



Bason botanic gardens trust

spring 2018 newsletter

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FROM THE CHAIR

Having escaped the country for ten weeks over winter it was an absolute pleasure to return and see the Bason Botanic Gardens looking so splendid and well populated by people enjoying this wonderful, peaceful and tranquil place. So firstly, hats off to our Parks and Reserves staff and the Fulton Hogan team.

All areas of the gardens are bursting with new growth and there is plenty on show for everyone. It was great to see three large busloads of school children there recently, midweek, and to chat to people strolling about clearly delighted. I met people admiring the cacti that Clive Higgie has written about in this issue. Whanganui clearly loves the Bason.

It's hard to ignore the lake with its magnificent bloom of red and green Azolla fern. You will find an article about that in this issue. I'd recommend popping in to the conservatories too which have been putting on a great show. More about them later.

Recent work around Picnic Flat has seen the installation of an electricity network to enable us to have power available at four points. This will facilitate the use of a remote generator for events and leave the power pillars safe, with no power to them, outside of those times.

We are also looking forward to the completion of the round the lake walkway. A pathway through the trees, overlooking the lake is in the design stage and we expect to put this out for tender and financing very soon.

The gardens are visited by many sections of the

community and for many different reasons. Resthomes and other care givers bring their residents, athletes train there, companies bring their staff for R&R, families bring everyone. It's a go to place to charge the batteries be it through quiet meditation or a good feed at the barbecues.

Have you been recently?

Yours in the enjoyment of plants and spaces

Terry Dowdeswell
Chair



"TINY FERN DEALS DEATH TO DINOSAURS!"

Local people think of Fern Flats as being a district near Marton. However, we have our own fern flats at the Bason, although I wouldn't recommend trying to walk over them. "Where are they?" I hear you ask. "Well, down in the Lake, particularly at certain seasons," I reply. The red "pondweed" that accumulates in masses is actually a native fern called *Azolla rubra*. Each plant is very tiny, about 1-2 cm across. If you pick an individual one up, you can see its little scale leaves, and roots trailing into the water.

Azolla rubra mainly propagates itself through simple division, and can do this at a tremendous rate, in three-five days in favourable conditions. If the division process wasn't limited, *Azolla* would cover the whole world in no time flat (five months, to be specific). The green "duckweed" that is often seen growing with *Azolla* is actually *Lemna*, a flowering plant. Often as waterfowl plow through the aquatic plants at the Bason, they leave interesting trails behind.

Azolla is widespread across the globe, and has an efficient nitrogen-fixing ability, much greater than clover. It has been grown in Asia for millennia in paddy fields, as a way of "fixing" nitrogen from the atmosphere and providing it to rice crops. It also has had benefit in suppressing weeds and mosquitos.

Anyway, just why was *Azolla* the nemesis of the dinosaurs? Well, during the dinosaur age, when the world was much warmer, the Arctic Ocean was effectively a giant freshwater lake, covered with *Azolla*.

Over time, as the fern died, it sank to the bottom, tying up vast amounts of carbon. When the carbon (as in carbon dioxide) in the atmosphere reduced to critical levels, it lowered the temperature of the earth, a kind of reverse greenhouse effect. This led to the ice ages and widespread extinctions. If you don't believe me, Google "Azolla event".

Right: *Cylindropuntia subulata*



CACTI AT THE BBG

As a youngster growing up near Whanganui, I was intrigued by the large tree cacti growing on or near the corner of Dublin and Bell streets. In one of the then stucco two-storied "flats", a Mr Todman lived. He was a cactus enthusiast. Memories of his garden still inspire wonder in me. After his death, it was disassembled. Some of the big tree cacti went to the Red Pepper restaurant, now the Kingsgate Hotel, although they're now long gone. A lot went to the Council's Abbott St nursery, where they slowly withered away.

BOOKINGS: Direct all Botanic Gardens venue/BBQ bookings to the Customer Service Desk
Whanganui District Council, phone 349 0001.

