

'The Professional Horticultural Industry and the Application of 'Sustainability'.

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How do we turn a philosophical critique of "sustainability" into something professional horticulturists can stand behind, defend, and apply?

Definition of the vocation of Horticulturists: *'One who practices the art and science of cultivating and caring for plants'.*

Considering the inability to truly apply and measure the term 'sustainability' from a perspective of professional horticulturists, this paper presents a new broader paradigm through questioning:

- The sustainability of what?
- The relational First Nations 'Caring as Country' paradigm
- The need to explicitly include urban, amenity, ornamental, small crop production, natural resource management zones and plant production nursery sectors
- The language suitable for councils, industry bodies, and professional standards

Policy & Industry Translation

Sustainability in Professional Horticulture: A Relational Framework.

1. Problem Statement - Industry-Facing

The term *sustainable horticulture* is widely used across food production, urban landscapes, nursery operations, and natural resource management. However, in practice it is often applied without clearly defining what is being sustained, over what timeframe, and for whose benefit.

This has resulted in:

- Sustainability being equated with input efficiency alone
- Ecological outcomes being secondary to production or amenity outcomes
- Cultural relationships to land being largely absent from professional standards
- Urban and ornamental horticulture being excluded from serious sustainability discourse

For professional horticulturists, this ambiguity weakens both environmental credibility and industry leadership.

2. Reframing Sustainability for Professional Practice

From a professional horticulture perspective, sustainability must move beyond technical optimisation and be understood as a relational obligation between:

- Plants and soils
- Water and climate
- People and Country
- Present practice and future capacity

This reframing aligns horticultural science with First Nations principles of 'Caring as Country', which recognise the land as a whole of country 'living system' requiring custodianship rather than lack of caring for country, excessive land usage and extraction of every natural resource.

Accordingly, sustainability in horticulture should be understood not as the maintenance of a product or service alone, but as the maintenance of the living systems and planet's relationships that make horticulture possible.

3. Scope: Whole-of-Horticulture Inclusion

This framework applies equally to:

- Food and fibre horticulture
- Urban and peri-urban landscapes
- Parks, gardens, and streetscapes
- Ornamental and amenity plantings
- Nursery production and plant supply chains
- Ecologically and culturally significant sites

Urban and amenity horticulture are recognised as primary sites of human–plant interaction and as major determinants of water use, biodiversity patterns, soil condition, and public relationships with nature. They are therefore central to sustainability practice, not peripheral.

4. Professional Definition

Sustainable horticulture is the professional cultivation and management of plants as an ongoing relationship with Country, in which soil, water, biodiversity, and cultural responsibilities are maintained or restored so that food systems, urban landscapes, natural resources and nursery industries support human wellbeing and ecological function for future generations.

Sustainable horticulture is Caring as Country through plant production and landscape practice so that ecological health, cultural relationships, and long-term land capacity are not diminished by present use.

5. Professional Obligations - Translation into Practice

Under this framework, professional horticulturists have obligations in four interdependent domains:

a. Ecological Responsibility

Professionals must ensure that horticultural practices:

- Maintain or improve soil biological function
- Protect water quality and hydrological processes
- Support functional biodiversity
- Avoid creating long-term ecological debt

This applies equally to cropping systems, urban turf, tree management, and nursery production.

b. Cultural Responsibility (*Caring as Country*) Professionals must recognise that:

- Horticulture occurs on Country, not just on land
- Indigenous ecological knowledge systems are legitimate authorities
- Plant selection and landscape design express cultural values
- Disconnection between people and place is itself unsustainable

This requires:

- Meaningful engagement with Traditional Custodians
- Use of place-appropriate species where possible
- Acknowledgement of cultural governance of landscape

c. Temporal (Intergenerational) Responsibility

Professionals must consider:

- Long-term soil condition, not just seasonal yield
- Tree and canopy legacies in urban landscapes
- Future water availability and climate resilience
- Whether today's practices limit tomorrow's options

Sustainability is therefore judged not by short-term performance but by future land capacity.

d. Livelihood Responsibility

Professionals must support:

- Viable businesses and employment
- Food security and community wellbeing
- Fair labour and safe working conditions
- Economic activity that operates within ecological limits

Profitability is necessary but not sufficient; it must not depend on land degradation or cultural exclusion.

6. Key Paradigm Shift for Industry

Old framing:	Professional Framing:
How do we make horticulture less damaging?	How do we practice horticulture as an act of care?
Old Metric:	Expanded Professional Metrics:
Yield	Growth Rate
	Soil Function
	Water Integrity
Old Question:	Professional Question:
"Is this sustainable?"	"What is this practice sustaining and what is it diminishing?"

