing journey, he says "It's changed so many lives over the years – mine included. I want to create as much change for mob as I can."

An Indigenous owned and led enterprise offering opportunities to community

Worn Gundidj is an Indigenous-owned and operated co-operative based in Warrnambool. It offers a range of services and opportunities to Indigenous and non-Indigenous community through their nursery, bush foods business and cultural tourism at the Tower Hill Wildlife Reserve (Parks Victoria). Worn Gundidj also

facilitates access to training pathways to improve the skills base of individuals and to help with future employment pathways.

Chris's journey from baker to grower

As CEO, Chris works across all areas of the Worn Gundidj business and is 'hands-on' at the nursery every day.

When he first came to Worn Gundidj, he couldn't have dreamed that one day he'd be the boss. *"I didn't grow up with culture or my First Nations family. So that's been part of the journey. I was a little bit lost,"* he says.

After an earlier career working as a baker and pastry chef, Chris started at the Co-op as a nursery worker, washing out plant pots. He felt immediately at home with the people and the plants. He remembers the nursery as a *"really safe and enjoyable environment. I got to meet lots of mob, and sort of reconnect to my family and start learning a little bit about my culture as I went. It's all been a big learning curve."*

Through the years, Chris gained experience across all areas of the nursery, including plant identification, seed collection and propagation, landscaping, bush regeneration, soil health and bushfoods. Chris's own experience in switching jobs and needing to retrain with new knowledge and skills continues to shape how Chris provides training and upskilling opportunities for his team.

Connecting to Country

The Worn Gundidj Nursery specialises in native plants and supplies both wholesale and retail customers.





"We try to stick to our native provenance. So, plants from and for the area," Chris explains. "We're big on revegetation. A lot of these plants will help bring back our native wildlife – our birds, butterflies, possums – and our soils in an area where farming was a heavy industry."

Chris says the team takes great pride in caring for Country, as their plants are sold for regional revegetation projects, to landscapers and councils or to farmers. Farmers use native plants to provide shade and wind protection for livestock, slow wind speeds across pastures and crops, and mitigate erosion. The nursery is also a favourite of Warrnambool locals looking for local and bush food plants. The team was contracted by the local council to complete a revegetation project around the entrance to the popular Tower Hill Wildlife Reserve.

An early innovator in bushfoods

A few years back, Chris guided Worn Gundidj's move into bushfoods. It now offers a successful range of packaged products that bring unique Australian flavours to cooking and are also used in soaps and candles. The range includes powders made from plants such as anise, cinnamon and lemon myrtles,

wattleseed, peppermint gum, mountain pepper, and native limes.

Building partnerships is a big focus: Chris teamed up with Timboon Fine Ice Cream to develop a wattleseed ice cream, and he is currently working with a local commercial bakery, Chitticks, to develop a range of pies featuring native ingredients. Chris has hopes of seeing these products in supermarkets across the country in the future.

Stepping stones to opportunity

Chris is passionate about training, building capacity and providing mentoring and guidance, particularly for young people. Worn Gundidj offers formal training as well as non-accredited training and placement hours for local TAFE students and volunteers. Many of the staff pursue horticulture certificates that are an effective way to complement on the job training. Chris's advice to young mob is proactive and welcoming.

"Turn up. Work as part of a team, learn a bit about bush foods, your culture and language while you're there. Then when you know, you can find your journey. It's a great start for young mob that want to get into the Ranger program or work on Country with Traditional Owners."

For more about Worn Gundidj, visit worn Gundidj.org.au

For more about First Nations peoples' connection to agriculture, visit agriculture.vic.gov.au/garinga-djimbayang

