

FERNGLEN NATIVE PLANT GARDENS NEWSLETTER

Summer 2025/2026

Table of Contents

Curator Report.....	2
Annual Assessment of Pōhutukawa Flowering, December 2025.....	6
The Strange Weather Patterns of the Past Summer.....	7
Book Review – <i>When the Earth was Green</i> by Riley Black.....	8
The Importance of Planting Trees as Intensification of Housing Continues in Auckland.....	9
A Visit to Eden Gardens, Early March 2026.....	11
What's Happening at Fernglen?.....	12

Curator Report

text by Cameron Thomas, photos by Cameron Thomas

Maintenance

I do wonder if I jinxed things by saying, "It's fortunate we haven't had any more slips", because since then, we've had more. With the heavy, sustained rain in late March, one of the streams in the Parataniwha Glade burst its banks and tried to take a couple of the boardwalk poles with it.

With the southern entrance still blocked off, there is currently no public access to Ben's Ridge until the track can be properly assessed. The ridgeline path remains open, however the stairs leading down are closed.

It's a real shame, as a lot of mulching and weeding has been done up at Ben's Ridge over the past few months, along with the path borders being refreshed in the Rotary Grove which we'd love visitors to see for themselves. But for the time being, photos will have to do.



Refreshed edging in the Rotary Grove

Development

Recent visitors will likely have noticed the new garden bed that has appeared along the top driveway. This was a truly tremendous effort by our volunteers, who helped with the ponga borders to bring the look of the bed together.

With the pending addition of new bench seating, we hope that dividing the grass area with this planting will create a more defined grass picnic space, while also tying it more cohesively into the surrounding gardens.

A natural swale will also be incorporated into the bed, which should help minimise the risk of lower areas remaining waterlogged over winter. Following the recent rain, early signs are encouraging, with fewer washouts occurring elsewhere in the gardens.

Some of our wooden directional signs have also been refreshed, with cleaning and re-engraving completed. These will soon be complemented by official Council track markers, including walking times, over the coming months.

Planting

No major plantings have been done just yet, as the main planting event, in the newly made bed by the lawn area, will be in May. A few replacements of previously lost plants have made their way into the gardens, however.



Clianthus puniceus (kākābeak)

First is the kākābeak or *Clianthus puniceus* making its return, with the white flowering variety being planted near the *Hibiscus richardsonii*, and the standard red being planting up by the grass area next to the *Rubus*'s. Most of you will already recognise this striking and critically endangered herbaceous shrub especially when it comes out in flower are they're hard to miss. With only a handful of plants remaining in the wild this plant has maintained its popularity from long ago, being cultivated by Māori, to its use in gardens today. Despite having a botanical name that could be roughly translated to the 'blood-red glory flower', it often fights an ongoing battle with a wide range of common garden pests and can be stripped bare of foliage by snails in a few days.

Second is the native swamp hibiscus by the entrance near the *Sophora prostrata*. Much to my surprise and labelling lament, it has been reclassified from *Hibiscus diversifolius* to *Sabdariffa diversifolia*. A recent breakup of the Hibiscus genus now means it is a disjunct species and only representation of the genus in Aotearoa. It is now grouped in with roselle's (*Sabdariffa gossypifolia*), a niche 'fruit' that has gained popularity in recent years, which the fleshy calyx, or flower casing, is used in syrups, drinks, and jams. Though, given the fierce spikes of our native member, the only thing you're likely to taste from it is regret.

