

# FERNGLEN NATIVE PLANT GARDENS NEWSLETTER

Spring 2025

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## Curator Report

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*text by Cameron Thomas, photos by Cameron Thomas and Kelly Hayward*

### Maintenance

Things are picking up across Fernglen as the weather gets hotter, the plants have responded warmly but unfortunately the weeds are keeping pace too. Recent irrigation issues have been resolved thankfully, just in time as we head into the drier months. Heavy winds have continued to bring down the occasional tree and of course the many, many nikau fronds. With the intense bouts of rain and previous slips, it's a relief that the affected slopes continue to hold so far. Wildlands has been out updating and resetting traps as we head into the peak season for predator activity, keeping the control programme in shape.

### Development

Alongside the updates mentioned in the last newsletter about the fern house and the alpine house, we are also looking at refreshing the entrances and improving signage around the place. New visitors often tell us they did not realise the gardens were here, given how tucked away we are, so better road signs and clearer entrance signs should help make the site more visible. Labelling will also be a major focus in the coming months, which is always a substantial task with a collection as diverse as ours. In collaboration with the Auckland Botanic Gardens, we are working on updating and standardising our plant labels to improve clarity, information, and durability for the long term; until the next round of genus juggling and name changes arrive at least.

### Planting

At our previous volunteer working bee, the main planting project was refreshing the grass area up on Ben's Ridge. One problem with using native grasses in landscaping is the fact that native species tend to hold onto their dead leaves, making the plant look like it's given up when it is still very much alive. This area of the gardens thus needs periodic refreshing to keep it looking at its peak. The donated plants were grasses commonly used in landscaping that included *Carex testaceae*, *C. dispacea*, *C. comans* 'Bronze', and *C. comans* 'Frosted Curls'. Some additional grasses were added in the Rotary Grove in order to both help define the pathway better, and protect the kauri root zones in that area.

Trying to get the *Hibiscus richardsonii* re-established next to the bench seating has been an ongoing mission as the local slugs and snails have taken out the first couple rounds of germinated seeds. Though an incredibly hardy and tolerant plant once established, the young seedlings in particular are both susceptible and tasty to common garden pests. Though it will certainly be behind the *Hibiscus trionium* starting to flower elsewhere in the gardens, *H. richardsonii* can flower

within 3 months after germinating so we should still expect to see its blooms before the end of summer.

## Visitors

Warmer weather and bigger gaps between the rain has seen a noticeable up-tick in visitors to the gardens and we expect that to continue over the holiday period. We've also had a couple groups take advantage of the good weather to do some tours around Fernglen.

## Flowering / Fruiting

The first obvious change of the warmer weather is the orange blush creeping into the kawakawa berries throughout the gardens. While we're still a few weeks away from the season starting in earnest, the kereru seem unwilling to wait and have already been gorging themselves on anything showing the faintest hint of colour, especially around the education room.



*Jovellana sinclairii*

Another early summer flower coming into bloom at the moment is *Jovellana sinclairii*, a firm favourite of mine. More reminiscent of an English cottage garden plant than a New Zealand native, it has lush green foliage with white, upside bell shaped flowers, delicately speckled purple on the inside. A small population grows under the *Dracophyllums* near the lawn, and under the creeping fuchsia where it tends to go unnoticed except when flowering. A recent planting behind the bench seating aims to give this plant the spotlight it deserves.





*Fuchsia procumbens*

The *Hibiscus trionium* will also be catching your eye around the entrance and top gate, with its cream white flowers with a deep maroon centre. Although it is generally not considered a true native any longer due to much genetic scrutiny, this long term resident does bear a striking resemblance to *H. richardsonii* and they have been known to hybridise.



*Hibiscus trionium*



## Hidden Gems

The second specimen of bamboo orchid has come into flower on the totara next to the *Pennatia baylisiana* heading up the western path from the entrance. Together with the plant previously flowering on the *Griselinia*, it neatly shows off either end of this species flowering season.

Several of our *Dracophyllum* species, both near the lawn and in the Alpine House, have been in flower, typically having small off-white flower spikes that remain well hidden amongst the slender leaves.



*Dracophyllum sinclarii*

Our native mint, *Mentha cunninghamii*, has also shown a spread of its diminutive white flowers. The most abundant population is in the *Carmichaelia* bed, but with smaller colonies appearing elsewhere in the gardens.

One plant right at our entrance, *Muehlenbeckia astonii*, is a plant many will recognise from landscaping, where it is commonly used as hedging or topiary thanks to its divaricating interlaced branches. Its flowers and fruit however, are rarely noticed or appreciated. A firm favourite source of food for our native lizards, these tiny five petalled flowers undergo an unusual transformation. What most people would assume to be the fruit is actually the petals themselves, which become succulent as they mature. These curious translucent star shaped structures, are in my opinion, one of the tastiest native fruits you can find, though harvesting enough of these tiny fruit for a decent snack would require some dedication.





