Christchurch Botanic Gardens

The tradition of gardening in this city on the South Island of New Zealand goes back to the beginning of European settlement. The initial plans for a botanic garden in Christchurch were formed just 13 years after the first settlers from England arrived here in 1850. The first tree was planted on July 9, 1863 in what was later to become the Botanic Gardens. This tree, an English Oak, commemorating the marriage of Prince Albert to Princess Alexandra of Denmark, is still living near the footbridge over the Avon leading to the Bandsmen’s Rotunda and Daffodil Woodland. Many other trees that were planted within a few years remain to this day, making the Christchurch Botanic Gardens a tree-lovers dream destination. There are numerous large, majestic trees from all over the world, many of which are in excess of 120 years old.

Until 1946 the Botanic Gardens were controlled by the Christchurch Domains Board, but when that was dissolved because of financial difficulties, management was placed under the jurisdiction of the Christchurch City Council. Today the Botanical Services Team of the Greenspace Unit, Christchurch City Council is responsible for the Gardens. The mission of the Gardens is “to promote understanding and appreciation of the world’s flora (its botanical attributes and uses) including special areas devoted to Southern Hemisphere plants.” Over a million people visit the Gardens each year, which is near the Canterbury Museum, Christ’s College, the Provincial Council Chambers, the Christchurch Cathedral, and the Arts Centre.

Christchurch Botanic Gardens covers 74 acres within Hagley Park, a vast sports and recreation area on the fringe of downtown – one of the world’s largest open green spaces in an inner city center. Most of this land is within a loop of the Avon River in the middle of the city. Originally the area was mainly wetlands and sand dunes, but it was transformed into one of the finest collections of exotic and native plants in New Zealand, with many huge exotic trees (elm, oak, eucalyptus, etc.) planted by important early settlers and
visiting British royalty amid the long sweeping lawns, and various plant collections. Because the Gardens are meant to reflect the flora of the world, some of the Gardens’ best known collections are the large exotic trees, the orchid collections and the cacti and succulents, most of which are not on display because of lack of space. Although the daffodils and the cherry trees flowering in the spring are one of the most popular features, the Gardens are worth visiting in all seasons. The world-class begonia collections are an attraction in early summer, the roses and a collection of New Zealand dahlia cultivars actually bred in New Zealand are in full bloom in midsummer, and the mosaic of red, orange, yellow and brown leaves of the deciduous trees are a highlight in autumn. In addition to the plants, the area is home to some native birds, including native wood pigeons (kereru), scaup or black teal, and paradise ducks.

Some birds found in the Gardens include robins, native scaup (also called black teal, in water and walking through flower-filled grass), and paradise ducks.

The Collections:

Elaborate bedding displays grace the lawns near the main gate.

The annual bedding display has been a feature since the late 19th Century. During the Victorian era such displays were in high fashion, and the formal and spectacular spring and summer bedding displays continue this tradition. The displays utilize both typical annuals and other plants such as biennials, herbaceous perennials and shrubs to add contrast in color, height, form, texture and scent. Over 30,000 annuals are put out each year along the Armstrong Lawn to showcase the newest cultivars of begonias, geraniums, salvias, petunias, marigolds and more.

In 1997 the restored turquoise-and-yellow Peacock Fountain (named after the Honourable John Peacock who gave it to the city in 1906, not after any birds on it) was located among the bedding display. Originally sited at the east end of the Archery Lawn, it was dismantled in 1949 because of deterioration and high maintenance costs. In 1996 it was restored to it former glory and was officially re-opened the following year in its new location just inside the main gate on Rolleston Avenue.

In the spring, the Azalea Garden is a highlight, with a well-established collection of Azalea mollis cultivars and magnolias in the semi-shade of oaks and birches north of the bog garden.

The Peacock Fountain.
The Gardens boasts two rose gardens. The **Central Rose Garden** contains hundreds of cultivars and hybrids of modern garden rose in a formal planting. A portion is replanted every year in order to include recently introduced cultivars and award-winning varieties. The original rose garden, established in 1909, was based on the rectangular design of the rose garden owned by the Duchess of Sutherland in Herefordshire, England, and had 132 beds with over 2,400 bush roses, many standard roses and huge pergolas covered with climbing roses, all edged with box hedging. In 1935, the soil was exhausted and a major renovation was undertaken, hauling in more soil, planting a sheltering yew hedge for the new circular layout, and eventually replacing the central mirror pool with a large sundial.

The **Central Rose Garden** has hundreds of roses planted in a formal style.

The **Heritage Rose Garden** contains an extensive collection of over 250 modern, old garden and wild roses interplanted with herbaceous perennials, and many structures for rose supports as well as seating areas from which to enjoy the interesting displays throughout November and December. There are old roses of every size and color along with tall delphiniums, peonies, salvias and other companion plants mixed in.

The **Heritage Rose Garden** has many perennials planted amid the roses.

The **Herbaceous Border** that was developed in the early 1920’s was designed to show the perennials from all over the world best suited for a Canterbury garden. It was broken into sections in the mid 1930’s and today is one of few remaining herbaceous borders within a public garden in New Zealand. This very traditional English type of border is at its best from December through February (late spring to summer), with its range of color and texture among the massed plants. The thirty foot deep herbaceous bed stretches about a hundred yards filled with lush growth and large swaths of color without a bare spot anywhere.
The Herb Garden, constructed in 1986, has an extensive range of plants used for culinary and medicinal purposes.