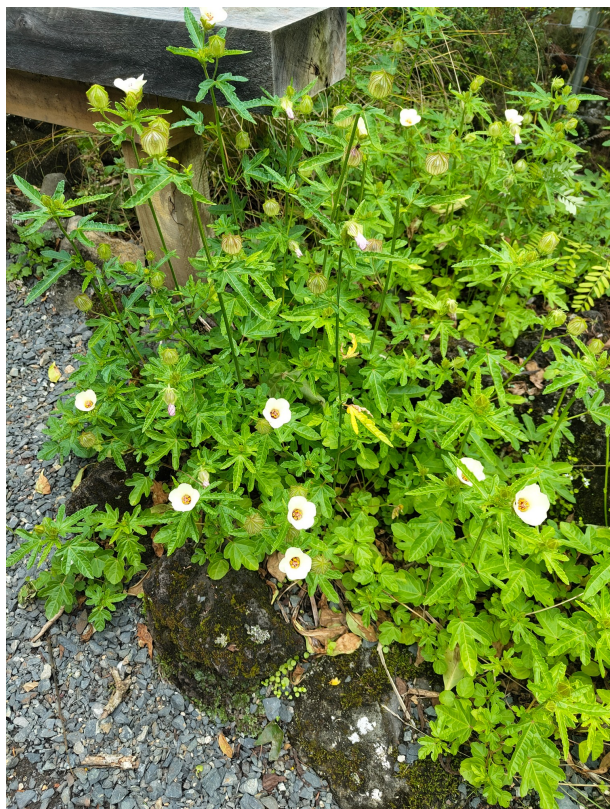
Visitors

We have certainly been at the whims of the weather lately going from a very dry late summer into what is shaping up to be a wet autumn, which has also impacted our visitor numbers. Ben's Ridge being closed has probably had the greatest impact, with the loop track being our regulars favourite area to walk. The weather also affected Eco Day which was part of the Auckland wide Eco-fest. Despite lower numbers of school aged children than expected, those who attended expressed excitement, wonder, and appreciation for what we do at Fernglen, and quite a number went home with plants and advice from the team, so in all it was still a good day.

Flowering / Fruiting

We've hit a bit of a seasonal lull with our flowering plants at the moment, with the summer flowers having done their dash and the autumnal ones just starting to gear up.

One plant I am glad to see thriving and flowering is *Hibiscus richardsonii*, which if you remember the last newsletter I was at war with the local slugs and snails to get these guys established again. Though often overlooked with its diminutive cream flowers compared to its showier non-native cousin *Hibiscus trionium*, with some strategic pruning and feeding it can get prolific enough to carve out its own niche in the garden.



Hibiscus richardsonii



Wahlenbergia albomarginata

Another plant making its comeback is *Wahlenbergia albomarginata*, often called the NZ harebell, found in one of the large concrete pots next to the alpine house. Though taking a hit as collateral damage in some over enthusiastic weeding, this plant has definitely bounced back with one of the most robust displays of flowers people have seen in years.



Closeup of *Wahlenbergia albomarginata*

One of plants that had a brief but showy display was one of our native bamboo orchids *Earina autumnalis*, raupeka, or the aptly named Easter Orchid which typically flowers around Easter. This plant has much larger white flowers than the related yellow-flowered *Earina mucronata*, and with similar leaf shape and habitat these two could be mistaken for one another when viewed in the branches of tall trees.

Visitors coming through the main gate would have noticed the Scarlet Rata (*Metrosideros fulgens*) putting on a show with its distinctive orange red flowers. Although just finishing up as this newsletter comes out, it definitely provided a feast of nectar to the various bees and insects that flocked to it.

Lastly, perhaps the showiest and most anticipated native flower is just coming into its season, *Tecomanthe speciosa*. Tucked up in the vines I found the first flowers to flush, and couldn't help but notice the plethora of buds ready to go, so I expect we'll get quite the good season out of the Three Kings Vine this year.



Earina autumnalis (raupeka)



Metrosideros fulgens



Tecomanthe speciosa

Annual Assessment of Pōhutukawa Flowering, December 2025

by Neville Arbury

December 2025 was possibly the most erratic season of pōhutukawa flowering I have ever observed! The first signs of flowering were particularly early. November 5, random trees were in full bloom while neighbouring trees showed no signs of flowers. This pattern continued throughout the entire 'normal' pōhutukawa flowering season. There were some phenomenal displays of flowers on individual trees while others in close proximity had little or no blooms!

