

# Auckland Garden

Newsletter of the Auckland Botanic Gardens and Friends

March 2026



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Botanic Gardens**  
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### Contributions to the newsletter are welcome

Material for the June 2026 issue  
should be submitted by  
3 p.m. Friday 1 May 2026 to the  
Editor

ross.ferguson@  
plantandfood.co.nz

Ross Ferguson editor,  
Barbara Wheeler and  
Simon James co-editors,  
Kim Stretton formatter.



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**Images** Front cover: *Eremurus x isabellinus* 'Cleopatra'

Opposite page, above left: Botanic Gardens Manager Bec Stanley and apprentice Jasmine Gunton with the 5 Star Garden certificate, issued in December 2025; above right: creative garden signage in the African Plants Garden. Below: Grassman in action

# Cover image - *Eremurus x isabellinus* 'Cleopatra'

The photograph on the cover of a planting of *Eremurus* was taken by Jack Hobbs at Bridgewater, a Royal Horticultural Society garden near Manchester, England. *Eremurus x isabellinus* is an interspecific hybrid resulting from crossing *E. stenophyllus* and *E. olgae*. The petals of the cultivar 'Cleopatra' are variously described as being coral-pink, apricot or soft orange with a dark red midrib on the back.

*Eremurus* is a genus in the family Asphodelaceae, a comparatively small monocotyledoneous family of about 900 species. Better-known genera in the family include *Bulbinella*, *Dianella*, *Hemerocallis* (day lily), *Kniphofia* (poker), *Phormium* (flax), *Xanthorrhoea* (Australian grass tree) and the aloes. However, taxonomists have long debated as to which genera should be included in the family and how the family should be separated from closely related families.

*Eremurus* has at least 60 species mainly from eastern Europe and Central Asia. They flower in late spring to early summer, producing a tall spike of many flowers in a range of colours, white to pink to yellow to orange. The spikes can reach almost 2 m, and they are therefore impressive plants for the back of a border. They are often called foxtail lilies or desert candles. The generic name *Eremurus* name comes from the Greek words *eremia* meaning desert and *oura* meaning a tail because of the appearance of the flower spike.

Although spectacular, it seems that *Eremurus* species require really cold

winters, hot dry summers and perfect drainage. They are grown in the South Island and it seems they are particularly successful in Central Otago. Not, unfortunately, plants for Auckland.

Ross Ferguson



# Gardens Manager's report

Late last year, we were delighted to be awarded Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) Conservation Practitioner Accreditation. We now join around 20 botanic gardens worldwide to hold this accreditation, which recognises excellence in plant conservation policy, practice and education.

As an international benchmark, this accreditation confirms that we meet global standards for conservation. To achieve it, we provided evidence of strong foundations — including well-documented living collections, clear strategic direction, and appropriate systems and expertise — and demonstrated conservation in action. This includes how our work translates into real outcomes through public engagement, conservation horticulture, research, training, sustainability and ethical practice, and contributions to both *ex situ* and *in situ* conservation.

My sincere thanks go to Ella Rawcliffe, our current Conservation Specialist, and

to Emma Simpkins, Yvonne Baker and Steve Benham, who have grown this programme over many years to where it is today.

Almost 30 years ago, when I was working at the Department of Conservation, I remember meeting with Jack Hobbs and Steve Benham to discuss how the Botanic Gardens could contribute to plant conservation in Auckland. Early projects on coastal cresses /nau (*Lepidium* spp.) and mistletoes — including restoring their habitat in the wild at Miranda — spring to mind. Our forty-year commitment to Regional Park revegetation is also part of this story, with hundreds of hectares of new forests and wetlands planted across the region.

We've shared many of these stories in this newsletter, and you can look forward to more. They highlight how conservation sits at the heart of what we do — contributing in practical, measurable ways to plant conservation locally, nationally and globally.

Bec Stanley

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## Ayrlies Plant Fair, 2026

Friday 13 March and Saturday 14 March, 9.00 a.m. – 3.00 p.m. 125 Potts Road, Whitford.  
Entrance fee \$20. For more details go to [www.Ayrlies.co.nz](http://www.Ayrlies.co.nz)

# Introducing new staff...

## Jasmine Gunton Apprentice

Jasmine has been an apprentice at the Botanic Gardens since May 2025 although she was known to us before that, having assisted the team through the previous summer in one of the fixed-term gardener roles. Jasmine has also worked as a garden assistant at Mitre 10 and a junior lab assistant at Landcare Research, both in Auckland.

Jasmine has an honours degree in ecology and was the 2023 President for University of Auckland Scientific (a student-led scientific review publication). She completed her honours thesis on the facial markings of native bees in the genus *Hylaeus*. In her free time, Jasmine enjoys playing the guitar and roller skating.



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## Siv Ear Visitor Services Representative (casual)

Siv was born in Cambodia and has lived in New Zealand for 9 years. She lives in Papatoetoe and is studying medicine at Auckland University. The casual role gives her an opportunity to work with the community and engage visitors with plants in a meaningful way. Having worked recently in part-time customer service roles, Siv brings enthusiasm and customer service skills to the team.



## Simone Dixon Visitor Services Representative

Simone brings 35 years' experience in tourism with KiwiRail's Great Journeys of New Zealand where she showcased New Zealand, via the eyes of rail, which weaves through stunning coastlines, ravines, native bush and viaducts. She has recently worked for Ngāti Tamaoho Trust in the Social Services care sector. Simone's passions are storytelling and customer service. Working at Auckland Botanic Gardens offers her the opportunity to use these skills alongside other passionate people.



## George Hulse Apprentice

George is super excited to be coming onboard at the Botanic Gardens as an apprentice. He was born in Warrington, Cheshire, and moved with his family to New Zealand when he was 8 years old. He comes to us with some experience working in the hospitality and landscaping industries and is looking forward to focussing his energies on developing his competencies and knowledge in horticulture. With his previous experience, George will contribute greatly to the horticultural team and the wider Botanic Gardens as he himself learns from the team here throughout his apprenticeship. Outside of his passion for horticulture and environmentalism, George enjoys snowboarding and playing the drums and guitar.



