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Nature strip gardening:
Prepare for Planting Indigenous Plants

A guide to planning an indigenous and native garden on your nature strip

Planting indigenous plants has many benefits that include: supporting local biodiversity, providing food and shelter for wildlife, reducing impacts of climate change, and enjoying a drought tolerant garden.

When planning your nature strip garden, there are some important things to consider to ensure your garden thrives.

Wominjeka. Council respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge their legacy and spiritual connection to the land and waterways across the City of Port Phillip and pay our heartfelt respect to their Elders, past, present, and emerging.

Planning out your nature strip garden

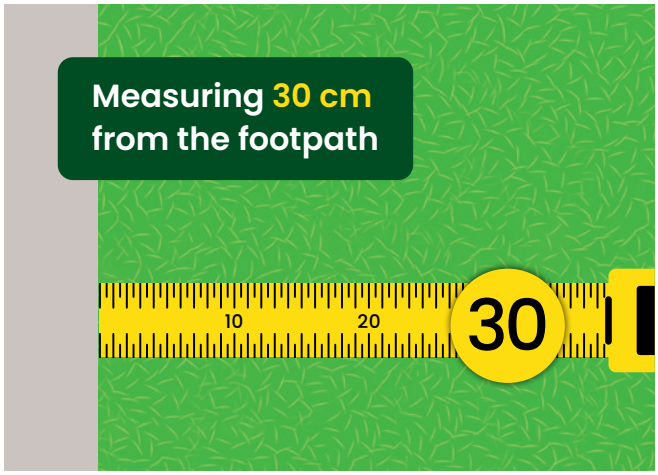
Nature strips come in many shapes and sizes. To make the most of the area you have, make sure to plan out your garden, and include the Nature Strip Guidelines into your planning.

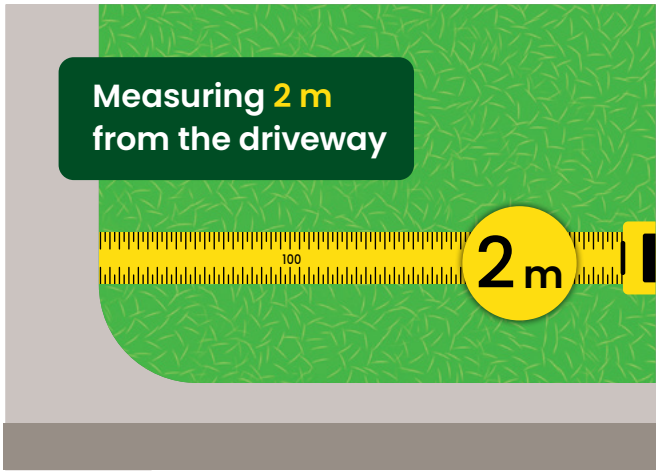
Planning can include:

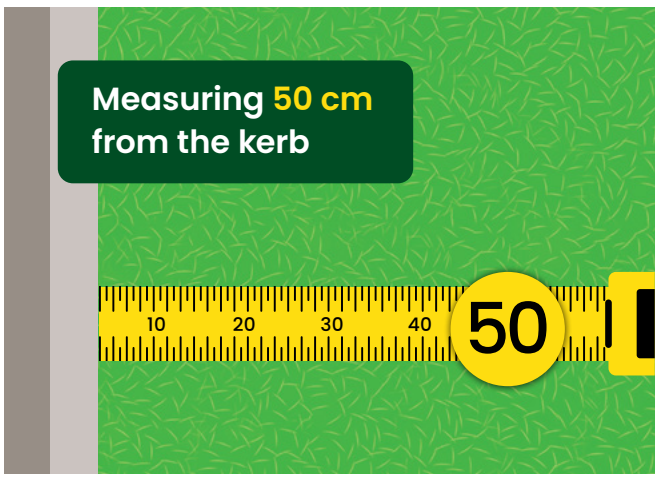
- marking out areas for different plant heights
- marking out any clear areas to maintain access to street parking, or bin collection
- measuring how close nearby pedestrian crossings, intersections or corners are, as this will influence plant heights
- marking a minimum of 50 cm away from tree trunks, or 30 cm for a tree plot.

