FERNGLEN NATIVE PLANT GARDENS NEWSLETTER

Winter 2026

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Curator Report

text and photos by Cameron Thomas

Maintenance & Development

With the spring flush upon us, the grass in the resown lawn is finally starting to thicken up. With its first trim due this week we're hoping that the new lawn area will be open by the end of October. Our new irrigation system in the Fernhouse has been finalised and will be helping to keep our fernhouse looking lush over the looming dry summer ahead. As we work towards having living walls filling out the fernhouse, the latest addition is a dedicated irrigation line to keep them moist. The system will periodically run for 5 minutes throughout the day, so don't get too spooked if you hear the pipes gurgle to life while you're in there. It's actually quite the mesmerising sight if you ever get the chance to see it running.

I'm still waiting with bated breath for an update on the tracks. Be assured I will announce any updates when I receive them with much giddy excitement.

Planting

No major plantings have happened, however I am undertaking a little experiment with our new lawn. With the lawn area being the only area on site with non-natives, I have decided to trial integrating native groundcovers into the grass there. With a wide mix of *Acaena*, *Leptinella*, *Luzula*, *Epilobium*, *Mazus*, and *Gunnera* I hope to see which species can do well as part of a mixed lawn. Along with creating an effect of the native plants slowly reclaiming the area, I hope to inspire people to use more native ground covers in their own gardens.

Visitors

Along with a noticeable up-tick of visitors with this spring weather, we've had a couple of large groups through Fernglen recently. First was the Glen Eden gardening group who really enjoyed their fact-laden tour. They had absolutely splendid feedback for us and were kind enough to sign a letter of support for the prioritisation of our tracks being reopened. The week after we had a surprise visit from the local Birkenhead Playcentre on one of their nature days. Sadly, they weren't able to picnic on the new lawn just yet, however they spent a few hours exploring every corner of Fernglen. A huge thank you to the parents, who helped keep the more adventurous kids off the plants while helping to instil a respect for the gardens.

Flowering/Fruiting

I recently realised I'm rather fortunate in my position at Fernglen as quite often in amenity horticulture, it can seem that sometimes the only photos you take at work are when things have

gone wrong. With a week off recently, I was quite pleased to return to Fernglen, suddenly flowering in abundance. With my camera roll stuffed with photos of flowers, strap in because there's a lot to get through.



Clematis cunninghamii



Geniostoma ligustrifolium

The first plant I noticed was our *Clematis cunninghammii* putting on quite the stupendous show. The plant we have on the trellis behind the kiosk is a male and the flowers have the most delightful scent first thing in the morning. Another strong smelling flower I've noticed nearby took me a while to figure out the culprit. Hangehange, or *Geniostoma ligustrifolium*, has inconspicuous green flowers that carry a heavy musky, slightly sweet scent that reminds me of earthy spices and decomposing wood. Our *Alseuosmia macrophylla* has an ambitious showing currently, a great relief as most of the plant along the fern path died back leaving us rather nervous as to whether it would survive. The name *Alseuosmia* in Latin roughly translates to 'fragrant grove' and once you get up close to the striking red tubular flowers you'll understand why. Last on my list of native nosegays is *Pimelea longifolia* coming up in its delicate bundles of white flowers. Often called the NZ Daphne, many members of the genus have fragrant flowers. Our mairehau (*Leionema nudum*) next to the *Pimelea* is also having a great season. The flowers unfortunately don't have a noticeable scent, quite surprising as it's one of our few native members of the citrus family and the leaves have a rich camphorus scent to them.



Alseuosmia macrophylla



Pimelea longifolia



Leionema nudum



Xeronema callistemon



Sophora prostrata

Quite a number of our more striking natives are drinking up the sunshine and pushing out some phenomenal blooms. It would be quite hard not to notice the *Xeronema callistemon* by the main gate with over a dozen flower spikes in full show. The specimen by the education room is usually a month or two behind the one in the main beds but we're hoping it will be showing off soon enough. The white kākābeak (*Clianthus puniceus*) is just finishing off its latest flush but the red one by the lawn has decided to do a second round, looking obscene as ever. The *Metrosideros carminea* is just gearing up with its beautiful magenta flowers, already exciting all the local pollinators. Up on Ben's Ridge, our kumarahou (*Pomaderris kumaraho*) is having another excellent season, such a shame people can't see it in person. Our *Sophora prostrata* is also just coming out into flower, it serves as quite the contrast to your typical kōwhai flower with its compact shape and distinctive orange lateral petals.



Clianthus puniceus



Metrosideros carminea



Pomaderris kumaraho



Pomaderris kumaraho closeup



Pterostylis agathicola



Earina mucronata

Now for a few hidden gems you might miss. I talked in the last newsletter about our native pixie cap orchids coming up, and recently our greenhood orchids have been popping up too. *Pterostylis agathicola*, also known as the kauri greenhood orchid is an unassuming plant heavily associated with kauri forests, being mycorrhizal it relies on fungi to support its growth. Our bamboo orchid *Earina mucronata* on the *Griselinia* next to the pergola is also thriving, with the wind just right you can often catch a whiff of its delicate scent. Just in front of the *Earina* is *Toronia toru*, a classic example of the indigenous Māori name being incorporated into its botanical name. It is quite unique in that it is the only member of its genus, and one of only two native *Proteaceae* (think *Banksia* and *Grevillea*) members, the other being *Knightia excelsa*. Though typically grown for its attractive lanceolate leaves, it has quite handsome flowers if you can spot them in the tree tops.