There was no obvious reason for the erratic flowering – position of trees, proximity to the sea, soil types, age of trees – no obvious pattern emerged. And flowering finished rather quickly, at least a week before Christmas Day! As usual the variability of flower colour was apparent ranging from deep red to orange red.

Metrosideros 'Mistral' (a hybrid pōhutukawa / northern rātā) invariably flowers after pōhutukawa throughout to New Year, but for some unknown reason, this season they flowered at the same time as pōhutukawa with their distinctive smaller, deep red flowers.

While flowering of pōhutukawa remains mysterious, it is critical that they continue to be planted in public spaces where room allows. They remain a critical part of Auckland's identity.

Just to add to the conundrum of pōhutukawa is the fact that a very small percentage of trees produce quite spectacular aerial roots, while other surrounding trees have none!

And by late February some pōhutukawa were dripping with seed pods, neighbouring trees having few if any!

What a fascinating tree!!!

The Strange Weather Patterns of the Past Summer

by Neville Arbury

December, January and February are normally the hottest and driest months of the year. However, during this period Auckland received regular downpours – to the delight of gardeners. In addition light rain fell frequently to supplement the heavier rain.

The impact of this significantly increased precipitation was noticeable with Auckland's trees responding with new vegetative growth. The rain was the saving grace for many street trees. Especially those planted in the winter of 2025. Sadly, there is usually no follow up care for street trees and losses are considerable.

The concern now (written early March), is that the tap is turned off and we experience a very dry late summer/ early autumn. Now is a perfect time to mulch trees and shrubs while the soil is still warm and moist. This will help prevent the soil from drying too rapidly.

Predicting the weather is always a challenge, but will probably become even more problematic in future years, as climate change impacts all weather factors, especially monthly rainfall totals.

Book Review – *When the Earth was Green* by Riley Black

by Neville Arbury

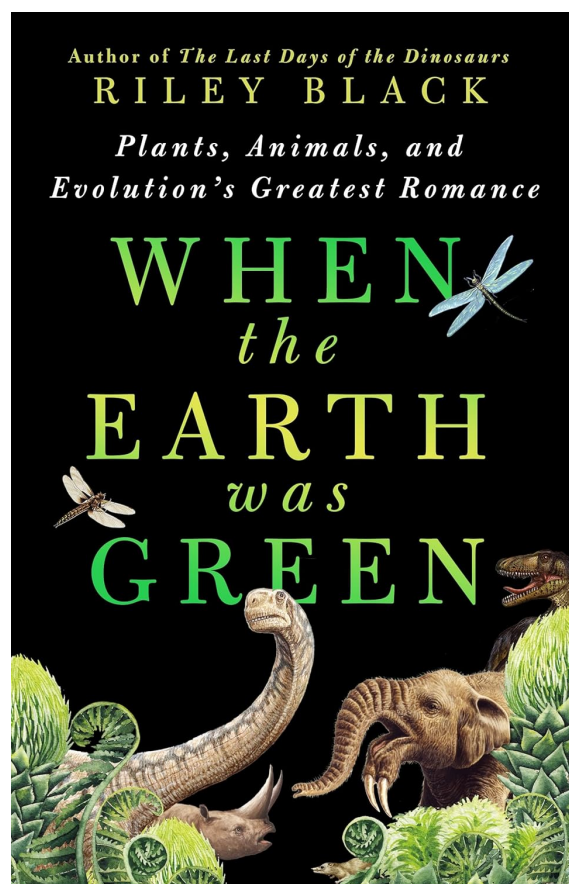
In this fascinating publication, the author essentially addresses how plants, and their interaction with animals have shaped the world through the millennia. As she writes,

"Through all of life's changes, plants have responded, adapted and thrived anew. Changing the world as they flourish."

This importance of plant life can never be underestimated, according to the author. Perhaps more than any other form of life, plants have shaped nature on Earth.