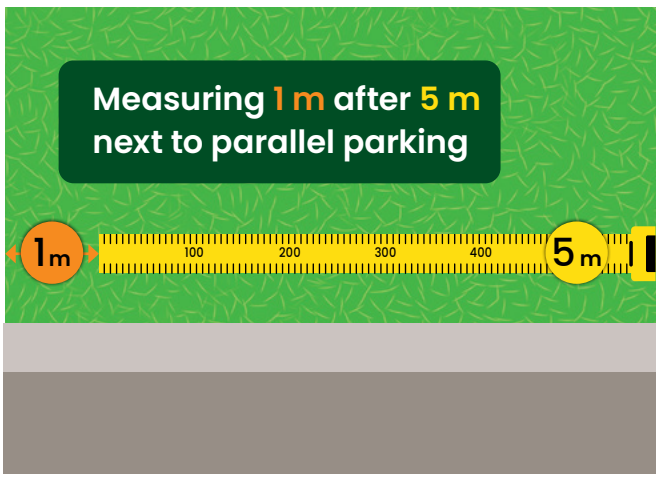
Example nature strip planning

See below for an example of how to measure out and plan your nature strip garden using the *Nature Strip and Street Gardening Guidelines* – available on our website.

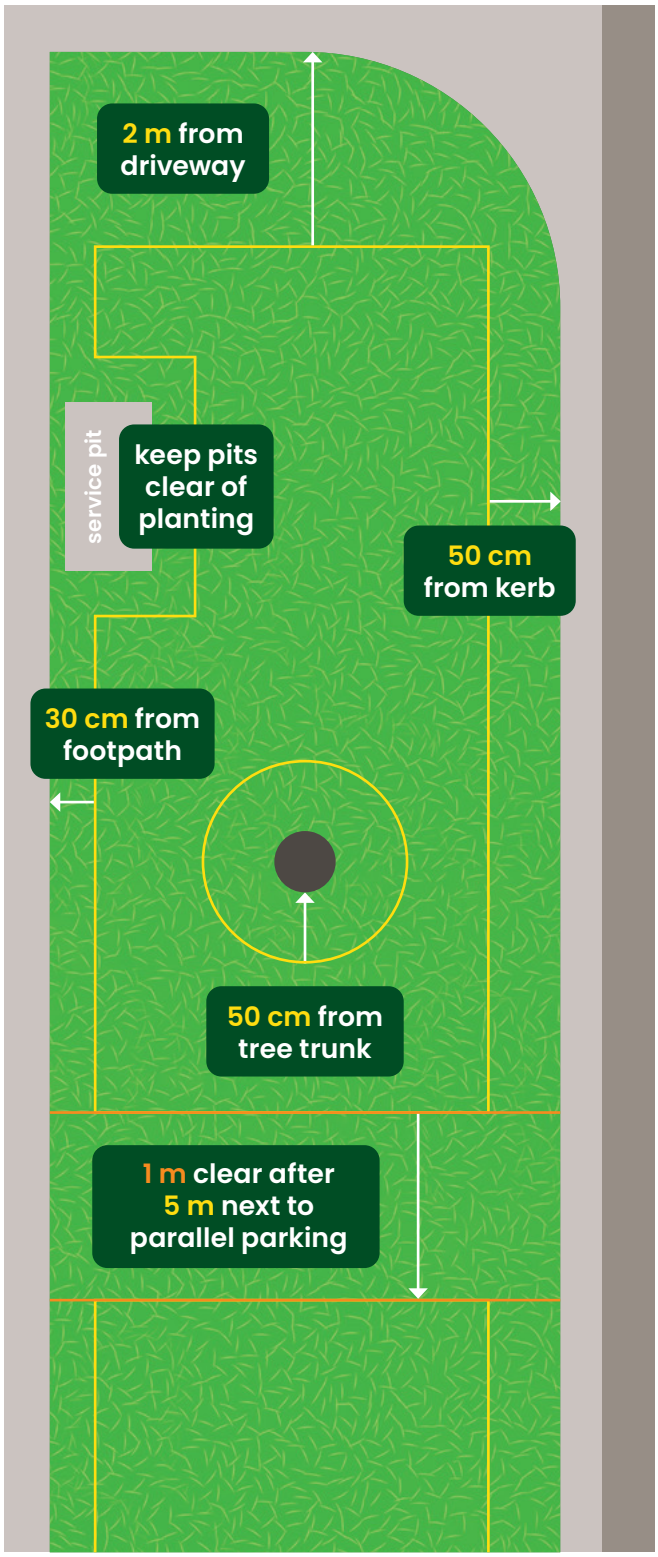


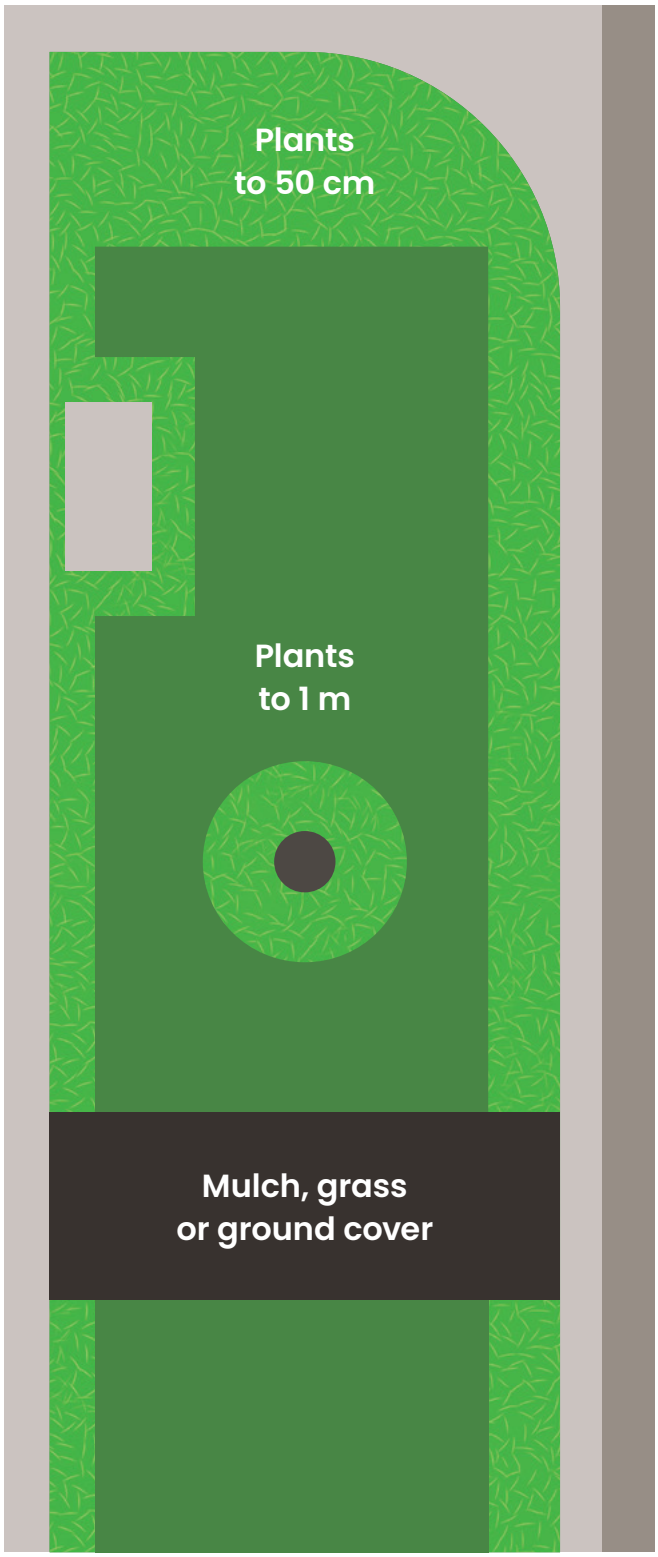






After measurements are taken, draw up a plan to show the areas to plant.
You can trace over a photo to make the plan.