Toronia toru

With spring well underway, there's plenty happening at Fernglen at the moment, and this is only a fraction of what's out there. If you haven't visited in a while, now is a good time to come and see what is flowering. If you need pointing in the right direction to find any of these blooms, or have any questions about our plants, feel free to come and find me in the gardens!

Common Questions from Visitors to Fernglen

text by Neville Arbury, photo by Kelly Hayward

Having shown groups and individuals around Fernglen for over 30 years, I am frequently asked similar questions, below are a few of them.

Almost all visitors express surprise at the number of endangered plants in New Zealand and how many we have successfully growing at Fernglen. Invariably I am asked, "What is the rarest plant you have growing at Fernglen?" Of course I reply, pointing out the *Pennantia baylisiana* in the old garden, proudly explaining that this is the world's rarest plant according to the Guiness Book of Records, with just one female specimen left in the wild on the Three Kings Islands.

Many visitors are amazed at the number and variety of species we have growing in our gardens. "How do you care for them all?", is a common question. Ferns are always of considerable interest: "Where are they best grown?" "Are some easier to grow than others?" "How much water do they require over summer months?"

Considerable interest is always shown in the display of numerous groundcovers found throughout Fernglen – *Leptinellas*, *Gunneras*, *Nerteras*, *Leptostigmas* and *Menthas*. "What are the best ground covers for shady gardens, clay soils, coastal properties?", I am asked. I emphasize that groundcovers help suppress weeds, conserve ground moisture as well as being an attractive addition to the native garden.



Various groundcovers in Fernglen

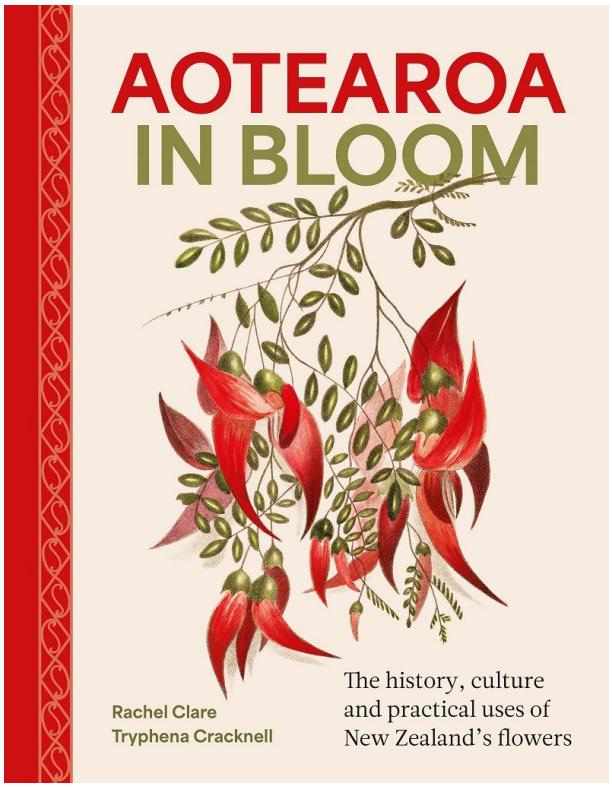
The "ancient" *Tecomanthe speciosa*, planted in the 1950's is always of interest to visitors especially its age and its "triffid" nature i.e. it has never stopped growing! Visitors in early winter are always amazed at the large cream flowers that appear from woody branches. "How does this happen?" I am asked.

Our native begonia, parataniwha, growing prolifically by the bridge to Bens Ridge is always of great interest to visitors, particularly because in appearance it is so unlike other native plants. "Where can I grow it?" "Does it need to be near water?" These are common questions.

Invariably near the end of a tour I am asked "Who owns the gardens", "Are they always open to the public?", "Who looks after the plants?" When leaving visitors often repeat the same comment: "If only I had known about the gardens years ago!" What can I say!!!

Book Review: *Aotearoa in Bloom – The History, Culture and Practical Uses of New Zealand's flowers* by Rachel Clare and Tryphena Cracknell

by Neville Arbury



This superbly produced and illustrated publication has been long overdue and fills an important gap in the "library of literature" relating to our native plants.

The two authors have researched their topic in phenomenal depth, as well as displaying their knowledge from many years of involvement with native plants. As the "blurb" on the back cover of this publication states,

> *"combining photographs with historic botanical drawings, Aotearoa in Bloom weaves together stories of people and plants. Part social history, part gardening guide, this special book is a blossoming celebration of Aotearoa's unique natural heritage"*

With enticing chapter headings, the book addressed native flowering plants according to their habitats:

1. Mountain Bloomers – Alpine Loving Flowers
2. Bush Belles – Flowers from the Ngahere
3. Sun Worshippers – Scrubland and Rock Dwellers
4. Waterside Charmers – River, Stream and Swamp Flowers
5. Beach Babes – Coastal Beauties
6. Widespread Wonders – from Mangrove to Shorelines

As a bonus, towards the end of its publication is a guide on how to propagate native plants and how to find the right plant for the right place.

