Project Cultivate

Recreating a flourishing native grassland in Melbourne General Cemetey

Tree planting at MGC

Project Cultivate aims to improve the landscapes of our cemeteries in a positive way. With a quarter of a million indigenous grassland plants now established at Melbourne General Cemetery (MGC), things are going well. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. But one common question we get asked is why we aren't planting more trees. The short answer - we would if we could!

The challenges of tree planting

MGC is home to over 1,100 trees, some of which are remnant or even heritage-listed. We explore every opportunity to add more but this isn't as easy as finding a "bare" spot and planting a tree. An optimal planting site for a tree takes a number of things into consideration, both above and below ground. Cemeteries can present a number of unique challenges in that respect.

Space for uninhibited root growth

To grow healthy, uninhibited roots, trees need a certain type and amount of space in terms of:

- Volume below the ground
- Surface area and shape of surface area
- Sufficient space from adjacent infrastructure

Without adequate space for uninhibited tree root growth, trees can damage surrounding infrastructure like walls, monuments, paths, roads and buildings. Trees without adequate space for root growth also require more maintenance and die earlier.

Ideal soil conditions

Growing a thriving, healthy tall tree requires uncompacted soil, open soil area and significant "available" soil volume. This is unfortunately lacking in many areas of MGC. To grow a 10m tall, 6m wide, dense canopied tree, we would need at least 8.3m^3 of uninhibited soil volume for healthy root growth - the size of a large Asian elephant! That's a lot of soil and hard to find in many cemetery sites. Trees also need good access to sunlight and water throughout their lifespan.

New trees at MGC, with more to come

Planting trees in cemeteries is a challenge, but it doesn't mean it's not happening at all. Over the last 24 months, over 100 new trees have been installed at MGC, with more opportunities identified. Trees are selected for lifespan, ability to cope with climatic changes, size (above and below ground), environmental benefits and whether they "fit" with the history and heritage of the site.

What did the natural environment of MGC look like?

Prior to European contact, the area now occupied by MGC would have been classified as a Plains Grassy Woodland, described as an open environment with few trees, sparse shrubs and a species-rich ground layer, dominated by grasses, herbs and wildflowers.

The canopy coverage from the scattered Eucalypt trees within this landscape would have been between 10% to 15%. The current canopy coverage at MGC is between 12% to 15%, and through Project Cultivate, the grasslands are flourishing, in balance with and in honour of what once was.

SMCT acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land on which Melbourne General Cemetery is located and pays respect to their Elders past, present and emerging.

SOUTHERN METROPOLITAN CEMETERIES TRUST

Project Cultivate

The realities of tree planting

Without adequate space,

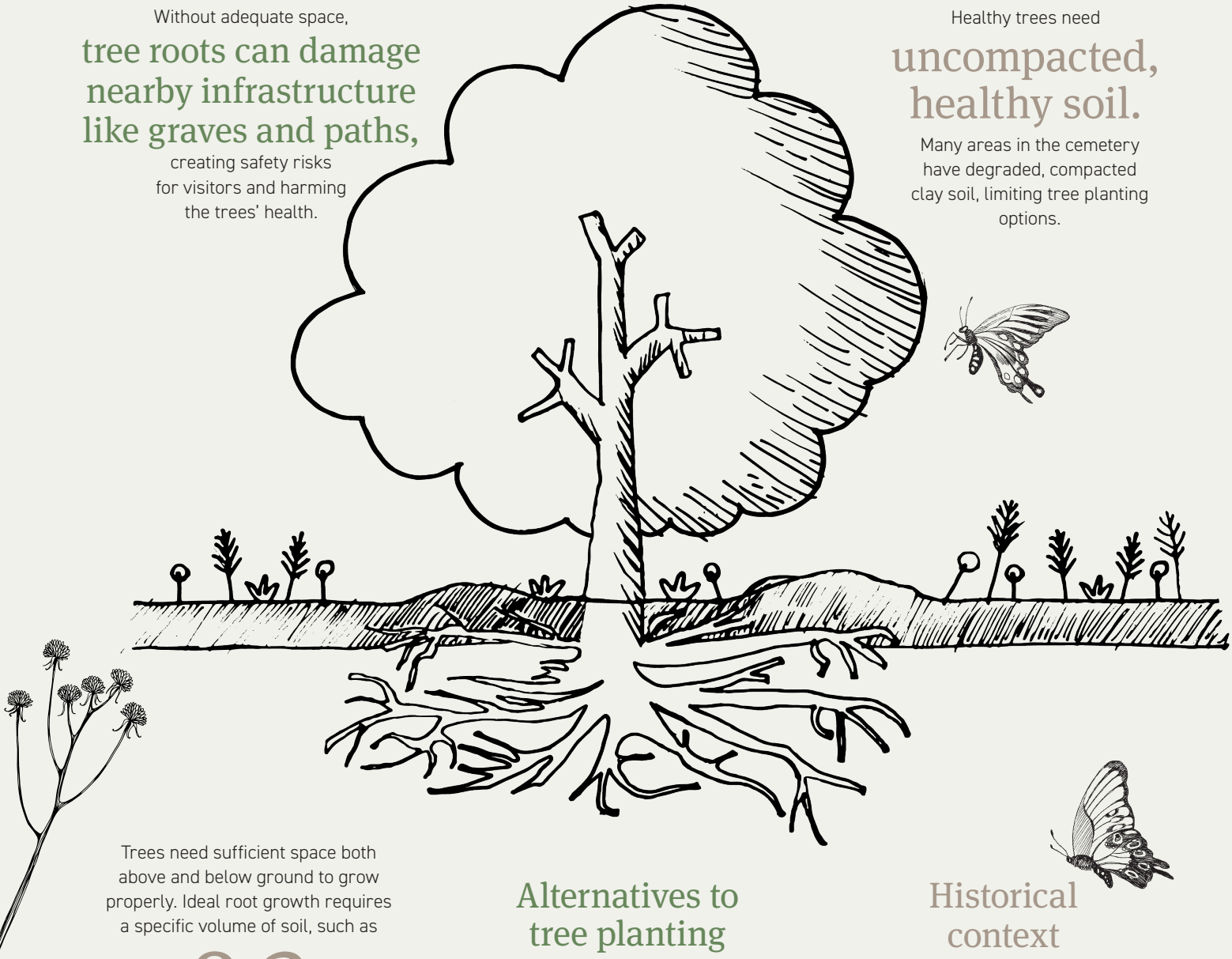
tree roots can damage nearby infrastructure like graves and paths,

creating safety risks for visitors and harming the trees' health.

Healthy trees need

uncompacted, healthy soil.

Many areas in the cemetery have degraded, compacted clay soil, limiting tree planting options.



Trees need sufficient space both above and below ground to grow properly. Ideal root growth requires a specific volume of soil, such as

8.3

cubic metres for a 10-metre tall tree.

Alternatives to tree planting

By focusing on indigenous grassland revegetation, Project Cultivate helps mantain the cemetery's natural balance without the risks to infrastructure posed by large tree roots.

Historical context

The cemetery's original ecosystem was an open plains grassy woodland with low canopy coverage, making native grassland plants a more fitting choice for sustainable revegetation.

For more information about Project Cultivate, please visit our website at **smct.org.au/cultivate**

SOUTHERN METROPOLITAN CEMETERIES TRUST