## Marcela Palafox Visitor Services Representative (casual)

Marcela was born in Mexico City where she grew up and worked for a few years as a sustainability manager within different industries and as a mediator between government and the community in city sustainability challenges and issues.

Marcela moved to New Zealand two years ago and has taken up volunteering roles to improve her command of English and get to know Auckland better. She describes herself as a creative, disciplined, resilient and friendly individual with a passion for photography, sustainability and activism. When the opportunity arose to work in a casual role at the Botanic Gardens, she felt this matched her values and allows her to share her passion with our visitors.



## Kimberley (Kim) Strempele Collection Curator

Kim is the newly appointed Collection Curator with a strong passion for plants and horticulture. She began her career in hospitality but always had an affinity for working outdoors and with plants. Taking a leap of faith, Kim applied for a horticultural position at Auckland Zoo in 2019, which became the stepping stone into her horticultural career.

In 2021, Kim undertook a horticultural apprenticeship at Auckland Botanic Gardens, where she spent three years developing her skills and plant knowledge under the guidance of the collections and horticultural teams. Following the completion of her apprenticeship, she gained further experience working with several horticultural companies and spent a year working at Ayrli's Garden.



Kim brings with her a strong enthusiasm for plant care to high horticultural standards, learning and sharing her knowledge with others. She is currently curating the Spring Blossom Valley,

Camellia and Magnolia collections. On 30 November 2026 Kim will transition, as collection curators commence a full collection rotation, into managing the Rose and Mānuka collections.

## Lyrck Johnson Horticulturist, Domain Winter Gardens

We are pleased to welcome Lyrck Johnson to the Domain Horticulture Team, who joined us on 4 November 2025. Born in Aotearoa New Zealand to a Nigerian father and a Niuean mother, she grew up between New Zealand, Sydney and Niue. This diverse upbringing, along with being part of a large family of eight spread across the world, has strongly shaped her values, sense of identity, and love of connection. She recently graduated in Landscape Architecture from Unitec and is excited to put her studies into practice. What attracted her to this role was the chance to apply design principles in a real-world setting, deepen her plant knowledge, and gain hands-on horticultural experience.

She describes herself as spirited, determined, and adventurous. Outside of work, she enjoys gardening, drawing, reading, listening to music, spending time with family and friends, and continuing her academic interest in decolonisation and landscape practice. We are delighted to have her join the team.



# Congratulations Jack Hobbs MNZM

Congratulations to Jack Hobbs on being appointed a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in the New Year's Honours List for 2026 for "services to horticulture".

The official citation lists some of these – as manager of the Auckland Botanic Gardens from 1997 until 2025, his success in plant breeding, his writings and his radio and TV programmes, the numerous awards to him personally and to the Gardens.

Jack is probably the best known and respected horticulturist in New Zealand. He has advanced the conservation, understanding and enjoyment of plants. The Friends know well his ability as a communicator and his people skills, his ability to make volunteers at the Gardens welcome and their efforts appreciated.

The Chief Executive of Auckland Council, Phil Wilson, said in a press release congratulating Jack:

"Our gardens have evolved from farmland to an internationally renowned and award-winning collection of horticultural and scientific significance under Jack's watch... His contribution is one of the most significant in local government. When he retired this year, we celebrated his leadership and impact, but also his humility. He is a man that asked nothing more than to get on with his job each and every day, for many decades – yet he has contributed more than anyone might expect of a public servant. This is a fitting and well-deserved acknowledgement."

Ross Ferguson

## The journey of growing Grassman

As part of our recent summer exhibition, *Tangled Roots*, we were delighted to bring to life Grassman – a living costume created by United Kingdom artist Ashley Peavor. With support from the Friends, we were able to work with Ashley to develop two Grassman suits, as well as host Ashley on site for ten days to gain tips and tricks he's learnt over the last 10+ years of developing this special costume.

Creating a costume that is living might seem daunting, but our nursery team were up for the challenge, so that was

enough for us to progress the dream of bringing Grassman to life at the Botanic Gardens. The Visitor Services team had a couple of meetings with Ashley online to understand what the requirements were for growing such a special costume, and his capacity to support our project. Ashley quickly started to work on making two costumes for us, and they arrived in early September 2025.

Each suit was made up of four major pieces: legs, torso, arms and head. They came as separate pieces, a bit like a sewing

pattern which was laid flat on a surface. A layer of potting media was put across every piece of the suit, then a generous layer of grass seeds (just regular lawn seed from Mitre 10) was applied. In seven days, the seed had germinated and in six weeks we had a luscious lawn growing on the fabric. The roots grew through the fabric to hold the potting media together and became a robust piece of the suit. We initially started sowing the suits in the glasshouse of the nursery, taking over a significant amount of bench space to allow space between each of the pieces.



The nursery team closely monitored the grass, trimming it, feeding it and watering it regularly. With the incredibly high temperatures we had at the end of November, the temperatures within the glasshouse soared to 37°C. Despite watering three or four times a day, the suits were starting to suffer. The tips of the grass were burnt, and the roots weren't looking healthy.

In mid-December we moved the suits to the tunnel house, where daily temperatures were 10°C lower than in the glasshouse, and the intensity of light was lowered. With a good haircut, a feed of fertiliser and some patch work of ready lawn and freshly grown grass seed, the suits were back to looking green and lush.

At this point, you might be wondering how flat pattern pieces become an entire suit. The clever system designed by Ashley meant we could simply cable tie each element together, so two pieces created the legs, two pieces created the arms, two pieces created the torso, and one unusually shaped piece created the head. The head was probably the most challenging part to put together, and although one person could put the suit together, it was much easier to assemble with two.