7. Examples of Industry Application

a. **Urban Parks & Gardens**

Sustainability is not simply drought-tolerant turf or efficient irrigation.
It includes:

- Living soils
- Habitat value
- Culturally meaningful planting
- Long-term canopy planning
- Public relationship with nature

b. **Nursery Industry**

Sustainability is not only reduced inputs.
It includes:

- Genetic diversity
- Biosecurity integrity
- Water and nutrient management
- Ethical plant sourcing
- Shaping what landscapes become possible

c. **Amenity & Ornamental Horticulture**

Sustainability is not purely visual quality.
It includes:

- Ecological function
- Cultural expression
- Future maintenance burden
- Heat and water resilience

8. Policy Implication

Professional horticulture policy should define sustainability as the maintenance of ecological function, cultural responsibility to Country, intergenerational land capacity, and viable livelihoods across food, urban, amenity, nursery and all other sectors of the horticulture industry. Sustainability metrics should therefore extend beyond production efficiency to include soil health, water integrity, biodiversity, and cultural relationships to land.

9. Why This Matters for Professional Identity

This framework positions horticulturists as custodians of living systems:

- Not merely technicians
- Not merely producers
- Not merely landscapers

but as professionals responsible for the future condition of Country as shaped through plants.

It gives horticulture:

- Ethical coherence
- Cultural legitimacy
- Ecological credibility
- Professional authority

APPENDIX The Paradigm Shift – 'Caring as Country' vs 'Caring For Country'

The difference between "caring as Country" and "caring for country" represents a shift from a **place-based, relational, and cultural existence** to a more **functional, management-oriented approach**. While both are crucial to the health of Australian lands and waters, "Caring as Country" emphasizes the holistic, daily, and spiritual connection of Indigenous people living within their landscape, whereas "caring for country" often refers specifically to land management practices.

1. Caring as Country: Being, Living, and Existing

'Caring as Country' is primarily about **presence**. It implies that Indigenous people are living on their traditional land, practicing culture, passing down knowledge, and building community.

Ref: Caring for country and sustainable Indigenous development: Opportunities, constraints and innovation Altman, JC, Whitehead, PJ **Year published:** 2003 [ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences](#)

Ref: Australian State of the Environment 2021 DCCEEW, Canberra 2022

Ref: World Wildlife Foundation, 2023, Caring on country blog : <https://wwf.org.au/what-we-do/caring-on-country/>

- **Existence as Management:** Simply being on Country is a form of care. It involves the constant observation and maintenance of the environment through daily life.
- **Cultural Continuity:** It centres on "caring for culture," where stories, songlines, language, and connection to ancestors are inseparable from the land.
- **Reciprocity:** This paradigm believes that if you are on Country, you are automatically in a reciprocal relationship—you care for Country, and Country takes care of you.
- **Impact:** Living on Country often results in beneficial ecological outcomes (favourable fire regimes, control over weeds and feral animals) as a by-product of daily life.

2. Caring For Country: Action, Management, and Obligation

'Caring for Country' is a broader term that often describes the specific actions, projects, and management practices employed by Aboriginal people to manage land, water, and air, often in a professional or ranger capacity.

Ref: Caring for country and sustainable Indigenous development: Opportunities, constraints and innovation Altman, JC, Whitehead, PJ **Year published:** 2003 [ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences](#)

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- **Obligation and Stewardship:** It is seen as a formal obligation, duty, and honour inherited from ancestors to ensure the continued health of land and seas.
- **Active Management:** It often involves specific activities such as cultural burning, biodiversity monitoring, Ranger activities, and ecological restoration.
- **Integrating Knowledge:** It bridges traditional knowledge with Western conservation science to heal Country.
- **Structural Focus:** It can sometimes exist within a western framework of "land management," but it is uniquely defined by indigenous custodianship, prioritizing long-term health (often 7 generations ahead) rather than just short-term productivity.

'AS' and 'FOR' – An evaluation distinguishing between **being with** the land vs. **managing** the land.

Feature	Caring AS Country	Caring FOR Country
Focus	Being, living, and being part of Country.	Actively managing and healing Country.
Nature	Life-style, culture, everyday presence.	Project-based, Ranger work, formal duty.
Connection	Spiritual and daily existence.	Obligation and management.
Outcome	Cultural continuity and health.	Ecological health and resource management.

Summary of the Difference

'Caring as Country' is the foundation; it is the **cultural, spiritual, and physical presence** of people in their landscape.

'Caring for Country' is the **application** of that cultural connection through intentional actions to maintain or restore the health of that landscape.

Ref: Australian State of the Environment 2021 DCCEEW, Canberra

Paradigm shift: You can 'care for' country without living on it, but true 'caring as or caring on' country involves a holistic, ancestral connection where the people are part of the ecosystem for which they are caring. However, both are frequently used interchangeably to mean Indigenous-led conservation and stewardship.

Ref: Australian State of the Environment 2021 DCCEEW, Canberra