

# BLAZING a trail

Horticulturist and environmentalist **CLIVE BLAZEY** shares his thoughts on the role that trees – both native and exotic – might play in mitigating the effects of climate change, and shaping a better future for us all

Since founding The Diggers Club in 1978 with his wife, Penny, Clive Blazezy has been an outspoken champion for climate action and the protection of biodiversity. As well as developing the Diggers' collection of heirloom flower and vegetable seeds, he's created four centres through his Diggers Foundation to educate, inspire and promote his 'subversive gardening' approach.

Clive has also published 10 books. In the latest, *We Speak for the Trees*, he enlists the passion and insights of leading horticulturists and environmentalists to help argue his case for a tree-led climate recovery. In the following interview, he riffs on what we're doing wrong, what we could be doing right, and how our choices matter for future generations.

**Tell us about the title, *We Speak for the Trees* – it's a bit Dr Seuss-like, isn't it! Do you feel like the Lorax, 'speaking for the trees' yourself?**

Well, I'm a grandparent, so whatever Dr Seuss says gets through to the next generation! I've got three generations to think about now, so I guess this is what this passion is all about. What we're trying to say is that we 'speak up' for the trees. We are not saying we know all there is to know about them – that's why we've put together people who can help us. It has to be done humorously, which is what Dr Seuss is fantastic for.

**It's whimsical, but there's a strong message in his books, isn't there?**

Yes, and at the time he was writing, people were chopping down trees at incredibly rapid rates. Even today, about 50 years since *The Lorax* came out, the message still doesn't seem to be getting through.



**LEFT TO RIGHT**

Giant Californian redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*) at Redwood National Park in the US; Clive Blazezy aims to inspire and educate through 'gardening by example'.

There's incredible biodiversity in the soil, in the seeds. Even in Hiroshima, the plants have survived. We need to understand plants and their history, and their capacities – that's what we've got to connect with. Losing involvement with plants is part of the problem.

**Are you concerned that our political leaders aren't taking the issue seriously?**

I am appalled at the current impasse. There needs to be an understanding of photosynthesis – that's where our energy is all free, on every square metre of land. Yet we dig up stuff that's millions of years old. Why we're wedded to digging stuff up, I can't understand.

**So that's what we're doing with fossil fuels – using plant energy of the past instead of plant energy of the present?**

That's right. Photosynthesis is a hard thing to understand – I've been a gardener for a long time and it wasn't top of mind for me. But as I've read about it, it's clearly the answer. We have more energy than we need coming from the sun, yet we keep on doing what we're doing – we still have this mining mentality. It's vital that we come to understand that, and start planting trees.

**Do you feel the gardening community can make a difference?**

Yes. As gardeners, I think we're ahead of most of the community, because we understand the importance of biodiversity, and connecting to plants, organics and the trees. When David Attenborough went back to Chernobyl, 30 years on, the deer had come in, the trees had grown...

**Should we be planting more trees?**

Of course we should. If each person planted 160 trees over the next 10 years – that's 16 trees each a year – we'd bring enough carbon back to earth for us to get on top of the hard bits, which is leading to a sustainable lifestyle. You could pay for these trees to be planted or plant them yourself. That's pretty much what we're doing – we're starting an arboretum up at Trawool, about an hour from Melbourne, and we'll grow exciting trees to inspire people, such as sequoias – fast-growing trees that can bring carbon back to earth. So, just as our Heronswood garden has inspired people to be organic and grow vegetables, through gardening by example, that's what we'll be doing at the arboretum.

**A large part of your book is devoted to the role of soils as a carbon sink. Is that something individuals can help with too?**

Yes – of course, the way to build up organic soils is to keep recycling leaves, branches and whatever waste you've got from the kitchen. We've been doing this for about 20 years at Heronswood, and we've lifted the carbon levels seven-fold in our gardens. That's seven times more than we need, so if the whole world had a garden and followed organic principles, we would ►

get those results just by recycling. The fact that on bin day, we all put out two or three bins... that's a fantastic indicator of all that's wrong. Bill Mollison and David Cavagnaro, two of my heroes we write about in the book, put out about two bins a year! Just like temperature rises, CO<sub>2</sub> and forest fires, these are all indicators of what we're doing wrong.