We had two suits so that we could cycle through them between weekly performances. This meant each suit had a break while the other was being used. This was important because there was some wear and tear, particularly around the feet and the edges of the suit. Also having never done something like this before, having two suits gave us peace of mind that if something did go wrong, we had a backup.

Many visitors asked us who was wearing the suit, and until now, we didn't want to lose the magic of our favourite green yeti Grassman and share this detail. We had a wonderful team of professional performers who wore the suits. They were circus performers and stunt actors who were fit and strong, particularly important for wearing a heavy costume like Grassman. The performers needed to be comfortable with limited visibility and air – although we had some holes in the headpiece, it wasn't the most pleasant

experience wearing the head. With lots of breaks, and enthusiasm for this unusual performance, the performers were happy to create wonderful weekly performances for our visitors.

Thank you to all the staff involved in the Grassman project and those who supported it being such a success. We hope many of you managed to see Grassman in the flesh, or maybe I should say, in the turf.

Emma Simpkins  
Education and Partnerships Specialist

Grassman with Gardens staff (left to right) Emma Simpkins, Greg Meylan, Mich Newton and Amy Pollard



# President's report

A year ago, the Friends acknowledged the seismic shift about to be undertaken with the announcement of Jack Hobbs' retirement.

This year we are very pleased to congratulate Jack on being awarded the MNZM in the New Year Honours List 2026 for services to horticulture. Jack is so deserving of the award, and we are proud to have supported this honour being granted to him. We are very grateful for the encouragement that Jack has always given to the Friends and volunteers at the Gardens. He went above and beyond to engage with us and to voice appreciation for our contributions to the wellbeing of the Gardens.

In recognition of Jack's retirement, the Friends established the Hobbs Award for a younger or early career horticulturist to further their education and develop their career. Watch this space for the announcement of the successful awardee later in the year.

Congratulations also to the staff for their incredible dedication and many hours of work in the Gardens being recognized by the 5 Star New Zealand Garden Trust rating. They are an amazing bunch of people, not only ensuring that the gardens provide enjoyment, recreation,

relaxation and education to the public but also dealing with whatever situations arise such as an inquisitive pukeko needing help to detach a drink can from its beak.

Last, but not least, a shout out to the Library volunteers who spent many hours restacking the books on the shelves after the contractors had finished repairing the Friends Library roof.

Thank you to members for continuing to support us. If you have not been receiving the emailed "Just Between Friends" with news and updates for Friends, please contact [friendsofabg@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofabg@gmail.com) to update your email address. Likewise, if you have any suggestions for possible speakers or gardens to visit please let us know. We would love to hear from you.

Look out for details of the Artist in Residence programme being held in March. There will be opportunities for adults and children to participate in workshops under the guidance of the Artist.

I hope you have the opportunity to enjoy events that are scheduled for the Gardens or just a stroll to soak up the summer glory and sumptuous colours of the plantings.

Cleone Campbell

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## Email addresses

Email lets us provide useful information on events at the Gardens. If you have email and we don't have your email address, please forward it to our Administrator, Irene Horton, at [friendsofabg@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofabg@gmail.com)

# Introducing Simon James

Simon was co-opted to the Executive Committee of the Friends and then became an elected member at the last AGM. He writes:

I lived in the UK until I retired and moved to New Zealand in 2012 to a far better environment closer to my wife Pat's family.

My work experience was firstly as a marine engineer, culminating as a mechanical engineer doing research in Liverpool University. In all this there is a notable absence of anything horticultural! I do have other interests, such as music (I play recorders and the trumpet), croquet, bridge and do some 3D printing.

In the Gardens, I am one of the Wiri Rambler drivers and Pat is my guide.

For anyone with a busy life, being able to walk round a garden, particularly one as good as Auckland Botanic Gardens, is a great way to relax and just take the air. South Auckland is privileged to have such a great facility on its doorstep. This

is why I want to volunteer to do what I can to keep it running.

Being on the Committee is one way of providing assistance if needed and being able to influence action that will improve the visitor experience, particularly with events such as the Sculpture in the Gardens Exhibition where some engineering skills may be useful.



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## Friends apprentice awards

Over the past few years, the Friends have generously sponsored two awards to recognise excellence in elements of the horticulture apprenticeship at the Botanic Gardens: the apprentice who presents the best work record and the apprentice who scores the best plant identification test average.

At the Friends Volunteer Christmas lunch last December, Adalia Edwards was announced as the winner for both awards. Adalia was presented with certificates and prize prezzy cards. Well done, Adalia!

# Botanical Art Worldwide 2025

Following an invitation from the American Society of Botanical Artists for participation in Botanical Art Worldwide, 2025, the Friends of the Botanic Gardens and BASNZ (Botanical Art Society of New Zealand) generously provided a working fund for our participation.

The theme of the event was "Plant Diversity" which covered heritage crops, their wild relatives, ancient crops and useful crops grown in New Zealand for food, fibre and building.

New Zealand artists were invited to send in submissions and from the sixty-eight submissions received the curatorial panel of Sri Benham, Barbara Wheeler and Ross Ferguson chose the forty works for the main travelling exhibition plus seven which were "too good to leave out".

The exhibition opened in the Visitor Centre gallery at the Auckland Botanic Gardens on 29 March with a formal opening that evening attended by around seventy – artists with family and friends, Gardens staff, sponsors, Friends members and others from the art world. It was a relaxed and enjoyable evening with attendees welcomed by Jack Hobbs, Viv Canham, Lesley Alexander, Sue Wickison and Sandra Morris.

The exhibition closed in Auckland on 29 June, then travelled to the Wellington Botanic Gardens (1 August – 30 September) then to the Ashburton Art Gallery (18 October – 7 December).

