Christchurch Botanic Gardens

In a loop of the Avon River, bordered on three sides by the green expanse of Hagley Park, are the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. More than 1.1 million visitors come to the gardens each year, making them one of the city’s most popular attractions.

The gardens are at the heart of Christchurch’s reputation as the Garden City. A temperate climate supports thousands of plants, gathered from around the world and across New Zealand since 1863.

Some of the largest, tallest and oldest trees in New Zealand can be found here. The gardens host spectacular colour and form, intriguing artworks, and memorial plantings that celebrate events from local and international history. Introduced species remind us of faraway places, and native plants take us to the bush, the mountains and the wetlands of Aotearoa.

The Gardens Heritage

When the first European settlers arrived they were met by swamp, shingle beds and sand dunes.

Maori had valued the wetlands, estuary and the coastline for centuries. They camped at mahinga kai (food-gathering places) along tracks running between pa (settlements) to the north and south.

The tussock and flax, grasses and raupo of this area were foreign to migrants from the northern hemisphere arriving in the 1850s. The settlers brought the gardening traditions of their homelands with them and set up public spaces for gardening from the very beginning. In 1855, the Canterbury Provincial Council took control of the reserves which later became Hagley Park and the Government Domain – became the Christchurch Botanic Gardens.

In 1859, Yorkshireman Enoch Barker came to Christchurch as government gardener. His early work revolved around supplying gravel from the reserves to help build the city’s roads. He established a nursery and planted avenues of trees around Hagley Park. It was he who planted the first official tree establishing the Botanic Gardens.

Most of the early curators had trained on English and Scottish estates and were steeped in Victorian and Edwardian gardening fashions. But before long plants were brought in from around the world – initially from Tasmania and eventually from countries as far away as India, Nepal and China – while in return native New Zealand seeds were sent to botanical societies around the world.

The 1870s and 1880s were key years in the development of the gardens. The young settlement had put down roots. Scotsman John Armstrong was curator, and he and his son Joseph created much of the shape of today’s botanical landscape. They had a keen interest in local flora, and also introduced and acclimatised more than 4000 plant species, many of which arrived by sailing ship, travelling for months across the seas from England in wooden cases.

Funding the gardens was a challenge for the Christchurch Domain Board, established in 1872. Unsuccessful attempts were made to establish economic species like medicinal plants, olives, tobacco and sugar maple. These schemes were abandoned in the mid 1880s. Over the years, grazing fees and revenue from sales of hay, firewood and shingle supplemented the board’s income, as did regular garden fetes.

In 1946 the Domain Board was disbanded and the management of the Botanic Gardens passed to Christchurch City Council.
How old is the Christchurch Botanic Gardens?
On 9 July 1863 an English oak (Quercus robur) was planted in the Botanic Gardens to commemorate the marriage of the English monarch Queen Victoria’s eldest son Prince Albert Edward to Princess Alexandra of Denmark. It was planted by the first Government Gardener, Enoch Barker, and is accepted as the foundation date of the Botanic Gardens although not much appears to have been started until the following year.

This oak tree is located close to the Avon River near the footbridge leading to the Daffodil Woodland. It is marked with a plaque that can be found at the base of the tree.

What is the definition of a botanic garden?
Although the boundaries between public parks, private plant collections, scientific collections and scientifically based and landscaped public botanic gardens are blurred, a widely accepted definition for a botanic garden is as follows: botanic gardens are institutions holding documented collections of living plants for the purposes of scientific research, conservation, display and education.

What is the vision for the Botanic Gardens?
The Christchurch Botanic Gardens are foremost in celebrating and presenting plant diversity through collections and programmes, including promoting the relationship that people have with plants.

What is the oldest botanic garden in New Zealand?
The establishment year of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens in 1863 is shared with the Dunedin Botanic Gardens, making these two the oldest botanic gardens in New Zealand.

Both gardens are celebrating their 150th anniversary in 2013. Within the Australasian region, the oldest botanic garden is the Royal Botanic Garden (RBG) Sydney (1816), followed by the RBG Tasmania in Hobart (1818), RBG Melbourne (1846) and the Adelaide Botanic Gardens (1855). Christchurch Botanic Gardens, while not the oldest, are relatively long established and, historic.

How large are the grounds of the Botanic Gardens and Hagley Park?
The Botanic Gardens comprise 21 hectares with Hagley Park consisting of 164 hectares of land.

The botanical collections located within Hagley Park that are included within the Botanic Gardens collections cover approximately 11 hectares. These are the Heritage Rose Garden, the Primula Garden, the Pinetum and the Kate Sheppard Memorial Walk. The combined area for the Christchurch Botanic Gardens and Hagley Park is about 185 hectares.

Where is the Christchurch Botanic Gardens located?
The Christchurch Botanic Gardens are located in the central business district 15 minutes walk from the central city. It forms part of the Cultural Precinct. The Gardens are enclosed by Hagley Park and the loop of the Avon River. One side is accessible from Rolleston Avenue.

