

FERNGLEN NATIVE PLANT GARDENS NEWSLETTER

Summer 2019



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Finally the Appointment of a New Curator at Fernglen

After almost six months of lengthy and protracted negotiations, Steve Cook, a long-term committee member has been appointed as the new curator for Fernglen with 16 hours a week available to carry out this task.

It is only when there is no curator that the appearance of the gardens illustrate how important the curator's role is. Steve has a formidable task before him just to return the gardens to the state they should always be in, before considering further developmental work. The monthly working bees have helped maintain the gardens in some sort of order since our previous curator, Malcolm Fisher, left in September, but there is much to do. Fortunately, Steve is well suited to the task, knowledgeable, industrious and multi-skilled. I have no doubt the gardens will thrive under his care.

Curator's Report

Who would have guessed? After the last 7 days of December, when Birkenhead's rainforest ecosystems were blessed with 120mm of life-giving precipitation, we didn't expect some 'devil in the sky' to suddenly turn off the tap. In the 51 days between New Year and 20 February, Fernglen received a mere 22mm of rain.

Contrast this with last summer, when Malcolm's Curator Report mentioned "regular sprinkling from the heavens". Little wonder, as during the corresponding period last summer, New Year to 20 February 2018, Fernglen received 800mm of rain, so very different from this summer's desiccating 22mm. See my photo taken up at Ben's Ridge, of one of the many large cracks which opened up as the parched soil shrunk. My keys are there for scale, and I had to watch I didn't lose them down into the abyss.



Parched soil at Ben's Ridge

After having no paid Curator for 4 months, I started doing 2 days Curator work per week at Fernglen on 5 February 2019, subcontracting to Landscape Solutions for Auckland Council's facilities maintenance contractor, Venetia. Due to the current 7 weeks of drought I found myself ignoring the weeds in the rock gardens and tubs, and instead spending my 2 days per week mainly on getting as much water as possible onto the stressed plants. I was very grateful for help from Dwain of Landscape Solutions (a real expert with an awesome knowledge of irrigation). Dwain installed a better irrigation solenoid and helped with maximising the benefits from irrigation. Due to the drought this needed a fine balance between having too much watering (which caused us to lose two fine *Cordyline indivisa*) and in some spots too little water, which caused us to lose two very old *Dracophyllum*s:

Dracophyllum traversii and *D. latifolium*. *Dracophyllum*s are very hard to find, so if anyone out there has some potted *Dracophyllum* trees to donate or sell to Fernglen, we would be very happy to give them a place to grow and be appreciated.

Even with good irrigation we noticed more and more trees suffering and needing extra watering. For example, the Manatu *Plagianthus regius* planted by the Governor General, Sir Annand Satyanand 20 years ago was clearly suffering and has been receiving its first help from a hose for many years. Rain is now on the horizon and with any luck we will get a good soaking in the next few days to finish off February in a much better-watered state.



Two large seed pods on the large *Tecomanthe speciosa* these are now 300mm long

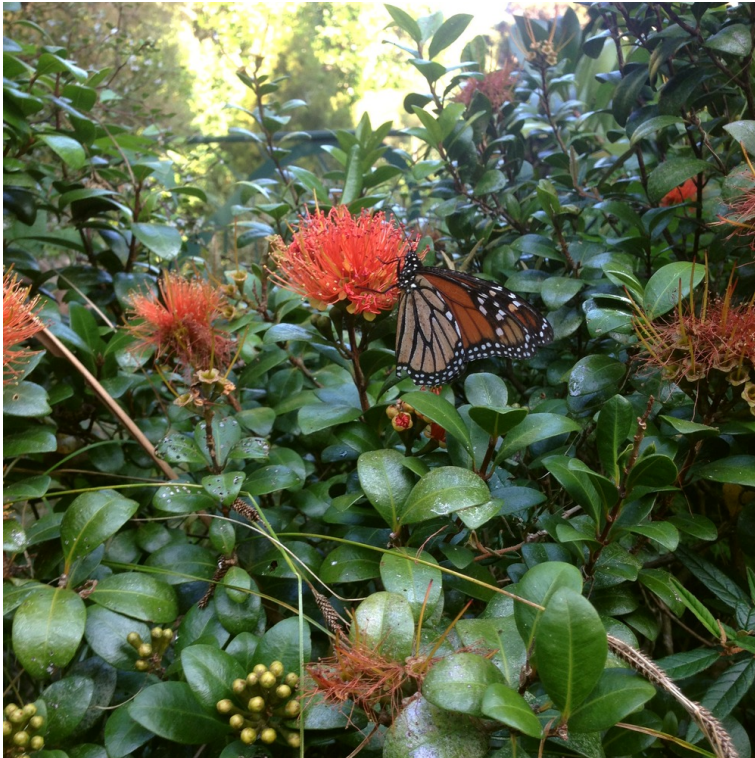


Centipede which you can find sometimes under logs or even bait stations

We have continued to have a lot of painted rocks hidden among our plants, and children coming to search for them. Its been very nice to have the Auckland Rocks children and their families coming to enjoy rock hunting.