A series of workshops was held during the

exhibition and on Worldwide Botanic Art Day, 18 May, we were privileged to have a presentation by Dr Nick Roskrige, "Te Korowai o Papatūānuku - the Cloak of the Earth Mother" when he discussed the use made by Maori and later, by European colonists of New Zealand's indigenous plants.

During the exhibition visitor numbers were high at all three venues, particularly on weekends, with comments being universally positive. Sixteen works were sold – two to overseas buyers (Ireland and Australia). Most artists had cards and/or prints of their works available. While sales of these were good they were not as high as in the earlier show – one visitor saying, "The cards are lovely but I never send anything by mail anymore!"

Auckland and Wellington each ran a "People's Choice" Award with the Auckland winner being Jennifer Duval-Smith's *Red Cabbage* and Wellington's going to Sara Bissielo for her *Mānuka*.

The Steering Committee of Lesley Alexander, Liz Powell, Megan Lockwood and Sandra Morris thanks all artists who submitted works, the Curatorial Panel who decided which to include, Gordon Harris Art Supplies for funding the People's Choice Award, John Leech Framing for their support, the staff at the Wellington Botanic Gardens Treehouse Gallery, the staff at Ashburton Art Gallery and Auckland Botanic Gardens Visitor Centre staff who dealt so patiently and effectively with sales and endless questions from visitors.

Liz Powell

# Friends autumn bus trip

## A BIG trip to Te Kauwhata, Ngatea and Thames

### Plum Meadows, Waerenga, Te Kauwhata:

We will enjoy a morning tea of Omega plum and Sicilian orange cakes made with artisan preserves, served with whipped cream and Greek yoghurt. Herbal and black teas plus locally roasted Aoraki plunger coffee will accompany them.

A guided tour will follow to see "a relaxed English cottage garden with winding pathways and lush flower beds, and on to a French-style garden featuring symmetrical clipped hedging, a striking topiary walk and an extensive kitchen garden. Hidden gems include an old crab apple tree, which has provided fruit for the family for over 80 years - they still follow their grandmother's recipe". Plum Meadows artisan preserves are available for purchase.

**Ngatea Water Gardens, Ngatea:** Is our lunch stop. Bring your own. We will have tea and coffee available. "Ngatea Gardens is a 5-acre wonderland with lotus and water lily ponds, lush greenery, friendly wildlife, and playful surprises around every corner. It offers far more than just a simple garden walk. It's a place where you can slow down, share laughs, wander at your own pace and truly enjoy time surrounded by nature. This is one special destination".

### Peppertree Gardens, Kauaeranga Valley Rd., Thames:

"Peppertree supplies an interesting and

**When** - Thursday 16 April. Be at the Gardens by 8.15 a.m. for a prompt 8.30 a.m. departure as we have a full day ahead of us.

**Where** - Meet outside the Visitor Centre, Auckland Botanic Gardens

**Cost** - \$85pp to cover the morning tea and tour at Plum Meadows, the entry fees at Ngatea and Peppertree Gardens and the bus.

**Return** - Auckland Botanic Gardens approx. 6:00 p.m.

**Bring** - Drinks, lunch, snacks, cash or card for purchases, comfortable clothes and wet weather gear.

**To book** - Please e-mail our Administrator, Irene Horton, at [friendsofabg@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofabg@gmail.com), making payment to: ASB 12-3011-0757619-00 with your surname and Bus Trip in the details. Friends are welcome to bring friends.

often hard-to-get range of trees and shrubs. Being plant collectors, we have developed 5 acres of gardens that are open to the public and available for weddings. Our garden exhibits our years of collecting and passion for differing plant groups. The garden has a large collection of Japanese maples and other smaller growing trees and shrubs. Large areas of lawn are surrounded by borders of perennials and other interesting plants. Hedges and paths dissect the slopes falling to several ponds."

Any queries, ring Barbara Harvey  
027 2865671 or 09 2638801

# Friends Art Group - latest news

We began the year on a very positive note with our meeting on the last Saturday of January. I'm never quite sure how many people will attend this meeting as it usually coincides with Auckland Anniversary weekend, but as we only hold 11 meetings each year, I'm always keen not to miss January. So, I was delighted to see such a great turnout. In fact, we had so many attendees that we needed extra tables! It was lovely to see everyone catching up, with plenty of animated conversation about holidays, family news, and recent art projects.

At our 28 February meeting, I demonstrated how to draw birds' nests. While they are not traditionally considered botanical art, the amount of plant material used in their construction firmly places them in that category in my view. Over the years, a number of nests have been blown from trees on our property, including an impressively large magpie nest, which I brought in to use as reference. Routinely, if there is a demonstration, we meet at 9:30 a.m. for the demonstration at 10 a.m., followed by time for participants to practise, with guidance available throughout. There is a \$10 donation for the demonstration, along with a koha for morning tea (please bring your own mug).

We are also pleased to announce that Artist in Residence Thomas Paster will be running a workshop for our group at the 28 March meeting. Further details will be emailed closer to the date. If you are not currently on the email list and would like to attend, please let me know, as numbers

are limited due to the capacity of the Friends Building.

Finally, the gallery space in the Visitors Centre has been booked for 1 August to 13 September for our annual exhibition. We encourage all art group members to participate and showcase their love of creating botanically inspired artwork.