*Mentha cunninghamii*



*Muehlenbeckia astonii*



*Pachystegia insignis*



*Rhabdothamnus solandri*

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## Additional Ferns Planted at Our September Working Bee

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*by Neville Arbury*

Both alongside the pathway leading to the fernery and inside the fernery, new ferns were planted during our September working bee. Existing ferns were mulched and sites were prepared for later plantings. While numerous fern species are thriving in these areas, others struggled to survive, reminding us how site specific ferns are. This can often make ferns difficult to successfully cultivate. The aim over the next year is to add further fern species, especially on the upper slopes of the pathway leading to the fernery. Improvements to the existing irrigation system will benefit the existing ferns.

New ferns included:

- *Adiantum aethiopicum*
- *Adiantum cunninghamii*
- *Adiantum hispidulum*
- *Asplenium lamprophyllum*
- *Blechnum discolor*, coastal form
- *Blechnum fraseri*
- *Blechnum minor*
- *Polystichum richardii*

Note: At our November working bee, one of our regular volunteers produced specimen of the rare kidney fern, *Hymenophyllum nephrophyllum*. We have previously attempted to cultivate this striking fern near the fernery with little luck. The new specimen has been planted in the fernery and we hope it will thrive in this position.



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## The Impact of an Exceptionally Wet Winter on Various Native Plants

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by Neville Arbury

While our native trees and shrubs have adapted to particular soil types, moisture levels, sun, shade and exposure to winds, it can be very stressful when significantly different conditions prevail. This can happen when trees and shrubs classified as wetland plants suddenly experience a prolonged summer drought, or as what happened in Auckland this winter, continuous rain, flooding resulting in a very high water table. After a drought with little or no rain in January, February and March, rainfall was heavy and persistent through to September, early October.

The impact of this continuous rain is particularly evident with plants preferring free draining soils. These plants can usually survive a winter where normal levels of rainfall are received. The additional amount that has fallen this winter, sadly, was the death-knell for some species.

Those species most severely affected include:

- *Brachyglottis* species
- *Corokia* species
- *Elingamita johnsonii*
- *Hebe* species
- *Meryta sinclairii*
- *Olearia* species, except *Olearia solandrii*
- *Pachystegia insignis*
- *Pomaderris* species
- *Pseudopanax lessonii*
- *Pseudopanax ferox*

The challenge for this summer is how to manage wet plants if the soil changes from being excessively wet to being very dry!

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## Book Review – *Nature's Temple's: A Natural History of Old-Growth Forests* by Joan Maloof

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by Neville Arbury

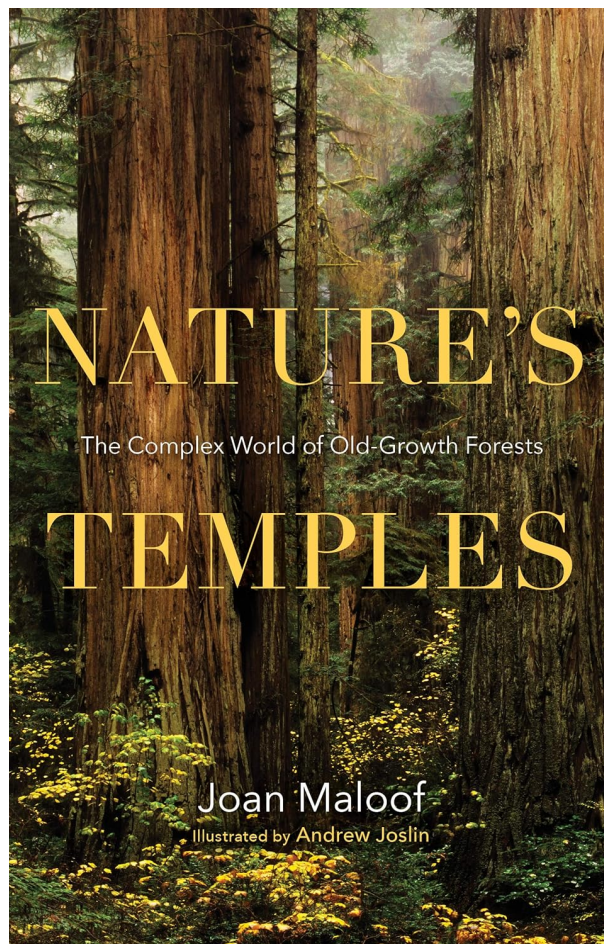
Author Joan Maloof is a founder and director of the Old-Growth Forest Network, a national organisation in the USA that works to save threatened forests. This fascinating publication explores the science and alchemy of old-growth forests and makes a compelling case for their protection. On the first page, author Maloof defines what an old-growth forest is:

*"A stage in a forest's development, but one that not all forests reach. In order to reach old growth a forest must have escaped destruction for a long enough period of time to allow natural biological and ecosystem functions to be the dominant influence."*

In other words, there is a continuity that allows generations of trees (and other organisms) to come and go!

Chapter after chapter, Maloof outlines the importance of old-growth forests, relating to birds, insects, mosses, herbaceous plants, lichens, worms, mammals and snails. In two chapters the connection of forests and water and forests and carbon are analysed in considerable detail. The author uses the phrase 'coupled system' when discussing the relationship between old-growth forests and water. Here she quotes Henry David Thoreau, *'Thank God they cannot cut down the clouds'*. He was comparing the beauty and wildness of clouds with the beauty and wildness of big, old trees. Maloof sadly notes that deforestation has indeed led to changes in cloud cover and rainfall.

