SYNERGY

NO-SPRAY GREENING

Graffiti removal costs Blacktown $350,000 each year – but that's changing for the better.

What follows, makes so much sense it will become best practice. It's a problem solver. A budget saver. And it's such a brilliant way to refresh abused public open spaces, people actually go out of their way to comment on it.

Vince Cusumano is currently Senior Coordinator Park, Policy, Trees & Natural Areas for Blacktown in Greater Sydney. He made the move roughly three years ago, deliberately stepping into Blacktown's unique mix of challenges and opportunities. "In an area of roughly 240 square kilometres, we have a high proportion of socially disadvantaged residents. We also have opportunities to influence future open spaces through new development." It's a great situation for anyone who wants to be actively making a difference to the quality of community outdoor space. Vince's portfolio of works is broad: but we're interested in one particular aspect - the Blacktown approach to managing graffiti.

Anyone with responsibility for public open space deals with graffiti – it comes with the territory. Location, setting and frequency will differ, but the fact that it appears means it must be addressed. Responses to graffiti vary, usually depending on budgets and local community expectations. In Blacktown during the 2014/15 financial year, five dedicated full time staff cleaned 23,000 square metres of the stuff. Clearly it would be good if there was some way to lighten this work-load, freeing up resources for positive gains elsewhere rather than trying to keep on top of the ongoing cycle of visual litter.

Not that Blacktown's graffiti response relies solely on a mopping-up approach: its 2012 Graffiti Management Plan established a systematic framework for action. Within that framework, Blacktown enlisted support for the police by encouraging the community to log tags as they happened on the Australian Graffiti Register.

This graffiti buffeted fence is where the green buffer idea was born, and where the trial took place.

Top: At planting, this is how the fence looked and (above) by four months, there was enough cover to deter taggers.

They also boosted their removal capacity by setting up graffiti removal team partnerships, where offenders from Probation and Parole and Juvenile Justice remove graffiti throughout the City. Overall the Plan works to keep things in check; but the big difference came thanks to a 'light bulb' moment. "It was before my time, but as I understand it, two key Blacktown graffiti team members - Rick Weisel from graffiti management and Matthew Adamcewicz, tree management - were standing in a reserve looking at the graffitied fences backing onto the park, and they wondered if planting out the fenceline would act as a deterrent."

Flushcombe Road was the trial site and (spoiler alert) it was a huge success. The reserve's mowed turf ran right up to the rear paling fences of the private properties backing onto the public space. With clear access for graffitists, this surface was being frequently vandalised.

Top: Here's a classic example of exposure that was being managed simply by constant cleaning. Above: The Viburnum planted over an equivalent property has removed the need to clean.

To try to break the cycle, one of the graffiti removal partners - Boystown Blacktown – prepared* the beds running along the fenceline, and planted the 25 litre Prostanthera (Mintbush) at one metre intervals. They followed this with mulching and establishment maintenance so that only five months later, the fences were screened by the growth and the graffiti had slowed.

Proving the green screen approach worked was a win. But could it be a cost-effective and sustainable option long term? The answer, happily is yes. Re sustainability, establishment has been good and vandalism rates low. Species are selected for the longer term so while it's early days yet, the plantings are going in, staying in and thriving. As for cost, graffiti removal costs Blacktown around $350,000 each year. Since every metre that's planted out is highly likely to become graffiti-free, the budget for rolling out green screens went from $100,000 after the trial to $250,000 a year later.

Blacktown's particular set up - it has its own production nursery as well as those Probation and Parole partnerships - means that, at Vince's estimate, it costs $140 to establish a metre of linear green in the first twelve months. Ongoing maintenance from that point on is minimal, mostly involving litter pick-up which is managed by the Probation and Parole teams.

Not surprisingly, Blacktown is keen to cover as many more vulnerable surfaces as possible in greenery, not only to make the visual environment so much better, but – let's be honest - to save money. Armed with that annual budget of $250,000 the question Vince and the team now face is to decide what to tackle and where. "So far we've treated five kilometres, and we estimate that there are 38 kilometres of road in Blacktown where a four lane road sits at the back fence, or where there are sound barriers that need protecting." What's gratifying is that people are noticing and making a point of letting the team know their work is appreciated.

Anyone who'd like to know more is welcome to contact Vince via email, vince.cusumano@blacktown.nsw.gov.au

*the soil was amended with TerraCottem

Blacktown's production nursery (soon to be upsized) is part of the solution – propagating or growing on stock scheduled for use in the program.

Kilometres of vulnerable roadway frontage is being progressively protected.

THE TC ADVANTAGE

TC Advantage is a package deal. It's about supplying TerraCottem (more about that in a minute), along with all the training, technical specification and compliance needed to turn a tricky project into a genuine long-term success. So when anyone has a turf, street tree, revegetation or whatever project to tackle, bringing in the TC Advantage expertise means you get: advice on which TerraCottem product to specify; training so that it's applied for maximum benefit; and monitoring to ensure compliance within the project's specs.

As for TerraCottem, it's a brilliant soil conditioning treatment because it works on various fronts at the same time...

To start with, it uses two main mechanisms to encourage substantial root development – polymers and root growth precursors. The polymers are a little like water-holding crystals except that TerraCottem's hydroabsorbent polymers have been carefully selected and well researched. This means that instead of just one polymer with a narrow water-holding and water-releasing ability, there is a group of them providing the same function over a wide range, for years. To put it crudely, more water can be stored and released under a broader variety of conditions. (To put it precisely for specification purposes: TerraCottem has an absorption capacity of a minimum of 4500 g H2O/100 g in distilled water using Method of Analysis CEN EN 13041, with a minimum of 90% of the water contained in the polymers being plant available.)

As for the root growth precursors, by definition a precursor is a chemical compound which leads to another. The precursors found in TerraCottem do exactly this, and for a very good reason. If you put growth hormones into soil, they rapidly biodegrade. But if you put precursors into the root zone, the plants get a kick-start by synthesising their own growth hormones. And this conducive environment – for optimum cell division and elongation – stays like this for 12 months.

Then there is a nicely varied collection of plant nutrients – soluble mineral fertilisers, in a format suited to the early growth phase of a plant; slow-release fertilisers, designed to offer a constant source of food over many months; and synthesised organic fertilisers which focus on the soil, stimulating microbiological activity and general soil health.

Add this all together and the result is fast and furious root establishment. This means greater accessibility to water, fewer losses, and, given the reciprocal dynamic between roots and canopy, noticeably vigorous growth. In the longer term, the soil conditioning power of TerraCottem means that plantings are buffered from stress. It's great stuff.

TERRACOTTEM®

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