## Art Group meetings:

- February 28 – Birds' nests, how to draw them with Lesley Alexander
- March 28 – Workshop with Artist in Residence, Thomas Paster
- April 25 (Anzac Day) – Chat, paint, draw, drink coffee – untutored
- May 30 – Chat, paint, draw, drink coffee – untutored
- June 27 – Up your Nature Journaling game with Jennifer Duval-Smith
- July 25 – Chat, paint, draw, drink coffee – untutored
- August 29 – Artist Demo TBC
- September 26 – Chat, paint, draw, drink coffee – untutored
- October 31 – Artist Demo TBC
- November 28 – shared morning tea and trading table

## Art Exhibition 2026:

- Friday 31 July – hanging the exhibition
- Opens Saturday 1 August – Sunday 13 September

If you would like to know more about our group, either phone me, Lesley Alexander on 021 161 7070 or email me at [lesley.alexander.smith@gmail.com](mailto:lesley.alexander.smith@gmail.com)

Lesley Alexander

# Growing Friends report

New Year's Day was an exhilarating day at the Botanic Gardens and visitors are attracted by the diversity the Gardens has to offer. The Growing Friends started plant sales again on 1 January, a Thursday. A lot of people discovered the plant sales for the first time. Some walked in out of curiosity and left with a wheelbarrow full of plants. The Growing Friends wish them all the best for their gardens this year.

Summer is the time of the year when visitors are attracted to the classic picture-

book flower garden. We can supply cottage garden flowers that are decisively perennial in Auckland such as Shasta daisies, alpine asters and cannas, among many. We have cannas in colours difficult to find and unique to the Auckland Botanic Gardens. We can turn *Kniphofia* and *Hemerocallis* into an example of sophistication.

Autumn is nearly here, and with it comes the somewhat despised task of digging in the compost!

Hiltrud Gruger

## Friends Artist in Residence

The Friends Artist in Residence for 2026 comes from Austria. Thomas Paster will be working at the Botanic Gardens from 7 March until 23 April. During this time, he will usually be available at the Gardens on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Thomas intends to compose landscapes of light and darkness in the native bush, exploring the many complexities of green light. He will also study the interaction of light and leaves.

Thomas will be hosting three workshops:

- an adults' workshop on Saturday 4 April in the Friends building adjacent

to the front carpark. This will run from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. so bring your lunch. You'll need to book and pay for this course (\$20.00) at the Visitor Centre. There is a limit of 12 people so book early.

- a children's workshop on Tuesday 14 April from 10 a.m. to 12 noon in the Visitor Centre during the school holidays. There is no charge and it will be a drop-in course in the Visitor Centre. Parents will need to be in attendance.
- a workshop for the Friends Art Group on Saturday 28 March.

# Best of British

In May and June 2025, I escorted a group of avid gardeners around some of the finest gardens in the British Isles. Not one of the gardens disappointed, but I will feature below just my top ten.

Before commenting on the gardens I will begin with Chelsea Flower Show, one of the highlights of the trip. Despite visiting Britain many times, I have somehow never made it to Chelsea. I have frequently been to Hampton Court Flower Show which is held a bit later and has fitted better into my previous itineraries. I had been told it is just as good as Chelsea and it certainly is a great show. However, Chelsea is on another level, with the quality of the plants and display gardens absolutely superb.

We were fortunate to go on Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Members' Day, and we were lined up at the gates when they opened, allowing us to

wander around before the crowds for a short while. This had changed drastically by mid-morning when queues to view exhibits were more than four deep. The biggest crowds were in the Balcony and Container Gardens section, an indication of the keen public interest in gardening in small spaces.

I spoke to leading British sweet pea breeder Phil Johnson who had a beautiful stand featuring many of Dr Keith Hammett's strains including 'High Society', 'Shell Pink', the much-admired 'Piggy Sue' and 'Almost Black'. Although Keith is well known in New Zealand his breeding exploits seem even more celebrated on the other side of the world. I also chatted with landscape designer Leon Kluge who created a stunning South African exhibit featuring mainly members of the protea family. I have followed Leon and his botanising exploits on social media for some years, and it was

Chelsea Flower Show





## Wisley

great to meet him in person. This stand highlighted the opportunity New Zealand has to promote garden tourism through highlighting the beauty of our native flora to vast numbers of visitors and even larger television audiences in the United Kingdom where our native plants are already highly esteemed.

Our next visit was to Wisley, the famed RHS garden near Woking. Wisley is the only garden I have visited every time I have been to England, partly as it is close to London but mainly because of its horticultural excellence, interesting plant trials and constant innovation. This year the most obvious change was the recently revamped Piet Oudolf border with the previously straight central path now winding its way down towards the glasshouse through naturalistic plantings of perennials and grasses. In the trial area new ornamental lupins attracted most public interest. Sadly, these have become well-established weeds in New Zealand,

especially in braided rivers but even along the Desert Road, as I noticed recently.

We then headed towards Cornwall. Rather than taking the usual route we drove through Dartmoor which my group all loved, but our driver was much less enthusiastic as the roads are very narrow and corners so tight.

The Eden Project opened in 2001 and features two enormous enclosures in a disused clay mine. The largest biome houses tropical plants, the other, plants from the Mediterranean. The story goes that after seeing a pineapple growing at Heligan, Sir Tim Smit was inspired to celebrate plants and people's connections with them and the Eden Project is the result. It is envisaged as a "living theatre for plants", and "every plant has a human story".

It is always a great place to visit for inspirational displays and captivating

storytelling that emphasises the importance of plants to humanity. We joined one of the regular guided tours with an “explainer” who wove together anecdotes about plants such as coffee and spices with stories on social history, economic impacts and most importantly human dependency on plants.

I have long wanted to visit Rosemoor in north Devon after getting to know Lady Anne Berry (née Palmer), but somehow this was my first visit. Lady Anne developed the original garden in 1959, further developing it until gifting it to the RHS in 1988. Subsequently she moved to New Zealand and married Bob Berry who farmed at Tiniroto near Gisborne where he established Hackfalls Arboretum. The Berrys' story is remarkable, but one for another day.

Rosemoor proved to be one of my favourite gardens of the tour. The gardens are structured without feeling contrived, with colourful perennials jostling with

grasses held together by the solidity of clipped shrubs and hedges. Around the ponds skilful combinations of bold foliage and various grasses in subtle verdant shades were sheer artistry. Well-curated wildflower meadows flanked grassed walkways, the roses were in full flower, and one of the peacocks even flaunted his tail feathers for us. I can envisage similar beautiful meadows in the Auckland Botanic Gardens not too far in the future, but probably minus the peacocks.