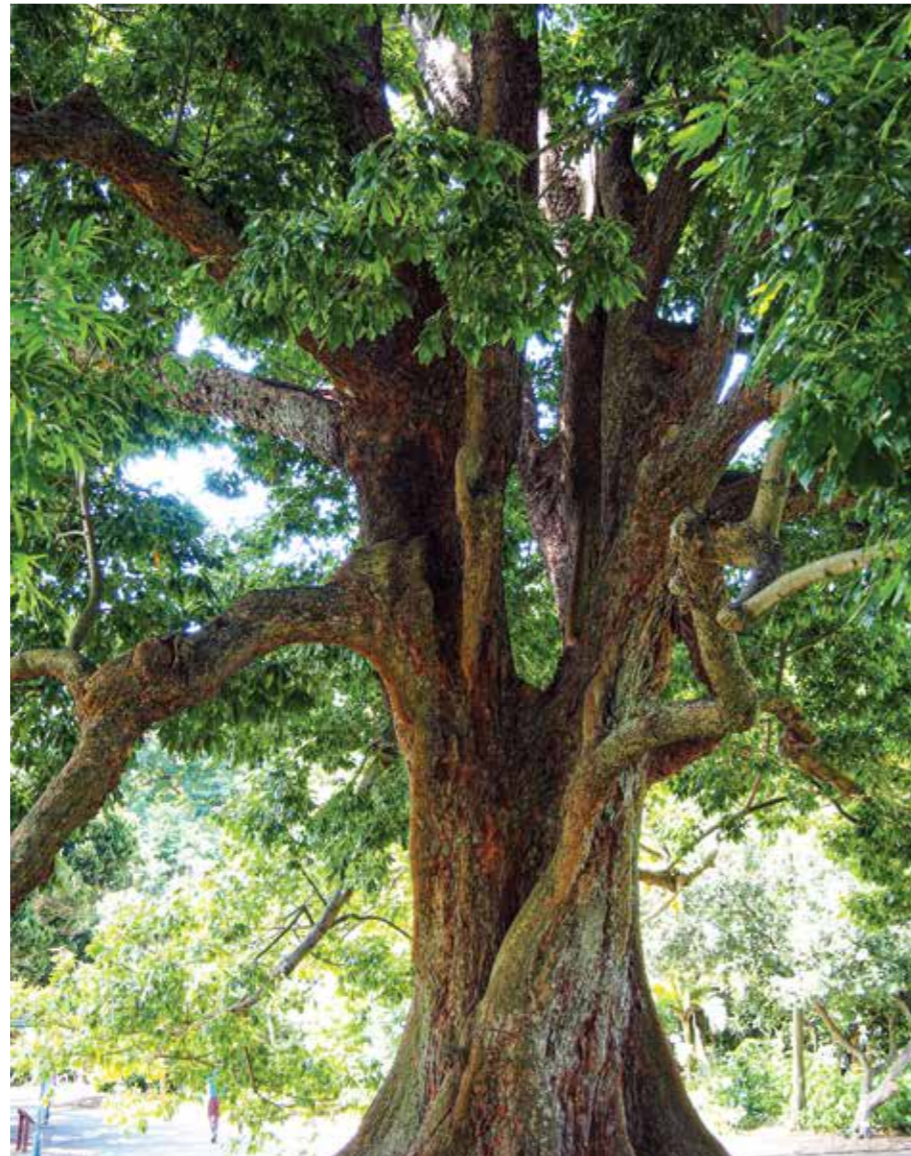
**We forget that there's the same amount of carbon stored in a tree underneath the ground as above, and of course, the mycorrhizal fungi attached to its roots.**

The mycorrhizal fungi is probably the most complex thing to understand – it has fine threads underground that create fantastic pathways under the soil, and it enables trees to 'talk' to each other, so when one is attacked, the rest linked to that pathway respond to defend themselves.

Understanding what happens under the soil is pretty important, but most of the food we eat is grown for us, so when the soil's ploughed up, you're destroying those networks. When you cut down the trees, you're stopping the carbon from coming back, and you're leading a totally artificial existence. So we've got to get back to where we were before the big agricultural chemicals grew the food for us. You could say it's a backward step, but if everyone who has some land was doing it, and planted the 16 trees per year, or grew their own food organically, we'd make a dramatic and immediate change.

