



Tree Rites

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'I'm obsessed with planting trees. That's all I really want to do, even if it means shuffling along on my bum, aged ninety, to get my last tree in,' says Barbara Schaffer, landscape architect and the founder of Tree Rites, a Sydney-based not-for-profit organisation that facilitates the planting of tiny forests on public land as an act of celebration and commemoration. The project is an attempt to reweave ritual into relationships between humans and nature.

Each Tree Rites forest commemorates a particular rite of passage, such as a birthday, death or a marriage. 'With each of the plantings there's a form of music, poetry, or reflection ... one of the key elements of the project is enabling people to reintroduce ritual into their lives,' Barbara says.

The project began as a tiny forest to celebrate Barbara's sixtieth birthday. Afterwards, one of her friends suggested it was too good an idea to happen once; that many people would love to do it, but don't know how, and don't have access to land.

Barbara is not short of know-how. She's currently the principal landscape architect for the Government Architect NSW, and a co-author of the Sydney Green Grid – an interconnected network of open spaces across metropolitan Sydney. While Tree Rites is a side project unconnected to her work with the Government Architect, her professional experience means she knows where trees are needed and who to liaise with to get them in the ground. 'I've mapped green space across the whole of metropolitan Sydney,' she says. 'This project is an opportunity to plant the Green Grid. Tiny forest by tiny forest.'

There are several Tree Rites projects in process. Barbara's preparing the ground for a forest on a farm north of Sydney and is about to plant her fourth project with Sydney's Woollahra council – a commemorative forest to celebrate the life of a young woman, recently passed. The group are working with the council to prepare the site and have committed to nurturing it post-planting. 'One of the key elements is to foster deep connection between people and nature, so ultimately people want to protect nature,' Barbara says.

The project, unsurprisingly, is touching a nerve. 'Tree Rites is both deeply spiritual and profoundly instrumental,' says Claire Martin, president of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. 'These forests remind us that we are a species amongst species, giving rise to a kind of radical hope for much-needed cultural and political change.'

For eons, humans have created meaning and expressed cultural values through ritual. Tree Rites – planting hope, habitat and meaning in the streets of our cities – is activism both purposeful and profound. ✨

Illustration by Abbey Rich.