This remarkable book has my very highest recommendation, easy reading and yet incredibly informative. A must for all native plant lovers who have been waiting so long for this superb publication.

A Walk through the Cairns Botanic Gardens

by Neville Arbury

By sheer chance my accommodation in Cairns was adjacent to the Botanic Gardens, so every morning I was awoken by the dawn chorus of various native Australian birds, culminating in the throaty laughter of a kookaburra.

The gardens cover 38 hectares in North Cairns and is world renowned for its collection of tropical vegetation. Entering the gardens I went straight onto a long boardwalk displaying what coastal vegetation in Cairns would have been, prior to settlement. This was an area of wetlands with many large trees and emerging understory and remained my favourite part of the gardens.

The "Flecker Garden" is an extensive collection of tropical flora from Northen Queensland, South East Asia, South America and Africa. Here I discovered a massive teak tree planted in 1946. They have enormous leaves that I was familiar with when travelling in Myanmar in 2018. The display of tropical plants here was simply mind boggling. The *Heliconias* were in full bloom with masses of deep red flowers arising from large leaves.

The "Fitzalan Gardens" featured a comprehensive collection of mature palms that were planted in the early years of the gardens. The grey coloured *Bismarckian* were the standout palms.

The "First Peoples Plant Use Garden" displayed the many plants used by the Rainforest Aboriginal People who were hunters and gatherers. The plants displayed here were used for food, shelter, medicine, clothing, utensils, tools and weapons. My overall impression of the gardens was that they closely resemble a walk through the tropical rainforest of Queensland. Almost all plants were accurately labelled, paths were user friendly and directions were well signposted.

As a lover of tropical plants (after NZ natives of course) I was thrilled to view such an extensive collection from the hotspots, not only Northern Queensland but other parts of the world.

The gardens are a fitting attribute for the city of Cairns that displays it tropical plants so well in plantings throughout the city.

A look at Auckland's Two Indigenous Veronicas: *Veronica Bishopiana* and *Veronica Obtusata*

text by Neville Arbury, photos by Kelly Hayward

NOTE! *Hebes* are now classified as *Veronicas*. DNA testing provided evidence that they should be placed inside the large existing *Veronica* genus.

We have both these species thriving at Fernglen where they have been part of our plant collection for many years. *Veronica bishopiana* is to be found growing near the long-standing ngaio in the old garden while *Veronica obtusata* is growing on a retained bank behind the Alpine House in proximity to the female *Elingamita johnsonii*.

Veronica bishopiana

This rare plant is only located in parts of the Waitakere Ranges, growing on coastal cliffs and stream sides. It has a rather open "leggy" habit eventually reaching one metre at maturity, with distinctive maroon/green leaves and white/mauve colored flowers. The plant was originally considered a hybrid of *Hebe stricta* and *Hebe obtusata*, but was later classified as a true species. The plant was named after John Bishop (1865-1933), a long-time resident of Titirangi who was a prolific collector of native plants.



Veronica bishopiana at Fernglen

Veronica obtusata

A low growing, semi prostrate plant with distinctive elliptical leathery leaves is only located in coastal areas on steep slopes and rugged cliffs. Unfortunately seldom seen for sale, the plant is easily propagated by seed or semi hardwood cuttings. Originally thought to be limited to Auckland's west coast, there is a very small population to be found near Kawhia.

NOTE: As with all Veronica species the two described in this article are best planted in an open sunny site where there is sufficient air movement. Soils should be particularly free draining as both species are naturally cliff dwelling.



Veronica obtusata at Fernglen

Flowering of Kōwhai in Auckland

by Neville Arbury

While September is commonly considered as the month for kōwhai to flower in Auckland, depending on the weather conditions, flowering can occur earlier or later. The key question for home owners who have planted a kōwhai in their garden is, “when will my Kowhai start flowering?” The exact time is incredibly variable, can be anytime from three to ten years after planting! The “good news” is that once the tree has commenced flowering this will continue each following year.

The eventual form of a kōwhai tree is also quite variable, it is worth noting that *Sophora microphylla*, often available in garden centres, has a prolonged juvenile divaricating form which delays the onset of flowering.

When selecting a suitable position in the home garden for a new kōwhai tree, consider that they are long lived trees often surviving for over 100 years! They prefer an open, sheltered position, with well drained soil and where the trees can be safely accessed by native birds.

Do not be distressed when the leaves of kōwhai trees disappear sometimes overnight on juvenile trees. Infestations of the kōwhai moth caterpillar can be devastating but fortunately trees recover quite quickly.

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



Explore, Sketch and Discover

Join Lesley Alexander to observe and
document the changing seasons at Fernglen

Spring

Saturday
17 October 2026
11am - 1pm

Summer

Saturday
16 January 2027
11am -1pm

Autumn

Sunday
11 April 2027
11am - 1pm

Use QR codes for more details

fernglen

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