

Leaflet

Spring 2014

Bason Botanic Gardens Trust
Newsletter

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Ian Hamilton

2013/14 has been a year of highlights. First of all the opening of the Lakeside project. The project, financed by a substantial bequest from Christian and Belle Alexander, was officially opened at a lakeside ceremony on Friday 13 March. It is fitting for an important park like the Bason to be supported by some generous citizens of the Wanganui community. We could not have improved the lakeside without this tremendous bequest.

The second project is now under way. The trust is redeveloping the opening of the Homestead Garden and you would have seen the plans in the recent winter Leaflet. It will be an attractive, welcoming and stimulating entrance. It will, I am sure, attract comment.

The third project was also in the Leaflet. These barbecues are certain to be popular with some smart rain covers over them.



Many expressions of interest have been received from across New Zealand for a large modern abstract sculpture at the base of the Millennium Steps. These are to be short listed before further designs are required.

Below: This question featured in the Stuff quiz recently. Can you get the answer right?

Where are the Bason Botanic Gardens?

- Napier
- Hasting
- Oamaru
- Whanganui

I think that this is amazing progress over just the last three years. Each newsletter has outlined the ongoing work that continues at the gardens. Many people require thanks for the maintenance and improvement of plants and trees. First the committee: Phil Thomsen, our outstanding secretary and newsletter producer, Terry Dowdeswell, our treasurer, council representative Wendy Bainbridge, and other committee members, Clive Higgie, Marc Higgie and Kevin Luff. In my time on committees I have rarely come across such a knowledgeable group.

My thanks again goes to the Council for its ongoing support, Fulton Hogan for their everyday care of the gardens, the Homestead Gardens volunteers led by our Patron Vonnie Cave and to the Community Projects Team.

What of the future?

We need to complete the sealing of the road. The trust is trying to raise more funding and we are hoping that the council will subsidise anything that we raise. Our Strategic Plan talks about more sculptures in line with the Council policy. Electricity reticulation down to the lake is another item on the list.

We will continue with planting and maintaining our plants and trees. As I stated in the newsletter, Botanic Gardens are these days viewed as environmentally sustainable institutions holding documented collections for the purpose of conservation, to display, educate and enjoy.

Iconic New Zealand plants

Clive Higgie

There are certain plants which just stand out and grab your attention. They're different, strikingly beautiful or indeed possibly ugly – if judged along traditional lines. Here, think *Amorophallus*, *Hakea victoriana* and *mata-gouri* perhaps.

Anyway, here in New Zealand, there are half a dozen plants which stand out above the rest. These are iconic. Some, actually all, are pretty common and sometimes we need to “refresh our attitude” to appreciate them.

They are *Phormium tenax* (flax), *Cortaderia* (toe toe), *Rhopalostylis sapida* (nikau), *Cordyline australis* (ti kouka or cabbage tree), *Carex secta* (cutty grass or purei) and *Cyathea medullaris* (mamaku or black tree fern).

With the old French saying “All cats are grey at night”, it would have to be a very dark night indeed to miss the uniqueness of these plants.

Let's have a quick look at each of them.

Flax (harakeke). Perhaps the one I take least notice of and I'm certainly over all the colourful cultivars, although I did buy a small cultivar called “Blondie” last year. Fearfully I believe the name influenced me. Anyway, an area of flax like the Taupo swamp just north of Plimmerton is an awesome sight, especially when

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flowering.

Toe toe. Subtly more beautiful than the larger, bolder pampas from Argentina, our toe toe is indeed spectacularly wonderful at the height of flowering.

Nikau. Our New Zealand palm, the southern-most species in the world (Palm Valley near Akaroa). There are palm species galore to the north of New Zealand, bigger, taller and faster, but no more beautiful.

Cabbage tree. Our cabbage tree is a wonder, so graceful and unique. The biggest and bold-est of all the Cordylines. Not a friend of the lawn-mower but that's life, isn't it.

Carex secta. Perhaps not on your list? To me, it's one of New Zealand most special plants. As a small boy, hanging out in swamps and such, we soon learnt to respect that ... cutty grass! As an adult, its graceful beauty, often framing water, captivated me. The most beautiful area at the Bason Bot Gardens, for me, is the carex swamp.

Mamaku. Whilst not unique to New Zealand, our tree ferns are certainly in the iconic realm. Like me, visitors to New Zealand are captivated by them. The mamaku, our graceful giant, is an amazingly robust plant. It grows in a wide range of conditions, but it prefers sheltered,



SCULPTURE PROJECT

Phil Thomsen

Now that the Homestead Garden entrance and covered double barbeque projects are well underway, the Board is working towards its next project. We find that the lead times for projects are so long that we need to work on the planning processes for several at the same time. Current effort is towards a large abstract sculpture near the toilets at the bottom of the Millennium Hill. At this point there is a large empty space, which leads itself to some kind of dramatic feature. Until recently there was a large conifer in this area; however this has now blown over, so there is a blank canvas to work with.

The artwork is planned to be visible from several key viewpoints. Firstly, as one drives down the Millennium Hill you will be looking directly towards it. Secondly, those driving back from the barbeques on the Lakeside will also be driving towards it (or strolling if they are simply walking to the toilets). Lastly, as one walks down the Millennium Hill Steps you will again be looking directly down on the feature. As a result, it is critical that the sculpture is visible from every angle – including moving around it.

A second criteria is that that artwork needs to be a simple dramatic piece. While viewing it while driving down the Hill, the emphasis needs to be on simplicity and boldness, not fussiness. About a year ago, Board members put up a bamboo structure about 10 metres high as an indication – and looking down the Hill it was clear that this is around the scale required for a feature in this position.

At the same time, it would be pleasing if it encouraged interaction, particularly by children. The Stuart Welch sculpture near the Millennium Hill Lookout often has children crawling over it or posing in it. While 10 metres might be too moist valley bottoms, where it is among the



Top right: Mamaku growing near Whanganui

Above: Carex secta at Bason Gardens

high to climb on, there may be scope to play around the base (as one sees with the David McCracken sculpture by the Saturday morning River market). It is also hoped that, although the sculpture may have a bold impact from a distance, it has an interesting surface texture or pattern that invites closer inspection. Plus of course, the artwork needs to be durable in a coastal environment. Plus safe! Phew! – that’s a pretty demanding list! And all on a modest budget!

The Trust Board appointed a Sculpture Group to plan for this – Clive Higgin, Phil Thomsen, and Terry Dowdeswell. Through the services of the Wanganui District Council Arts Facilitator, Debbie Kapohe, the project was promoted to the arts community, both locally and internationally. The response was phenomenal – 19 expressions of interest from as far afield as Italy.

At this stage, the Sculpture Group held two meetings to appraise the candidates. Assisting with these were Greg Donson (Sarjeant Gallery), Bill Millbank (Millbank Gallery), and Wendy Bainbridge (Council Senior Parks Officer and Board member) as well as Debbie Kapohe. The Group then shortlisted three artists, as illustrated on these pages. As a next stage, each of these three will be invited to submit a full plan and specifications, along with a maquette (a small scale model of the sculpture). For doing this, they will receive a fee from the Board. It is planned to display these works, perhaps in the iSite gallery upstairs, or

the Council foyer, and ask for feedback from the public on the three pieces.



Shortlisted sculptures

Top: Proposal from Elinor Harvey McDouall, looking down the road descending the Millennium Hill

Middle: A representation of how Wi Taepa’s sculpture would look on site shows how organic it would appear.

Bottom: Paul Johnson and Gail Mason’s proposal is reminiscent of the tall trees near the site, or steep Para-