Stourhead is another of my old favourites, although that was not the case when I first visited some 35 years ago when I did not really enjoy it. I recall leaving quite disappointed as it is widely regarded as one of the greatest of all gardens in the English landscape garden style, but after several subsequent visits I have grown to love it and now really feel its grandeur and artistry. The magical walk around the large lake was apparently designed to evoke feelings of descending into the underworld as various follies, temples

Rosemoor



and the arched Palladian bridge are encountered or glimpsed. The 18th-century mansion is also well worth visiting, especially for its magnificent collections of art and artefacts.

The National Botanic Garden of Wales in Llanarthney does not make my top ten, but it warrants a mention for featuring the world's largest single-span glasshouse. However, my highlight surprisingly was the Birds of Prey display featuring the likes of well-trained red kites, barn owls and the European eagle owl.

Next up was Blarney Castle in the south of Ireland. I decided to forgo the tradition of kissing the Blarney Stone and focused instead on the garden, a choice made easy by the 90-minute queues to kiss a rock presumably covered in saliva. Incidentally, I was actually more taken with the imposing Blarney House rather than Blarney Castle. The expansive and excellent gardens are set in 24 ha of land, with a well-signposted path winding around the property which features a lake, interesting rock features, a fern garden, poison garden and intriguing structures.

Garnish Island in Bantry Bay, County Cork, features formal gardens set within extensive plantings in the naturalistic style promoted by famed gardener and journalist William Robinson. The walled garden contained large, impressive New Zealand mānuka in full flower, with a wide diversity of our native plants elsewhere on the beautiful 15-ha property. There was a 15-minute ferry ride to get to the island which proved to be a highlight of our tour.

Belvedere House and Garden provide an immersive dip into Irish history and

culture. Our driver told us it is “the home of Irish folklore”, and the tales of its colourful history are fascinating although at times deeply disturbing.

The National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh is a 21-ha satellite of the main botanic gardens in Dublin. We arrived about 30 minutes before our guide and I must say until she arrived, I was struggling to make sense of it. This changed dramatically when Jean Burtchaell escorted us around, her eloquence, enthusiasm and knowledge really captivating us. She described it as a plant hunter's garden, an apt description of this fascinating diverse collection of plants from around the world. The curator, Seamus O'Brien, was in Yunnan collecting plants when we visited and had delegated Jean to cover for him. Her infectious passion for the garden really brought it to life, emphasising that knowledge alone does not make a great guide as passion is an equally essential ingredient. This visit also highlighted the importance of having clear, engaging, self-interpretation in gardens as not everyone has the luxury of a Jean to take them around.

Kilmacurragh features extensive wildflower meadows, and Jean provided much useful data on their management and content. She claimed that meadows store more carbon than rain forests. Although research has shown this is clearly the case with seagrass meadows, I am not sure it applies equally to terrestrial meadows. Research does however show they store more carbon than shrubs, indicating another benefit of the Auckland Botanic Gardens' meadow and no-mow programmes and associated research.

Bodnant in North Wales, already one of my

favourite British gardens, was even more spectacular than usual when we visited. This was partly due to the celebrated Laburnum Arch being in full flower, perfect for a group photo. The formal Italianate terraces are also exquisite, but my favourite spot is the Dell, set in a gorge with mature woodlands and complete with a waterfall. The National Trust's management of the diverse collections spread across the 32-ha property, including five national plant collections, is exemplary.

Our final garden visit was to Bridgewater, the Royal Horticultural Society's fifth and most recent garden to open to the public. Just a 30-minute drive from our Manchester hotel, it proved to be one of the tour highlights. Although a large garden covering 62 ha, the horticultural standards are exemplary, as is to be expected from an RHS garden.

On arrival we entered The Welcome Building, an award winning sustainably

Bodnant

designed visitor centre, but personally I think Huakaiwaka achieves as much if not more, despite being smaller and built at a fraction of the cost.

The Community Wellbeing Garden is, as the name suggests, intended to reconnect visitors with nature and thereby improve their wellbeing, and it is also the venue for patients prescribed "time in the garden" by their doctor. They even employ a fulltime "therapeutic gardener" to help ensure visitors get the most out of their wellbeing experience.

Meadows of primulas in the Asian Garden were visually stunning, and the Paradise Garden is another compelling feature. Lessons from Bridgewater included the importance of excellent initial landscape design, and of focusing mostly on the provision of outstanding visitor experience. They achieve all of that and more.

I have excluded many wonderful gardens



from my final selection but think I have captured those most relevant to Auckland Botanic Gardens.

So, which were the most popular gardens as determined by a weighted voting poll I conducted with my 24-strong tour party?

I was not surprised that Bodnant was the winner, but I did not expect it to be by such a large margin. Second place went to Rosemoor, with other popular picks being Bridgewater, Wisley and Garnish Island.

Over my 25 years of escorting garden tours around the world those that make the strongest impression on my groups invariably have fascinating background stories. These could be about their colourful history, the meaning and purpose of the garden, but most often it is about the people whose drive, passion

and creativity have shaped them. It often seems as though in some way they are still present, their spirit continuing to bring the garden to life and giving it meaning.

Furthermore, the gardens I choose to visit most regularly invariably (with the notable exception of Stourhead) embrace change, and I know they will always be better than when I last visited.

Jack Hobbs

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Later this year Jack is leading a tour of India from 31 October to 25 November. It has been a long ambition of his to visit this amazing country, and he would welcome some "Friends" along. If interested contact Pukekohe Travel 0800 785386, or check their website [www.pukekohetravel.co.nz](http://www.pukekohetravel.co.nz)

## Trials update

Our summer highlights in the Trials Garden this season have been aubergine (eggplant) and cosmos. Despite aubergines notoriously taking an entire season to bear fruit, some of ours were producing in late December/early January. Aubergine (*Solanum melongena*) cultivars 'Early Prolific', 'Patio Baby' and 'Shikou' have all been producing healthy, delicious fruit (despite being on the small side). The remainder of our cultivars show great promise for fruit in February, and are all healthy, large plants.