I would like to say thanks very much to Barry Brown and Kelly Hayward for their essential help with watering in the Alpine House, also thanks for the many hours of watering parched trees up at our Ben's Ridge Arboretum by Neville Arbury and by Kelly. Also thanks to all the committee members who helped by spending many hours removing the weeds which I had ignored, being very busy with watering through the 7 weeks of drought and unusually hot summer days.

Steve Cook



Monarch butterfly on the rata *Metrosideros fulgens* at the main entrance



Honey bees on a *Collospermum hastatum*

The Annual Assessment of Pohutukawa Flowering, December 2018

Another what could be described as 'unusual' season of flowering for our often designated Christmas tree, although normally flowering has finished by November the 25th. This year flowering was spread over an extended period, commencing in early to mid-November with some flowers still flowering in early to mid-January! To further complicate matters, whether groves or avenues of pohutukawas e.g. around Tamaki Drive, rather than all trees flowering at the same time they bloomed individually with one specimen in full flower while the neighbouring trees were either coming into flower or were completely finished flowering.

The intensity of colour and quality of blooms were also of considerable interest, while some trees were absolutely covered by majestic blooms others flowered very lightly. Nothing is ever straight forward with pohutukawa flowering! Also to be observed is the variability of flower colour from light tomato red to deep crimson red.

I am still surprised at ongoing street plantings of pohutukawas, usually the cultivar 'Maori Princess', they are still being planted in narrow grass berms with overhead power lines, sadly a disaster waiting to happen, either some savage pruning or removal at a latter date. Overall a better than average year for pohutukawa flowering in the Auckland region, possibly brought about by the generous rainfall we received in November, early December.

Book review: *Treasures of Tane, plants of the Ngai Tahu* by Rob Tipa

This publication in considerable detail tells the story of natives plants of the South Island, how Maori and European settlers learnt their uses as food, fibre, building materials and medicines. The author, a freelance journalist, was initially contracted by the Department of Conservation to research and write up the traditional uses of 60 native plants found on the west coast of the South Island, from that research has grown this fascinating book. Covering climbers, grasses, trees and flaxes information flows in abundance when discussing individual plants.

I had no idea of the numerous uses of supplejack, *Ripogonon scandens*, to create crayfish pots, to reinforce fish traps, to make stretchers for injured people, to build a sprung mattress for beds, that red berries and tender shoots could be eaten, young shoots and roots were valued for bush medicine producing a liquid that was used as a tonic, a blood purifier and cure-all for fevers. My only experience with supplejack was being caned with it at primary school in the late 1950s! As the author notes, for every plant that he researched, there were many varied and surprising uses.

The most intriguing chapter is that of possible New Zealand's most toxic plant, tutu or *Coriara arborea*, responsible for both the deaths of animals and people. Despite the obvious dangers of the plant, Maori used it as a refreshing drink, jelly and food sweetener and as an indelible ink in tattooing. Preparation of these 'recipes' was regarded as 'tricky' and the plant was treated with considerable caution by both Maori and Pakeha. European missionaries made fortified wine from tutu berries.

Covering over 58 native species this publication will intrigue the reader as you learn so much about the traditional uses of our native plants. There would appear to be a treasure-trove of medicines out there awaiting modern pharmaceutical companies, a possible new major industry for New Zealand alongside Manuka honey.



The Possible Re-emergence of Cabbage Tree Decline

First observed in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, it is estimated that around 75% of our cabbage trees died in that period. Fortunately, the rate of dying declined significantly towards the end of the 1990s, it was presumed that new and existent plants had developed some immunity to the disease.

Sadly over the past six months, I have started noticing dead and dying cabbage trees as I travel around Auckland. This is purely anecdotal, to my knowledge, there has been no scientific survey although friends and colleagues have confirmed my observations. If this is the case, why would the disease suddenly reappear in late 2018 and early 2019? Is the problem related to specific weather conditions? I would ask all readers of this newsletter to closely observe cabbage trees either growing in their property or in the suburbs they live in with particular attention to three main factors.

1. What age (estimated) are trees dying at, to see if there is a pattern?
2. Where are the trees growing that are dying e.g. sun/shade, wet/dry conditions?
3. Are the trees dying rapidly or as previously over a lengthy period?

Hopefully, my observations have been of a limited number of cabbage trees that are dying of natural causes, I will update the situation in the autumn newsletter.