The chapter on prehistoric plants is especially interesting, Black writes,

"It has been the constant growth of plants that has allowed so many fascinating prehistoric creatures to evolve, as green life oxygenated the atmosphere, coaxing animals on to the land and formed forests that shaped our ancestor's anatomy!"



Chapter 13 titled, *"Partners in Pollination"*, is particularly intriguing, as it relates to New Zealand 17 million years ago, and the pollination of *Astelia hastata*, the 'widow maker' plant. This native epiphyte requires pollination and produces a supply of sweet nectar that the bats require for energy. While collecting the nectar the bat becomes covered with pollen that is then transferred to the next *Astelia*, a trade that the bat is completely unaware of!

The author summarises her work very simply when she writes, *"The present is rooted in the past, just as a tree is rooted to its home soil"*.

A fascinating read, highly recommended.

The Importance of Planting Trees as Intensification of Housing Continues in Auckland

by Neville Arbury

The major question here is, where to plant the next generation of native trees to provide lungs for the city of Auckland.

- *Existing parks* – A survey of all Auckland parks would no doubt illustrate there is ample room for planting many native trees. There is certainly room at the Auckland domain, and Cornwall Park for additional plantings of large native trees.
- *Schools, primary, intermediate and secondary* – Often planting areas are bereft of large trees that provide shade and shelter.
- *Sides of motorways* – Traditionally planted with ‘fast growing’ native shrubs, plantings are invariably poorly maintained and eventually are dominated by rogue privet and wattle trees. An ideal site to display large native trees.
- *Street trees* – Especially important in newly developed suburban areas, where there are no overhead power lines and sections are invariably very small.
- *Golf courses* – Great potential to increase plantings of tall growing native trees.
- *Retirement villages* – Encourage the planting of large trees rather than present small shrubs.
- *By existing walkways* – Often dominated by privet, wattle trees. When developing new walkways, the planting of native trees should be an integral part of the process.
- *Sport, recreational fields* – Often these areas are quite exposed to the elements, wind, and rain. Trees provide shelter and shade for both participants and supporters.
- *Margins of Auckland* – Critical areas to plant as Auckland expands rapidly. Establishment of new reserves, retention of existing plantings. Often there is just one opportunity to enhance these areas.

Very simply, there are so many outstanding reasons for planting more trees in an urban environment. Below are listed some of the primary reasons:

- To improve air quality and capture carbon
- Reduce heat and create microclimates
- To create a habitat for birds and insects (biodiversity)
- To reduce the risk of erosion and flooding
- To improve well being
- To create wildlife corridors
- To reduce the impact of buildings and roads

A Visit to Eden Gardens, Early March 2026

by Neville Arbury

Many years ago an abandoned quarry in Mt. Eden was purchased with the idea of creating an inner city garden. In the mid 1960s Jack Clark, a well-known Auckland nurseryman with some very capable and enthusiastic assistants began the arduous task of creating paths, walls, and planting areas before finally commencing planting.

While being mainly a collection of exotic trees and shrubs, especially azaleas, camellias, hibiscus and rhododendrons, there are many native trees, shrubs and ferns growing throughout the gardens.

The native fern collection was thriving in March when I visited. The numerous king ferns were outstanding, possibly because of the very wet summer we have experienced. All ferns were resplendent with new growth.

Large native trees found at Eden Gardens include totara, rimu, rewarewa, karaka, kōwhai, and pōhutukawa. There is an exceptionally old pōhutukawa near the summit of the Hillary walk.

The quandary for the management of Eden Gardens is the size of many of the existing trees – both those planted and others that have arrived by seed deliveries by neighbouring birds. Some significant tree surgery is required to reduce canopy, size and overcrowding.

The gardens are well worth a visit. A serene environment, so close to the centre of Auckland.

What's Happening at Fernglen?

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

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

or phone: 021 236 5800



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Lesley Alexander
021 161 7070 or
email lesley.alexander.smith@gmail.com

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