In the cosmos trial (all *Cosmos bipinnatus* cultivars), our favourite flowers have been 'Fizzy White', 'Cupcakes', 'Double Click

Cranberries' and 'Tickle Pink', though the standout winners so far are 'Peppermint Twist', 'Versailles Flush' and 'Fizzy Rose Picotee' for overall uniformity. 'Rubenza', 'Apricotta', 'Xsenia', 'Sonata Mixed' and 'Sea Shells' all had interesting flowers, but their overall form was not fit for display.

These plants are definitely worth taking a look at next time you're in the Trials Garden. Other trial areas worth visiting are the salvias, mixed perennials and agapanthus sterility trial for their interesting colours and forms.

Sam van Ryn  
Trials Horticulturist

# New Zealand Gardens Trust Assessment

In mid-December, we received formal notification that Auckland Botanic Gardens (ABG) has retained the certification of a New Zealand Gardens Trust (NZGT) 5-star garden. NZGT promotes the very best of New Zealand public and private gardens, so retaining 5-star certification is an achievement that's worth celebrating and shouting about. According to NZGT, a 5-star garden is considered, " ... a Garden of National Significance. These are highly recommended gardens for their presentation, design and plant interest throughout the year. They have a distinctive identity of their own and a character that gives them an edge. They may have special features that may appeal to those with special interests."

We can never underestimate how tough it is to remain consistently at 5-stars, year on year. We are incredibly proud of all the team's hard mahi, including our amazing volunteers, and their continual efforts to improve ABG for the people of Tāmaki Makaurau and for all 1.1 million visitors every year.

Certification is reassessed every 3 years to ensure ABG continues to meet the standards and criteria set by NZGT. The assessment team of 3 garden and landscape designers and plantspeople visited in November 2025 to undertake the assessment. Areas such as garden design, landscape flow, garden maintenance, plant health, accessibility, health, and safety are all assessed.

The visually stunning arrival of Huakaiwaka visitor centre



In completing the assessment, the assessors made mention of visitor experience with the stunning arrival experience delivered by Huakaiwaka visitor centre, the diversity of visitors making use of the garden, educational opportunities and the quality of signage and interpretation catching their eyes.

Around the gardens, they noted improvements since the last assessment, such as the new Te Puna Raranga (pā harakeke weaving platform), the use of corten steel for garden edging in high profile areas and the thoughtful enhancement of native fringe areas. The assessors were excited about the ambitious forward-looking vision for the Botanic Gardens and hearing about the

next phase of the Pacific Pathway.

The work the team does was mentioned with the creativity displayed in the gardens and plant displays and the sustainable horticulture ethos in being able to achieve high health gardens with no pesticide use.

Some recommendations were provided, most of which are in our plans – from the completion of the Pacific Pathway circulation, repairing pathways and assets that need renewing, continuing to push innovative and creative plant displays and combinations and more spotlighting for visitors of our research.

Barbara Wheeler  
Curator

Creativity on display



# Stowe – Templa quam dilecta

Stowe in Buckinghamshire, England, is a monumental 18th century landscape garden full of political symbolism. It really can be described as monumental as no other garden has such a profuse and extravagant array of temples, monuments and other ornamentations, fifty or more. This is appropriate as the family motto of the Temple family, the family that created Stowe, was *Templa quam dilecta* – “How delightful are thy Temples”. There is also a remarkable 6.4-km long ha-ha allowing the garden to seamlessly flow into the surrounding countryside.

At Stowe, Richard Temple, 1st Viscount Cobham (1675-1749) spent 30 years to create the most complex of all English landscape gardens, designed to indoctrinate politically his 18th

century visitors by his ingenious use of iconography in his allegorical emblematic garden.

He inherited Stowe in 1713. He was wealthy, and he also had the time to dedicate to improving Stowe as he had just been unfairly sacked by Prime Minister Robert Walpole over a disagreement with the unpopular Excise Bill and the South Sea Bubble debacle. Cobham, like other Whig loyalist peers, opposed the current corrupt Whig administration. He spent vast sums of money putting Stowe on a war-footing with Walpole.

## My visit to Stowe

I went to Stowe in May 2025. The landscape garden extends to 99 ha, with an additional area covering 283 ha as part

Stowe House, completed in 1779 (Photo: S. Benham)



of the Stowe estate. The garden is vast, mightily impressive, complex and slightly exhausting, especially on a warm, early-summer day. After a 6-hour marathon walk, I failed to reach the western boundary.

I arrived within sight of the formidable Corinthian Arch and the distant views of the south façade of Stowe House set the scene for the day ahead. Once through Bell Gate, the original 18th century entrance to the garden, I could choose the allegorical “Path of Virtue”, the “Path of Vice” or the “Path of Liberty” which has most of Stowe’s iconic monuments. The choice wasn’t too difficult – I wanted to experience both the “Path of Virtue” and the “Path of Liberty” since both necessities of life appear at risk of being under-valued at present.

The three main architects of the classical temples / pantheons along these two paths were Sir John Vanbrugh, of Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard fame, William Kent, whom we became well acquainted with in the articles on Rousham in *The Auckland Garden*, and James Gibbs, whose greatest masterpieces were St. Martin-in-the Fields in Trafalgar Square and the Radcliffe Camera in Oxford.

**The monuments of John Vanbrugh**  
The first monument designed by Vanbrugh was the Rotondo in which sheltered a gilt statue of Venus (later a statue of Bacchus). The two imposing Lake Pavilions were also by Vanbrugh.

