

## Citizen botanists help track rare plants and stop the spread of noxious weeds in Canberra


666 ABC Canberra By Hannah Walmsley

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**PHOTO:** Erica lusitanica, or Spanish heath, is considered a noxious and highly invasive weed that has been found in the ACT. (Supplied: Michael Mulvaney)

**What started as an online map of Canberra's rare endangered plant species is now helping ACT park rangers keep on top of noxious weeds in the capital.**

MAP: Canberra 2600 

Just one year on from its inception, the Canberra Nature Map has collected more than 8,000 plant records with the help of eagle-eyed locals.

The online project gives the would-be botanists a forum to report and upload photos of plants spotted in and around the ACT.

The photos are then identified by a team of local plant experts, under the direction of ACT Government plant specialist Dr Michael Mulvaney.

The Canberra Nature Map is the brainchild of IT specialist Aaron Clausen.

A keen mountain biker, Mr Clausen first came up with the concept after spotting a native garden of orchids during a trail ride on Mount Majura in Canberra's north.

"I used to think of the bush as fairly boring, but one day I pulled over for a rest and almost tripped on something astonishingly beautiful," he said.

"It turned out to be the critically endangered Canberra spider orchid.

"I had been standing in what I later discovered was the largest population of them."

The chance discovery inspired Mr Clausen to put his citizen botany idea to a team of local experts, including Dr Mulvaney.

Dr Mulvaney admitted he initially rejected the proposal.

"To start with I tried to fob Aaron off, thinking I just couldn't cope with all this information," he said.

We've already gathered 40 per cent of our total rare plant record going back 110 years.

Dr Michael Mulvaney



**PHOTO:** Aaron Clausen, founder of Canberra Nature Map. (Supplied)



"When I saw what Aaron had produced, I was just blown away."

The site is already hosting up to 1,000 visits each day, with contributors uploading photos of flowers, grasses and, more recently, unusual-looking mushrooms.

"If people go walking and they see a flower or a mushroom that is unfamiliar to them, they can now take a photo via their smart phone," Dr Mulvaney said.

"There's a team of 30 experts waiting there ready to identify that photo."

Dr Mulvaney said the community contribution had been better than he and Mr Clausen had anticipated.

"We've already gathered 40 per cent of our total rare plant record going back 110 years," he said.

"It's giving us extraordinary insights about some of the plants we thought were rare and we're realising some of them are not that rare because they're turning up.

"Having all of those eyes out on the ground just makes such a big difference."

## Tracking invasive weeds

Although the map was designed to track native and endangered plants, images of invasive weeds and grasses have been welcomed by ACT park rangers.

The app is now being used as an early detection tool.

"Things like Spanish heath, we've got the record and the next day a ranger has gone out and eradicated that plant," Dr Mulvaney said.

"There's been probably half-a-dozen records of plants like that we're now trying to stop in the ACT that we didn't know were here.

"We've been able to go out and control them."

Mr Clausen said he hoped the site would eventually expand to include information on native animal life in Canberra also.

"We want to include butterflies next, then we want to do birds, lizards and frogs," he said.



**PHOTO:** The *Eragrostis curvula*, or African Lovegrass, is considered a noxious weed and can be found growing in the ACT. (Supplied: Michael Mulvaney)

**Topics:** animals-and-nature, canberra-2600