Native Grass Collection Thriving at Ben's Ridge

While not the easiest collection of plants to maintain long term, the grasses near the top of Bens Ridge are looking exceptionally fine at this moment. The three large Ghanias have been flowering throughout summer with their tall distinctive flower stems. In front of these magnificent tall grasses are a number of our native sedges including, *Carex buechananii*, *Carex comans*, *Carex dissita*, *Carex flagillifera*, *Carex solandri*, *Carex tenuiculus*, *Carex testacea*, *Carex trifida* and *Carex birgata*. As these various cedges are to be found naturally growing a wide range of habitats it is quite an achievement to have them thrive in one area.

Our native cedges are comparatively short-lived, only two to three years, therefore, maintenance of this area is ongoing with regular replanting to ensure there are always attractive mature specimens of the various species. Nearby in flower at present *Chionocluoa flavicans*, sometimes referred to as a miniature toetoe. We have grown our native toetoes in this area and intend planting some new specimens of *Cortaderia fulvida* and *Cortaderia richardii* this winter. If planting grasses in the home garden remember all the cedges must be grown in full sun, whilst some prefer dry conditions and some grow only where the soil is permanently damp.

Additions to Our Coprosma Collection

Coprosma linariifolia

Naturally occurs in scrubland in the lower North Island and throughout the South Island. The shrub or small tree can grow up to eight metres. Distinctive long narrow leaves are quite thick, a dark green colour. Fruit are white with a blue or black fleck.

Coprosma microcarpa

Found in the lower part of the North Island and in the South Island as far as South Canterbury. A medium sized shrub growing up to four metres with small narrow dark green leaves. Fruit is white.

Coprosma petriei

Grows south of the volcanic plateau in the North Island and throughout the South Island. Has a clumping, creeping habit, small narrow leaves are dark green. Fruit can be blue or fruit.

Coprosma rubra

Found in both islands in low land to lower montane forests, can grow up to four metres, leaves are thin and soft. Fruits are long white with a greenish tinge.

Fortunately, with diligent hand watering at Bens Ridge over the exceptionally dry January and early February, these new additions to the Coprosma collection have not only survived but have put on considerable new growth.

Join us on Saturday 6th of April 2019 from 10am to 3pm



Botanical Art and Fernglen Native Gardens - a Winning Combination!

Well, what a hidden gem Fernglen Native Gardens have turned out to be!

If you had popped into the gardens the weekend of the 8/9th December last year, you may have wondered what a group of 13 women were doing huddled over desks in the education room!



Well, we were taking part in a weekend workshop run by renowned UK botanical artist Jess Shepherd. We had heard through the Facebook grapevine that Jess, aka 'Inky Leaves' was visiting Australia and New Zealand in search of blue flowers and we were very keen to meet her while she was over. She became very well-known in botanical art circles for her exquisite overlarge watercolour paintings of leaves. Have a look at her website – <https://inkyleaves.com/> to see her truly amazing paintings!

We invited Jess to run a workshop on painting leaves larger than life in watercolour while she was in Auckland, and were delighted she agreed. She also ran workshops in Christchurch and Wellington so was able to see a fair bit of New Zealand. Luckily, she managed to find some specimens of sun orchids - *Thelymitra* willing to open long enough for her to take photos for her next series of paintings.



Some of Jess Shepherd's work

It was while botanical artist and good friend, Sandra Morris and I were looking for somewhere to hold the work shop that we came across Fernglen Gardens. Sandra contacted Kelly, who kindly showed her around and later rang me with the good news that she had found the perfect place in a great location! We had been looking for somewhere north of the bridge as in the past we had always had to drive to the Auckland Botanic Gardens in Manurewa and felt it was time to find somewhere nearer home!

The workshop was a huge success, everyone loved the venue and the opportunity to be surrounded by native bush while immersed in painting plants! Jess delightfully demystified painting leaves much larger than life for us, demonstrating her various techniques with watercolour, sharing details of her 'cheap as chips' brushes and favourite paint colours. With every detail of our chosen leaves being carefully observed and accurately drawn, there was no way we could finish our leaves in the 2 days, but we did go home inspired to continue to paint bigger, having learnt new techniques and colour mixes to finish them in our own time. Because botanical art/illustration needs to be botanically accurate, it is by nature very detailed and a painting can take many hours. Often a completed painting can take upward of 80 hours if you take all the preliminary sketches and colour trials into account.



Jess demonstrating



Since 'discovering' Fernglen, I felt such a delightful venue would be ideal for botanical art classes, and this year I am thrilled to be able to run monthly botanical art classes in the education room. These are suitable for complete beginners and intermediates as we will cover basic drawing, as well as watercolour and gouache. They take place every 2nd Sunday from 1.30 – 4.30pm (except May when it will be on the 1st Sunday), so if you love plants and fancy giving it a go, get in touch with me, Lesley Alexander on 0211617070 or email me at lesley.alexander.smith@gmail.com.

I look forward to introducing you to this beautiful and fascinating art genre.



Botanical Art at Fernglen

Interested?

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