**The monuments of James Gibbs**  
James Gibbs was employed at Stowe after Vanbrugh’s death in 1726. His first project was designing the Boycott Pavilions. This pair of lodges sit astride

the main carriageway entrance to Stowe, one of which was later home to Lancelot “Capability” Brown. The Gothic Temple, also designed by Gibbs, was completed in 1748. This appears as the oddest and least attractive temple at Stowe. The colour of the ‘sultry’ ferrugineous Northamptonshire ironstone from which it is built adds to its depressing appearance. Over the doorway is an inscription from Pierre Corneille’s tragedy *Horace* – “Je rends Graces aux Dieux de n’estre pas Romain” – “I thank the gods that I am not a Roman.” Being British then represented Liberty whereas being Roman was tyranny. Whig philosophy celebrated Anglo-Saxon heritage whereas Tory philosophy celebrated Roman culture. The Temple has a triangular ground plan based on the three Whig watchwords – Liberty, Enlightenment and Constitution.

Within viewing distance from this site is an impressive 35.5 m column also by Gibbs. A statue of Lord Cobham in Roman armour (which does seem inappropriate as he was a Whig) is at the top, surveying his entire domain.

Gibbs’ Temple of Friendship now stands forlornly roofless after a fire in the early part of the 19th century. A classical lead statue of a Fighting Gladiator used to stand guard outside the temple signifying that friends are worth fighting for. On a plaque over the Tuscan portico is MDCCXXXIX – Amicitiae S (1739 – Sacred to Friendship). It was dedicated to a group of opposition Whigs – the “Patriots” whose greatest member was William Pitt, later Prime Minister.

**The monuments of William Kent**  
At Stowe, Kent concentrated his efforts on a 16-ha site where he planned a version

of the Elysian Fields. In Greek mythology this was a place where only mortals related to gods or heroes could cross the river Styx into the underworld where they would remain to live a blessed and happy afterlife.

Kent's most attractive work at Stowe was his Temple of Ancient Virtue with its circular colonnade inspired by the ancient Temple of Vesta at Tivoli. Inscribed above the portal are the words *Priscae Vituti* – "To Ancient Virtue". The four niches inside contain display statues from the ancient world honouring Homer, the poet; Socrates, the philosopher; Lycurgus, a law-giver; and Epaminonda, an heroic general. Cobham believed that these four ancient Greeks embodied the virtues sadly lacking in the public figures of his day with their low standards of morality.

Within view of this temple is Kent's Temple of Modern Virtue – but satirically built as

a ruin, now reduced to rubble. These ruins were home to a headless statue reputed to be Walpole. Cobham had become so disillusioned with Walpole and his corrupt governance that he designed this to dishonour the corrupt Whigs, to disassociate himself from them. Stowe became known as the bastion of liberty.

The most southerly temple in the Elysian Fields is one of the most significant - the Temple of British Worthies. This is an exedra with busts in each of the 16 stone niches. The busts gaze meaningfully across to the Temple of Ancient Virtue. The eight busts on the left are men of thought and the eight on the right are men and a woman of action. Cobham had decided to give this area of the Elysian Fields a moral-political significance with busts of noble and truly admirable Britons such as Elizabeth I, Shakespeare, Newton, Milton, Bacon and Pope. George II appears to be conspicuously absent.

Temple of Concord and Victory, Stowe (Photo: S. Benham)



The centre of the building contains a bust, set within an oval niche, of Mercury – the god of messengers, who leads the souls of these heroes to the underworld of the Elysian Fields.

The work of Lancelot “Capability” Brown

Brown joined the Stowe staff at the age of 24 as an under-gardener in 1740 to work on water features, his then specialty. In 1741 he was promoted to head gardener with a staff of 40. Brown was at his best when working on a large scale, creating vast lakes, moving hills and sweeping away formal features such as geometrical parterres. His first major landscape design at Stowe was what is now known as the Grecian Valley. This artificially created “valley” lies in the far northeastern corner of the landscape garden, parallel with the main drive to and from the house with views of the Temple of Concord and Victory, Lord Cobham’s Column and General Wolfe’s Obelisk, extending the symbolism of both valour and liberty out to a wider landscape. These two concepts, valour and liberty, are central to the gardens symbolic, allegorical and aesthetic narrative reflecting Cobham’s 18th century ideals.

Stowe today

By the time of Cobham’s death in 1749 it was safe to say that Britain now rivalled Rome. Indeed, Britain had progressed beyond the glory that was Greece, the grandeur that was Rome. By about 1790 the gardens at Stowe were virtually complete. For almost 150 years nothing of artistic importance took place. Stowe was no longer a Whig citadel. It was merely the seat of the Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos, descendants of Lord Cobham.

Fortuitously, the gardens escaped the Victorian craze for mass plantings of hybrid rhododendrons.

Since 1923 Stowe House has become home to one of the top public schools in England. The school remains under the guardianship of the Stowe House Preservation Trust. The National Trust assumed ownership of the remaining estate and landscape gardens in 1989.

At Stowe, as well as Rousham, there is a strong sense of personality pervading the landscapes. Not only do these landscapes “talk” to each other but they have the innate ability to “talk” to their visitors. Stowe most definitely lacks the intimate charm of the “autobiographical” Rousham. In contrast Lord Cobham created a “political garden”. Today, Stowe’s political narrative is “read” by only some visitors, but we have the liberty to do so. Visitors can meaningfully experience the reasoning behind Lord Cobham’s creation or simply enjoy a pleasant walk in the fresh. No other art offers these opportunities.

Steve Benham

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Flowers from the  
Trial Garden

Top:  
Cosmos 'Tickle Pink',  
Bottom left to right:  
Cosmos 'Cupcakes Mixed'  
and Cosmos 'Fizzy Rose  
Picotee'





Greenfinch in Edible Garden  
(Photo: Barbara Wheeler)



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