How many plants grow in the Botanic Gardens?
The Botanic Gardens have over 10,000 exotic and native plants within their grounds.

Who provides the plants for the Botanic Gardens?
In the past, native plants and seeds were collected from the wild and exotic plants and seeds were ordered from other botanical institutions in New Zealand and overseas. Currently, very few cuttings and seeds are collected from the Botanic Gardens plant collections. Those that are collected are germinated and grown on in the Botanic Gardens nursery, mainly for use in the conservatories. Other plants are sourced through New Zealand nurseries or are imported from overseas through commercial nurseries and botanical institutions.

The Botanic Gardens still participate in seed exchanges through the Index Seminum Network. This network makes seeds available through its catalogue to members. Members to the network contribute to the Index Seminum by donating seeds for distribution.

Who funds the Christchurch Botanic Gardens?
Christchurch residents fund the Botanic Gardens through the Christchurch City Council’s property rates. Some one-off projects are funded by the Friends of the Botanic Gardens. There are two donation boxes at entrances into the Botanic Gardens where visitors can donate money. Approximately $2000 is collected through the donation boxes each year.

What can be seen in the Botanic Gardens?
The Botanic Gardens have over 2000 juvenile and mature trees spread throughout the grounds. Some of these trees are up to 130 years old. The climate and conditions within Christchurch means most exotic trees do better here (growth wise) than they do in their country of origin.

Historic structures and memorials found within the grounds include:
- Bandsmen’s Memorial Rotunda
- Cuningham House, Conservatory
- Kate Sheppard Memorial Walk
- Peace Bell
- Climatological Station
- Te Puna Ora Spring
- Curators House

Some of these are currently closed or being repaired following the earthquakes.

The gardens also are host to numerous birds, including native and introduced species. Found in the Botanic Gardens. For more information on the birds found in the gardens, visit the gardens’ website.
What is the Māori history of the site?

The eastern side of the Botanic Gardens along the Avon River was an important source of food (kai) for local Māori. Ngai Tuahuriri, based north of Christchurch at Tuahiwi, is the Māori tribal authority (Manawhenua) with guardianship (Kaitiakitanga) over this part of the city. Ngai Tuahuriri have a strong interest in waterways restoration. The gardens provide a place to strengthen the values associated with the Ngai Tahu relationship to plants and animals (Mahinga kai).

What was on the site of the Botanic Gardens before its development?

The vegetation in the vicinity of the Botanic Gardens at the time of European colonisation in the 1850s included short tussock grassland, toi-toi, Spaya orchids, ferns and orchids. Flax and sedges lined the river margins and swamps. In 1897 a large swamp in North Hagley Park was formed into a lake and named Victoria Lake after the queen for her Diamond Jubilee.

An account of the Deans brothers’ first journey to Riccarton Bush up the Avon River gives an indication of the riverside vegetation in the Botanic Gardens area:

“…a Māori canoe conveyed the party to the bend in the river close to the present Riccarton Road. During the whole river journey the canoe had to be forced through a thick growth of vegetation by pulling on the flax. When the little party left the river a path had to be made through the dense entanglement of fern, tutu, tussock, bramble, spaniards and other native growth, nearly breast-high.”

How many countries are represented in the Botanic Gardens plant collections?

Plants from many countries are represented throughout the grounds and conservatories, ranging from the Arctic Circle to tropical regions. The larger bio-geographical collections include:

• Himalaya and China – River walk
• New Zealand – New Zealand Botanic Gardens
• South American cacti – Garrick House

A Gondwana Garden is also planned to represent the southern super continent Gondwanaland which originally included most of the land masses in today’s southern hemisphere. A selection of plants with a relict lineage traced back to Gondwanaland will be included in this planting.

What other significant uses has the site had?

Some of the first Canterbury settlers erected V-huts in North Hagley Park. This area became known as Pilgrims Corner and is situated between the Kate Sheppard Memorial Walk and the golf club. A stone tablet acknowledges this history.

Why are the Botanic Gardens referred to as the Botanic Gardens (plural)?

The use of the word plural, “Botanic Gardens” goes back to the early days of settlement when, in addition to the “Government Domain” or “Botanic Garden” the Domains Board also operated a garden for the establishment of economic plants and a nursery where trees and shrubs were grown for distribution throughout the country. These were collectively referred to as the “Botanic Gardens” and although there is now only one garden the plural form has persisted so that today it is still called the Botanic Gardens.

Are there any groups closely associated with the Christchurch Botanic Gardens?

Like most large botanic gardens around the world, the Christchurch Botanic Gardens are supported by the Friends of the Botanic Gardens Society. People who wish to help the gardens can join and assist the gardens as a volunteer.

For more information see www.friendschchbotanicgardens.org.nz

On 18 October 1988 a meeting was held to discuss the possibility of establishing a society to help the Botanic Gardens. In 1989, the Society was officially registered as an incorporated society and became the Friends of the Botanic Gardens Incorporated.