**The book contains a useful dictionary of trees to grow for different purposes, such as trees for a warming climate or drying climate, fire-retardant trees, food trees... Do you have a favourite?**

My goodness! The front cover of the book has a giant sequoia on it, and I've been to California and the redwood forests and stood at the base of them in total awe.



The Forests Commission Victoria planted sequoias down in Colac in the 1930s, and another one was established in Warburton around the same time. I've been to those about four or five times. Even these tiny replicas of Californian redwoods give that great sense of awe. A sequoia can grow 100m high – we've got river red gums up

at Trawool at 20m – and we're going to grow sequoias up there, and metasequoias and ginkgos. We're picking the eyes out of what we think are going to give us the best results. We want to inspire people. When you see a sequoia forest – and if you have the same feeling as me, like you're in a gothic cathedral in France (that's the



**LEFT AND ABOVE**

The black booyong (*Argyrodendron actinophyllum*) is a fast-growing native, with huge potential for capturing carbon; the large spreading canopy of this magnificent bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) at Adelaide Botanic Garden cools the air and provides a shady spot for visitors.

closest thing) – that's what gives you the energy to try and replicate it. That's what I'm hoping we can help other people do.

**Which trees do you think are more suitable for an urban landscape: eucalypts or rainforest trees?**

That's a hard question! 80 per cent of the trees on mainland Australia are eucalypts, which is one of the reasons temperatures have risen higher here than they have worldwide. We've already reached a 1.5°C temperature rise, which the rest of the world is trying to prevent

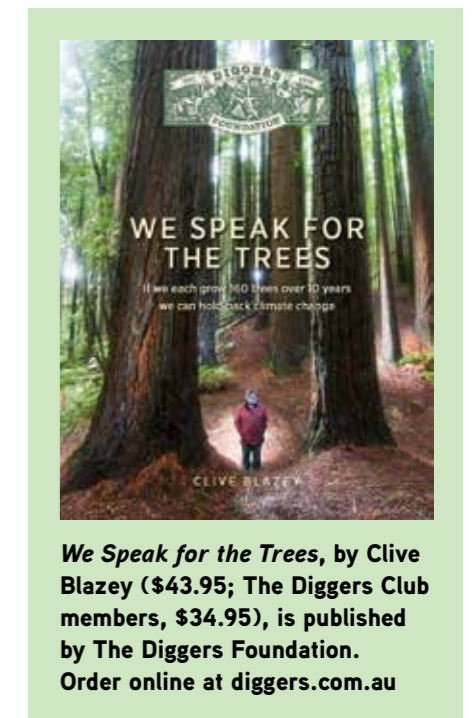
from happening by 2030. We're there, partly because we've cut down our forests, and partly because the eucalypt is very flammable, and bushfires are incredibly damaging and dangerous.

I drove through some of those recent fire-stricken areas about six months ago, and normally you get recovery, but in this case, about 30 per cent of it hadn't recovered, because the fire was so hot. In a sense, the eucalypt is such a fantastic survivor, it's increasing the temperatures and affecting our rainfall – two things that destroy the habitability of the planet. The other thing is that eucalypts are, in a sense, 'predatory'. I get into a lot of trouble with that analogy, but our rainforest areas – which are evergreen trees such as Moreton Bay figs and *Ficus hillii* – those trees will cope with dry conditions, and they've been phenomenally successful in botanic gardens across Australia.

So it's a pity that when Australians think about trees, we think about eucalypts. We should be thinking more broadly.

**Do you think exotics have a role, too?**

Yes – most of us grow exotic trees, as they give you denser shade and better colour. They're not flammable, and there are lots that don't need much moisture, so they can be just as drought-tolerant as a eucalypt. If you think about oaks, they're definitely the best leaves that I've come across for composting. There are lots of reasons why oaks are probably the most important of the deciduous trees. Pioneers planted oaks everywhere, so we have created a register of national estate and there are several oaks I want to list. I found there are 100-year-old specimens in Melbourne. If there are only 20 oaks planted to every 800 eucalypts, I'm hoping that if we swap that balance around, it'll make a dramatic difference. **GA**



**We Speak for the Trees, by Clive Blazey (\$43.95; The Diggers Club members, \$34.95), is published by The Diggers Foundation. Order online at [diggers.com.au](http://diggers.com.au)**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLIVE BLAZEY