Removal of lawn

Many nature strips have lawn which will require removal before planting. You can choose to remove the lawn from your entire nature strip or just from the areas where you plan to plant.

Consider the following when planning lawn removal:

- Lawn grasses can often become invasive and may overwhelm smaller plants.
- If you're planning to retain some lawn areas, ensure your plants have sufficient space to grow without competing with the grass.
- Removing lawn can lead to soil erosion. To prevent this, have mulch and/or new plants ready to establish soon after the lawn is removed.

Methods for lawn removal

There are several effective ways to remove lawn. Below are some methods that do not involve the use of chemicals:

Cardboard and mulch

This method uses a layer of cardboard topped with mulch to smother the lawn. It's a simple and cost-effective approach, especially suitable for nature strips that are relatively flat and even. It works best during the wetter months and also helps enrich the soil with nutrients.

Steps:

1. Layer cardboard over the nature strip, overlapping to ensure there are no gaps where light could seep in.
2. Soak cardboard thoroughly with water. This is an important step to ensure the cardboard makes good contact with the lawn and stays stable in windy weather. This could also be done prior to laying out.
3. Place a layer of mulch on top, ideally 8 to 10 cm thick, and water again.
4. Allow approximately 4 to 6 weeks, periodically checking beneath the cardboard to monitor progress. As the grass dies off, you should see exposed soil, ready for planting.

You won't need to remove the cardboard or mulch afterward. If kept sufficiently moist, the cardboard should break down enough to allow planting. Simply create a hole through the cardboard to reach the soil beneath and plant as you normally would.

Scalping to the soil

Scalping down to soil involves removing the lawn right down to the soil layer. This method can give faster results.

Scalping can be done manually using tools like a hand shovel. For lawns that are less dense, a mower or whipper snipper may also be effective if they can cut close enough to the soil surface. This method can also be used before applying cardboard and mulch, which is particularly useful for thick or heavily established lawns.

Soil

Choosing plants for different soil

Port Phillip is located within the sandbelt region, where soils are typically sandy. However, some areas also feature clay-rich soils, wetter conditions, or soils that have been introduced through landscaping or development.

What is the difference between sandy and clay soil?

- A 'sand-loam' is soil which is a mix of sand and organic matter (soil). Sand-loams are considered well-draining, meaning they don't hold onto water well. They can also sometimes be water resistant, meaning water will run off the top instead of seeping into the soil.
- A 'clay-loam' is soil which is a mix of clay and organic material (soil). Clay-loams hold onto water well. The more clay, the more likely the soil will be wet in cooler months, and dry in hotter months.

How do I identify my soil type?

You can often easily observe your soil to decide whether it is sandier or has more clay. Observe your soil for the following:

- **Colour and texture:** Is your soil light in colour and does it feel gritty like sand?
- **Stickiness:** Squeeze a handful of soil – if it holds together well, it likely contains clay.
- **Moisture retention:** Does your soil stay damp or dry out quickly? Clay soils tend to hold water, while sandy soils drain faster.

Plants that prefer well-drained soil or are drought-tolerant are generally better suited to sandy soils or sandy loams. Those that like moist soil tend to do well in clay loams. You can always check with your local indigenous and native nursery on what the labels mean for plant soil preference.

Tip: Some plants are quite adaptable and not particularly demanding. These are often labelled as 'adaptable' and make great choices, as they're generally low-maintenance and less likely to cause disappointment.

Clay loam soil which easily ‘squishes’ together

Clay is visible in the orange coloured areas

Sand loam soil has large grains of sand visible

Tip: Sandy soils are often labelled as ‘poor’. Sandy soils can be lower in nutrients. However, this is perfect for the indigenous plants which grow in sand. If you think your soil is ‘poor’, consider what plants might thrive in those conditions.

