

Newsletter

*For Friends of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens Inc
To Promote, Protect, & Preserve*

No 95, Autumn 2014

From President, Charles Graham -

New Visitors Centre

We have seen a considerable advancement in the progress of the new Visitors Centre since the last newsletter was written. The committee donned hard hats and hi-vis vests and was given a preliminary tour round the building and new nursery area. The building will in my view be a huge asset to the Gardens. Staff has recently moved into the office space and nursery area, although they do not yet have routine access to other parts of the building.

There will no doubt be opportunities for the Friends to support projects to enhance the learning experiences of visitors to the Centre over the coming years. As I reported in the previous newsletter, we have committed funds for graphic displays with touch screens mounted on free standing aluminum blades. These displays will be in the main atrium.

Conservatories

There is no confirmed date for the reopening of the conservatories. The Cuninghame House has had a number of engineering reports undertaken, and will probably be given the thumbs up. The Townend House needs work done on it before it can be opened. Before the Cuninghame House can be opened, the Townend House needs to be fixed so that there are two entries/exits to the conservatories.

An unexpected bonus arising from the closure of the Cuninghame House over the last three years is that the plants have been left to grow and compete for space and light, and this has resulted in some interesting hybrids being produced naturally. Anything that grows and looks different is being potted up by nursery staff

Guiding

Our guides have been busy of recent. February has seen more visitors taking up a guided walk than any other month in the last twelve months. All the garden clubs in Christchurch have been contacted and many have taken up the opportunity for a group guided walk. Other garden clubs have expressed interest for a guided walk in the coming months.

The guides are working with Jeremy Hawker on various options to optimise their guiding activities when the new Visitors Centre is open to the public

Plant Propagation Groups

The propagation groups have been busy in their new nursery area. We are excited that the new Visitors Centre will provide further opportunities for the sale of our plants. We are working with management through ideas that will best suit our needs in this new environment.

Our next Plant Sale has been set for Saturday 29 March and will begin at 9.00am and finish as usual at 12.30pm. We have some really good stock at the moment, and we expect it to be another great success. If you want some bargains, come and support us at the same time.

There are still a couple of vacancies in our propagation groups. You only need to be enthusiastic, and you can meet some great people, and learn something about propagating your favourite plants. If you are interested in joining one of the groups, phone Don Bell 343 6699.

Skills for the Future Award

The Friends financially supported Christchurch Botanic Gardens trainee Nellie Riley to attend the summer Practical Field Botany course (BIOL 305) at the University of Canterbury Mountain Field Station at Cass in

Contents

Garden News	4
Articles	6
Events in the Gardens	9

Friends' website

Have you visited the Friends' website? The address is <http://www.friendschchbotanicgardens.org.nz/>

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Distribution of Newsletter

We distribute the Newsletter by email to those members who have given us their email addresses and who have not requested otherwise. If you would prefer to receive the Newsletter by mail, rather than electronically, please contact Philippa Graham – phone 348 5896 or email philippa.graham@gmail.com

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January. Nellie and eight other students scoured the hills and riverbeds surrounding the Field Station, collecting and identifying by means of taxonomical keys over 80 species of plants. Six of their specimens were then mounted as herbarium specimens. Nellie said "It was a very worthwhile and fun course. I learnt a lot and have a new found interest and appreciation for our hardy and often tiny alpine species. Thank you (the Friends) very, very much!"

Summer Scholarship

The summer scholarship projects that the Friends sponsored are coming to a conclusion and Kristina MacDonald and Matthew Arnet have produced interesting results and conclusions.

Kristina has monitored the behavior of different pollinators on the native *Gastrodia* (potato orchid), and she has come up with some surprising results. Matthew, together with a Scion funded student, Bernado Santos, studied threatened exotic trees in several Canterbury arboreta.

Kristina and Matthew will be invited to present their results to the Friends later in the year, when the new Visitors Centre is up and running.

Gardens' News

From Curator John Clemens

New Botanic Gardens Visitor Centre.

There have been exciting changes since Christmas at the heart of the Botanic Gardens where the new Visitor Centre is being constructed. Visiting today you would see the new building clearly from many different angles never seen before: the high perimeter fence has gone (though there is still a chain-link fence around the construction site for public safety), and the old nursery building and remaining greenhouses have been demolished. Most recently, temporary staff offices have been removed. Now there is a glorious vista from under the tree canopy near Cuninghame House and the Rose Garden towards the gleaming glass and steel structure that has grown into its final form over the summer.



The alluring view of the plants in the new Botanic Gardens nursery



The north face of the new building visible across the Avon River

The angled glass walls rise magnificently from the ground between the Avon River and the western end of the Herbaceous Border. Plants from the Botanic Gardens nursery were moved into place progressively through January; first thing in the morning they look particularly alluring through the glass of the new nursery area. The building is also in full view from the north across the Avon.