A thought provoking publication. Extremely well written, often discussing science matters in an easy to comprehend fashion. Highly recommended!



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## Mulching Native Plants, Why and When?

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*by Neville Arbury*

When you are walking through native bush and especially native forest, you will invariably notice organic litter on the ground, made of fallen leaves, twigs and rotten branches etc. This is nature's mulch, ensuring that the organic content of the soil is continually replenished while at the same time creating nature's blanket, preventing soils from becoming excessively dry in summer and very wet over winter months.

In the home garden, mulch, an organic product of compost, crushed bark, leaf mould, has the following benefits: Moisture retention over dry summer months, weed suppression, moderating soil temperatures, aiding in prevention of erosion on steep slopes and long-term improving the organic content of soils as the mulch breaks down. The perfect time to apply mulch is in spring, as soil temperatures begin to rise and the soil water content lessens after a wet winter. Rather than applying a thick mulch in one hit, smaller amounts reapplied at regular intervals are most beneficial for plant growth.



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## Early Flowering of Pōhutukawa in November 2025

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*by Neville Arbury*

The first flowers of any significance were observed on November 5th. By Monday of the following week, considerable flowering was noted on random trees. There could be a run of mature pōhutukawa and a single specimen would be displaying deep crimson flowers. This is hard to comprehend.

There are two points of interest here to consider:

Does early flowering necessarily indicate a brilliant season of pōhutukawa flowering?

Is the fact that we experienced an exceptionally wet winter here in Auckland, in combination with comparatively mild temperatures lead to a brilliant flowering of pōhutukawa in the weeks leading up to Christmas? Only time will tell.

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## More Name Changes for Some of Our Native Plants

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*by Neville Arbury*

Over the past five to ten years there have been considerable changes to the scientific names of New Zealand plants. This is the result of advances in scientific research, especially DNA analysis, the strict adherence to international naming rules and the wish to incorporate te reo Māori names into nomenclature.

Many of the recent name changes have come from the evolving science of taxonomy. Here genetic sequencing aims to classify plants based on their evolutionary relationships. Previous plant classifications were often based solely on visual characteristics. These have been shown to be incorrect. Early botanists created large genera for plants that displayed superficial similarities. Modern taxonomy divides these large groupings into smaller more exactly defined genera that better reflect evolutionary history.

There is also concerted effort to recognise and include long established te reo Māori names within the scientific naming system.

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## A Walk Through the Famous Nan Lian Garden in Hong Kong

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*by Neville Arbury*

On a recent visit to Hong Kong, I found time to visit the serene and tranquil Nan Lian Garden. Opened in 2026, founding was mainly provided by the government and also by the nearby Chi Lin Nursery, who were responsible for the planting, design and construction of the entire garden. Interestingly the garden, which covers an area of 35,000 square metres is maintained and managed by the nearby Chi Lin Nursery for a nominal fee of HK\$1.00 per year under an agreement with the government.

Although the garden is situated in urban Kowloon, noise barriers have been erected to shield the garden from surrounding traffic noise, and extensive planting of trees helps to filter exhaust and dust from nearby roads. The garden follows the main elements of 'tang style' gardens, with artificial hillocks and ornamental rocks, water features, timber structures and old trees. The Chinese tradition of earth enclosing rocks is adopted for the formation of hillocks in the garden.

Visitors are encouraged to follow a one-way route to enjoy the landscaping based on traditional Chinese techniques such as 'borrowing scenes', 'concealing scenes', 'sheltering scenes', all designed to create space. The garden is immaculately cared for, the many trees appeared to be receiving individual care! Simply an amazing introduction to Chinese designed gardens.

Not to be forgotten, linked by a bridge is the nearby Chi Lin Nursery with its extensive gardens highlighted by large ponds full of flowering water lilies. The ancient bonsais growing in exquisite rock containers, many still wired, had to be seen to be believed.

Both gardens are an absolute must for anyone visiting Hong Kong



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## What's Happening at Fernglen?

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### Working bees

Regardless of the weather, working bees occur at Fernglen **on the second Saturday of every month from 9am onwards, until about 12 noon.**

The working bee is a great way to meet others, learn more about native plants, weeds and pest control. There is always a job to be done in the garden or in the education room.

No gardening experience is necessary and all ages and abilities are welcome. Gloves and gardening tools can be supplied.

Looking forward to seeing you there.

### Educational tours

Are you involved with a school or an education group and would like to learn about New Zealand native plants? A unique collection of plants from all over New Zealand grows at Fernglen. To see what is on offer please contact us

on email: [fernglen.nz@gmail.com](mailto:fernglen.nz@gmail.com)

or phone: 021 236 5800

### Room hire

The Fernglen Education Room is available for hire at very competitive rates. Please contact us

on email: [fernglen.nz@gmail.com](mailto:fernglen.nz@gmail.com)

or phone: 021 236 5800



# Botanical Art at Fernglen

Interested?

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