Introducing new soil

One of the advantages of using plants indigenous to Port Phillip is that they’re naturally suited to the local soil and climate conditions. This often means you can plant directly into the existing soil without needing to make any amendments. However, in some parts of Port Phillip, the soil may have been altered or may not reflect its natural state. If you believe your soil may need some attention, consider the following:

- Any new soil used should be labelled as suitable for Australian native plants.
- Soils designed for exotic gardens or vegetable patches often contain high levels of nutrients that can harm native species.
- Be cautious with clean-fill soil, as it may carry weed seeds.
- It’s a good idea to test the soil by planting a few natives first – you might be pleasantly surprised by what thrives.

If your soil seems very dry – where water runs off the surface – and shows little to no signs of life, such as minimal plant growth or absence of insects, you may want to improve its condition. Consider adding low-phosphorus organic matter, native-friendly soil, or a wetting agent to help restore moisture and support healthy plant growth.

Mulch

Mulch is a great way to introduce a layer of organic matter to your garden, which encourages beneficial bugs to keep the soil healthy. Mulch can also help retain soil moisture in warmer temperatures, keep weed seeds from germinating, and gives a garden a natural tidy look.

When using much, consider the following:

- Choose a 'bush mulch' or a low-nutrient mulch suited to native plants. For example, pine mulch can be too acidic for native and indigenous plants.
- Choose a mulch that hasn't been dyed.
- Be mindful of the maintenance required to keep mulch clear from the footpath.

To effectively suppress weeds, apply a mulch layer approximately 5 to 10 cm thick. To calculate how much mulch you'll need, multiply the area of your nature strip (in square metres) by the desired mulch depth (in metres).

For example:

A nature strip that is 2 m wide and 3 m long, with a mulch depth of 7 cm (0.07 m), would require:

$2 \times 3 \times 0.07 = 0.42$ cubic m of mulch

This is just under half a cubic metre.

Tip: Apply mulch to the ground before planting! Much easier than applying around baby plants.

Selecting plants

Plant heights

Plants which are low and bushy, or groundcovers grow best on nature strips. They are easily maintained and provide valuable habitat for much of our local wildlife.

The following types of plants are a suitable height for nature strips:

- Shrubs <1 m height (or <50 cm in some scenarios, refer to nature strip guidelines)
- Grasses, lilies and other 'strappy green' plants
- Wildflowers (herbs and forbs)
- Climbers and scramblers
- Groundcovers

Tip: Plant height listed on labels can vary depending on growing conditions. In ideal environments, plants may reach or even exceed their stated height. Shrubs, in particular, can be kept below their maximum height with regular pruning. However, if you're aiming for a low-maintenance garden, it's best to choose plants that naturally stay within the desired height range.

Plant placement

How far apart you plant will depend on several factors, including the mature width of each plant, how dense you want your garden to look, and how quickly you'd like groundcovers to fill the space.

Consider planting 4 to 6 plants per square meter. This allows more vigorous plants to naturally outcompete others as they grow. Keep in mind that it's perfectly normal for a few plants not to survive.

Light

Plants need sunlight to grow, however different plants tolerate different levels of sunlight. Observe how much sunlight your area receives throughout the day, then select plants based on their light preferences – such as full sun, partial sun, dappled shade, or full shade.

Note: Keep in mind that the amount of sunlight your nature strip receives can change with the seasons. As you plan your planting, it's helpful to observe how light conditions shift throughout the year.

Tip: The larger and darker green a leaf is, the more likely that plant will tolerate a shady spot. And the smaller and lighter green or silver a leaf is, the more likely that the plant prefers sun.

Light colored leaf on a Yellow Button daisy which likes sun

Dark green leaf on a purple coral pea which grows in shade

More information

This information sheet is part of a series.
Visit our website to access similar resources, including tips on plant maintenance and care
portphillip.vic.gov.au/nature-strips

1 Prepare for Planting Indigenous Plants
2 Planting Your Indigenous Garden
3 Caring for an Indigenous Garden
4 Guide to Indigenous and Native Plants

Nature strip and street garden guideline summary