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AUSTRALIAN FIRST: Native Seeds in Space Station

For the first time, Australian seeds have been sent into orbit and off the planet for an extended time in an experiment being conducted by the Botanic Gardens Trust.

Botanic Gardens Trust Executive Director, Dr Tim Entwisle said Australian seeds are among the hardiest seeds on earth and may well be suitable as oxygen producers when humans colonise the moon or other planets.

“It’s hoped this small experiment will show how Australian seeds respond to microgravity and ionising radiation, perhaps demonstrating they are the toughest on earth and in space!,” Dr Entwisle said.

“This NASA experiment could even lead to some ground breaking research by providing a preliminary evaluation of Space Station seedbanking – a possible option for the future.

“Great advances in science are often the result of unexpected results. Sending native seeds into space may open up whole new research areas, or it may confirm that we are already doing the best we can to conserve our seed for future needs,” he said. “Perhaps more importantly, I hope this short trip into space for some Aussie seeds will raise awareness of seedbanking as an insurance policy for the future.”

NASA astronaut Dr Gregory Chamitoff has taken the seeds with him on the Discovery Mission. The Discovery launched into space on 31 May on Mission STS-124 to the International Space Station. Dr Chamitoff is scheduled to spend up to six months in space. When he returns to earth he will bring the seeds back with him.

Dr Entwisle said the experiment will also highlight the important role of the Botanic Gardens Trust in ‘seedbanking’ – storing seeds under conditions best suited to extend their lives.

“This provides an insurance policy for species that might become extinct due to global warming or other changes to their habitat,” he said.

“With habitats under increasing threat, conservation seedbanking is an important strategy for both storing and understanding genetically important wild seeds. As part of a global seed conservation effort Botanic Gardens Trust is a partner in the Millennium Seed Bank Project based in the UK.”

The Australian seeds in Dr Chamitoff’s official flight items kit include: Golden Wattle, NSW Waratah, Flannel Flower and Wollemi Pine. Also included is a scarf from Sydney’s Royal Botanic Gardens depicting three of these species and a poster describing all four species.

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