For more detailed information about the Christchurch Botanic Gardens please refer to the Hagley Park/Botanic Gardens Master Plan and Management Plan.
## Detailed Chronology of Gardens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1859/60</td>
<td>Enoch Barker appointed Government Gardener.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>Prince Albert Edward oak planted by Enoch Barker. (First recorded planting in the domain).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>Barker and assistants begin grounds work in the Acclimatisation Society’s Grounds and begin to layout the domain. Barker requests donations of plants from public.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>Christchurch Horticultural Society granted land adjacent to the Acclimatisation Society for a Botanic Garden.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1866/67</td>
<td>John Armstrong replaces Enoch Barker as Government Gardener.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>Pine Mound planted with Pinus pinaster (syn Pinus maritima). The seed of Sequoiadendron giganteum received. New nursery established on the west side of the domain. Archery Lawn formed for the Toxophilite Society’s archery practice and competition.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>International Industrial Exhibition held in South Hagley Park. Acclimatisation Gardens formally opened to public.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>John and Joseph Armstrong resign from their positions over disagreements of the nature of the domain’s work. Ambrose Taylor appointed Head Gardener.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>Fire destroys approximately 5½ acres in the domain.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Magnetic Observatory complex constructed in the domain.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1906/1907</td>
<td>New Zealand International Exhibition held in North Hagley Park.</td>
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<td>1907</td>
<td>James Dawes appointed as Head Gardener.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>James Young appointed as Head Gardener.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>The first domain fête held, attracting a crowd of between 20,000 and 25,000 visitors. First stage of James Young’s rose garden laid out.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Tea Kiosk erected in the gardens.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Peacock Fountain erected adjacent to the present site of the McDougall Art Gallery.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Townend Conservatory and Orchid House purchased and relocated from Allan McLean’s estate known as “Holly Lea”. Domain renamed Botanic Gardens and James Young becomes curator.</td>
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<td>1915</td>
<td>Peacock fountain relocated to south-east corner of Archery Lawn.</td>
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<td>1917</td>
<td>Tilia (Lime) Avenue known as Beswick’s walk planted by James Young.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Tea Kiosk destroyed by fire.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>Replacement Tea Kiosk constructed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Cuningham House opened.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Bandmen’s Memorial Rotunda officially opened in September 1926 by Sir Heaton Rhodes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Peacock fountain relocated to a site west of the Archery Lawn.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>James McPherson appointed as curator.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Rose Garden remodelled by James McPherson.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Leonard Cockayne Memorial Garden opened.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Formal inauguration of Daffodil Sunday.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>New paddling pool constructed in the Children’s Playground.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Brendon Mansfield appointed as assistant director after James McPherson’s resignation. Snow storm causes significant damage to trees in the domain.</td>
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<td>1946</td>
<td>Botanic Gardens Amendment Act 1946 – domain boards cease to function, and Hagley Park and the Botanic Gardens vested in Christchurch City.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>Morris John Barnett appointed director of Botanic Gardens, Parks and Reserves. Snowstorm causes extensive damage to many trees on the Armstrong and Archery Lawns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Peacock Fountain dismantled.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954-1955</td>
<td>Old wooden Townend House demolished.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Huia Gilpin appointed director of Botanic Gardens, Parks and Reserves. Lawrie Metcalfe appointed assistant curator.</td>
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1955-1956  New Townend House constructed over the footprint of the original house.
1963     The gardens’ centenary was marked with the publication A Garden Century.
1968     “Wahine storm” causes extensive damage in the gardens.
1970     The gardens’ first guest touring vehicle known as the “Toast Rack” introduced.
1976     Conversion of Rose Species garden in the Murray-Aynsley Lawn to a Heritage Rose garden.
1978     Alan Jolliffe appointed curator.
1979     A fire damages Tea Kiosk and it is rebuilt using the existing brickwork.
1982     Warwick Scadden appointed curator.
1987     Information Centre erected.
1996     Peacock fountain reinstated on the Armstrong Lawn following major restoration.
1998     Demonstration Kitchen Garden formed beside the Curator’s House.
2003     Dr David Given appointed curator.
2004     Work began on the second Christchurch Botanic Gardens Management Plan including a public consultation programme which was undertaken in 2004/2005.
2009     Dr John Clemens appointed curator.
2010     First Canterbury earthquake. Trees removed from the Gardens for public safety.
2011     Second major Canterbury earthquake causes damage to the Bandsmen’s Rotunda, Cunningham House and other show houses, Herbert Pavilion, Nurses Chapel, Tea Kiosk, Curator’s House and some sculptures.
2013     Gardens’ 150th anniversary. Construction starts on a new building, incorporating nurseries, café and information centre.

Cunningham House with Rose Garden and mirror pond in the foreground and Magnetic House to the side