The New Zealand Garden has evolved over several decades to showcase mature specimens of native flora primarily from lowland forests. It includes the Cockayne Memorial Garden and the ‘bush area’ where plants were established to grow naturally. Cockayne Memorial Garden, established in 1938 with two sections, memorializes Dr. Leonard Cockayne, internationally known systematic botanist, ecologist and horticulturist. His Vegetation of New Zealand remains a classic book. The alpine garden section shows a representative of flora from New Zealand’s mountains, while the other part focused on Hebe, but following its redesign in 1961 includes additional native plants.

The New Zealand Garden features species native to this country, including Fuchsia and rengarenga (Arthropodium cirratum).

The Rock Garden, adjacent to a large lily pond, was formed from volcanic rocks from the Port Hills in the late 1930’s. It has a wide range of plants. Nearby are many Rhododendron species and hybrids, along with Hosta, Helleborus and Lilium.

The Heather Garden was redeveloped in 1967, moving from its original site on the southeast side of the rock garden, and enlarging it to accommodate the large collection of Ericas and Callunas, many of which are South African cultivars. Large informal groups give a natural appearance and a succession of flowers and colorful foliage provide interest throughout the year. The Primula Garden has an extensive
collection of plants in this genus, along with other moisture-loving plants, along a small stream in semi-shaded conditions under a selection of small trees and large shrubs. The Bog Garden has a nice backdrop of mature trees and shrubs that provide shelter from the wind. This area was developed from the gravel and sand pits on the western side of the gardens and now contains a wide variety of water-loving plants suitable for a bog garden in almost any situation.

The Heather Garden (L); the lily pond near the Rock Garden (C); and the Primula Garden (R).

The Archery Lawn, adjacent to the herbaceous border, was named because a local archery club used the area in the 1880’s. It provides grand vistas through the surrounding trees.

The numerous trees of the Christchurch Botanic Garden are set off nicely by the Archery Lawn.

In early spring the 5 acre Daffodil Woodland on the southwest side of the slow-moving, toe toe- (Cortederia spp.) and tussock-lined Avon River – with its huge duck population – comes alive with over half a million daffodils planted among the oak and ash trees of this established woodland.

The Avon River, lined with toe toe (Cortederia grass) and tussock, is home to ducks and swans. The Daffodil Woodland is on the other side of the river.
**Pine Mound** is a group of maritime pines, *Pinus pinaster*, growing on a naturally occurring sand dune at the far end of the Armstrong Lawn. The Pinetum is a collection of conifers that began prior to World War II that included many species and cultivars of cedar (*Cedar*), cypress (*Cupressus*), fir (*Abies*), larch (*Larix*), juniper (*Juniperus*), pine (*Pinus*) and spruce (*Picea*).

**Beswick’s Walk** is an avenue of majestic lime trees (the British name for linden trees, *Tilia europaea*, not citrus trees). It is particularly nice when in full bloom in mid-summer and when they turn a bright golden-yellow in autumn.

**Memorials:**

The **Bandsmen’s Memorial** is a white, round-columned rotunda in Harman’s Grove overlooking the Primula Garden. It was erected to commemorate the bandsmen who lost their lives in World War I. In the spring it is surrounded by thousands of daffodils and is used for musical programs. The current version is an earthquake-proof replica/restoration of the original.

The **Kate Sheppard Memorial Walk** is named for the social reformer who was partly responsible for pushing Parliament to make women eligible to vote in 1893. This walk was opened on the 100th anniversary of women’s suffrage planted with 100 camellias, most of which have white flowers, which symbolize “excellence in women”.

A stone tablet marks a naturally occurring spring, known as **Pilgrim’s Well**, where settlers drew water when they first arrived.

There are a number of conservatories at Christchurch Botanic Garden. **Garrick House**, constructed in 1957, displays a diverse collection of cacti in containers and planted in the ground. The stately **Cunningham House** displays tropical plants, with extensive collections including *Dieffenbachia*, *Peperomia*, *Hoya*, *Anthurium* and *Dracaena*. A spacious staircase leads to an upper gallery. The **Fern House**, dating to 1955, has a narrow meandering path winding through collections of New Zealand...
ferns alongside a stream. **Foweraker House**, named for a Christchurch alpine plant enthusiast, houses a frequently-changing display of both indigenous and exotic alpine plants. There is also a permanent display of slow growing (dwarf) conifers. **Townend House** displays a regular succession of popular greenhouse plants, including *Calceolaria*, *Cyclamen*, *Gloxinia*, *Primula* and hybrid tuberous begonias. **Gilpin House** features tropical collections of orchids, tillandsias, bromeliads and carnivorous plants.

The original Curators’ House on is now operating as **Curators’ House Restaurant** and education facility. The **Gardens Café**, close to a lake filled with water lilies and ducks, offers teas and lunches. The **Information Centre** provides maps and information, has monthly educational features, and sells selection of books, cards and prints with a plant theme.

Guided walks are held at 9:00 a.m. on the first Tuesday of every month or are available upon request and are led by the Ranger Service, Education Staff or Friends of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. Admission is free.

– **Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison**

**Additional Information:**