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CONTACTS:

Chairman

Terry Dowdeswell, c/- PO Box 778, Wanganui
Ph: 027 351 6104

Secretary:

Phil Thomsen, c/- PO Box 778, Wanganui
Ph: 06-347 1421, PRD@xtra.co.nz

Treasurer:

Alan Donald, c/- PO Box 778, Wanganui
Ph: 027 238 8118, alan.donald@clear.net.nz

Membership:

Andrea Coleman c/- PO Box 778, Wanganui
Ph: 027 726 8990, andrcole@slingshot.co.nz

A few were rescued by local enthusiasts and some came to the fledgling Bason Reserve (as it was called then). I well remember the "golden barrel", the big form of the "crown of thorns" and a yucca, all growing outside the main conservatory. They were iconic but unfortunately are now history. The big crown of thorns (*Euphorbia splendens*) is not a cactus but has similar painful properties. This was reintroduced on the Mill Hill a few years ago and is doing well.

The only cacti currently at the BBG are two forms of the Mexican and USA *Opuntia ficus-indica*, and an *Opuntia subulata* from Bolivia, Peru and Argentina.

The yellow fruit of *O. ficus-indica* on the Mill Hill is much-valued, mostly abroad but also here (generally by ex-pats from Africa).

Both of these *Opuntia* species can grow to five metres high and across. Indeed, after 20 years, it's now possibly time to set boundaries. Still, they're an easy-care plant: weeds are easy to control with weak herbicide and pruning is a piece of cake with slasher and pitchfork. Gloves are not an option – *O. subulata* laughs at leather boots! Indeed these plants are often used as a security fence/hedge.

Other uses for *O. ficus-indica* include the edible fruit, which can also be processed into syrups, jams, toppings, pickles, wine, beer ... Young pads (maybe also called leaves) are eaten raw in salads and can be roasted. They are also used for stock feed. Seed is ground into flour. Preparations from the pads are used to treat bruises, wounds, sun burn, leprosy, tumours, measles, diarrhoea, diabetes, kidney ailments ... To me, perhaps the strangest use is a rendering of the pads, to be added to whitewash and mortar, to improve adhesiveness.

So, next time you're traversing the hot, dry part of the Mill Hill, take a good, respectful look at these iconic, useful plants.

- Clive Higgle.

CONSERVATORY UPDATE

The conservatory displays alone have been worthy of a trip out to the Bason this year. I think it is the most floriferous display that we have had in quite some time.

Two years ago, as a cost cutting exercise, we stopped heating two of the three conservatories at Bason Botanic Gardens.

In order to ensure that we could still have a focus on orchids, this has meant that we needed to rethink the species that we would grow and acquire, in order to provide a display in these cooler conditions.

As well as the orchids, we have started to get small collections of other plants that provide interest to visitors so that there can be something of interest all year round.

We also decided to make a clearer distinction on species between each display house so they each have different points of interest.

As a result, in the conservatory closest to the pergola, we have mainly focused on *Cymbidiums* and *Masdevallias* for the Winter / Spring display and in the Summer we have *Begonias*, both the tuberous types and the leafy types. We have also started to get a variety of summer flowering bulbs and corms such as *Eucomis*, *Hippeastrums* and *Cannas*.

In the middle conservatory our main focus has been on *Dendrobiums* and *Sarcochilus* for the Winter / Spring period, with orchids that are largely from the *Miltonia* family flowering over the Summer. As well as that, we have a number of Bromeliad type plants that help to carry the displays. My favourite is the one with the purple centre.

In the Larsen house we have a number of *Phalenopsis* all year round, and we also have *Paphiopedilums* (slipper orchids), and even some *Laelias* that have flowered this year.

The Conservatories really do add another dimension to the Bason Botanic Gardens ... Enjoy.

Wendy Bainbridge



Above: *O. ficus-indica*
Below: *O. subulata*



A BRIEF STOP AT THE BASON

The Whanganui Camera Club recently hosted the Photographic Society of New Zealand's Regional Convention. More than a hundred photographers, from as far afield at Auckland and Christchurch, gathered at Collegiate School over the weekend 28-30 September. The programme included fieldtrips and photoshoots, one of which was at the Basen Botanic Gardens.

Lindsay says "Our passengers were interested to hear about the background history of the Basen Botanic Gardens and while we would have loved to spend more time there, everyone had a taste of what these lovely gardens offer – and I'm sure they'll be back on future photographic trips – and they all now know that test cricket ISN'T played there!!!

Lindsay Stockbridge LPSNZ

Lindsay has kindly sent us some of his images of the "Villa Rustica" sculpture to include in this newsletter.

If you like taking photos of the garden and would like to submit some for the Newsletter, Web site or Facebook page, please do so to terrance.dowdeswell@gmail.com

The easiest way to find our Website and Facebook page is to simply google Basen Botanic Gardens.



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c/- PO Box 778, Wanganui