Botanic Gardens staff (apart from those continuing to look after visitors in the old visitor centre building) moved into the office and nursery of the new Botanic Gardens Visitor Centre early in February. There is no public access to this area while construction of other parts of the new building is being completed;

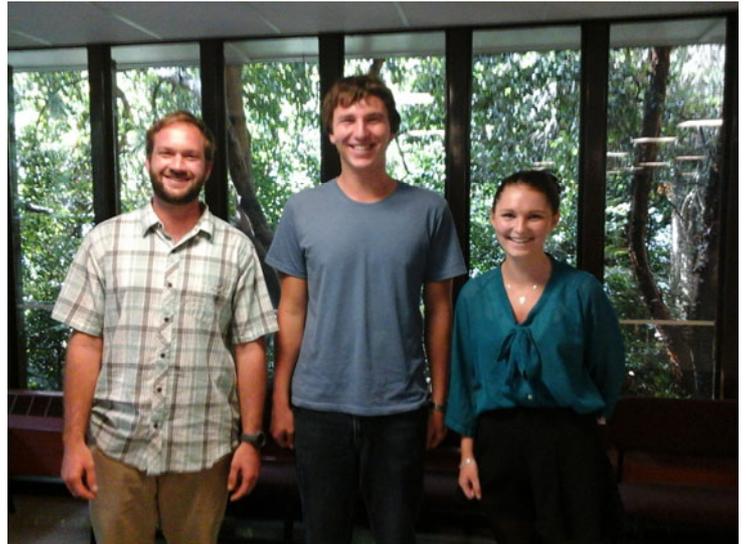
staff need to wear hard hats and “hi-vis” tops to enter (and to depart from) the construction site.

We expect that progress towards completion will be rapid, allowing staff to prepare and test other service areas, e.g. the library, herbarium, exhibition space, atrium, and multi-function space, before an official opening. Visitor Services Team Leader, Lynda Burns, reports that the blades and associated graphics for the atrium that the Friends have supported financially will be the first display to be completed. These are exciting times. We look forward to sharing the new building with the Friends and visitors.

Native and exotic plants studied.

In other behind the scenes news two summer scholarship projects co-sponsored by the Friends and the University of Canterbury are drawing to a close. We can expect to meet and listen to these students during the year. Each project has produced interesting results that connect our core collections with the “extended botanic gardens” in the city and wider Canterbury plantings. Responses to a call for recent sightings of the rare potato orchid (in the genus *Gastrodia*) allowed summer student Kristina Macdonald to work on pollination of three different *Gastrodia* species. These were at six contrasting sites, from the peace of a plantation at Lake Coleridge to a busy Disraeli Street section in the city. As predicted, some known *Gastrodia* sites produced no flowers this year, while others produced more than expected. The distinctive brown spikes appeared at four locations in the Botanic Gardens alone. Our friend, the native ground-nesting bee with the disreputable name (*Lasioglossum sordidum*), appears to be a requirement for good fruit set in one of our local *Gastrodia* species.

Matthew Arnet (and Scion-sponsored student Bernardo Santos) scoured the city and Canterbury for rare exotic trees on the Red List of the Interna-



Three happy 2013 – 2014 summer scholarship students (Bernardo Santos, Matthew Arnet, and Kristina Macdonald)

tional Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Plant collections in arboreta, including the Hart Arboretum at Lake Coleridge, the Anderson Arboretum at Albury, and smaller collections near Hororata, were compared with those in the Botanic Gardens and other city sites. Using documented collection lists, herbarium records, and help from local experts, they found and measured many trees that are threatened or critically threatened with extinction in the wild. Of course, there might well be other Red List trees planted in the city that have so far escaped attention. This is important work as we have a responsibility to look after these trees under the Convention on Biological Diversity. We are also getting a better understanding of the significance of our own plants within the Botanic Gardens.

Studying and conserving plants are important parts of Botanic Gardens business. Together with education and display, we are looking forward to promoting an understanding and appreciation of the world's flora during the rest of 2014.

Events in the Gardens

From Lynda Burns, Visitor Services Team Leader. 941 7585 or 027 559 0181.

Autumn Scavenger Hunt

Daily from Saturday 12 to Sunday 27 April, 10am - 4pm. Ages 3 - 12 years.
Pick up scavenger hunt list from the Information Centre

Articles

Plant hunter – Sarah, Countess Amherst (1762-1838)

My wife and I recently visited the Blue Mountains Botanic Garden, Mt Tomah. If you are visiting the Blue Mountains, inland from Sydney, and have an interest in plants and gardens, I can recommend a visit to this cool climate, high altitude (1,000metres) Botanic Garden.

One of the features of interest for visitors to the Garden is the Plant Explorers Walk. The Walk is a winding path down a hillside planted in tall trees and various shrubs of mainly Asian origin. Along this path are a series of 14 information panels, each of which relates to a focus plant and describes the adventures of one of the many plant explorers who collected in Asia during a period of 300 years. Most plant collectors were of course men, but one panel reminds us that this was not exclusively so; it outlines the activities of Sarah, Countess Amherst.

Lady Amherst was a competent and enthusiastic botanist, talented watercolour painter and keen ornithologist.

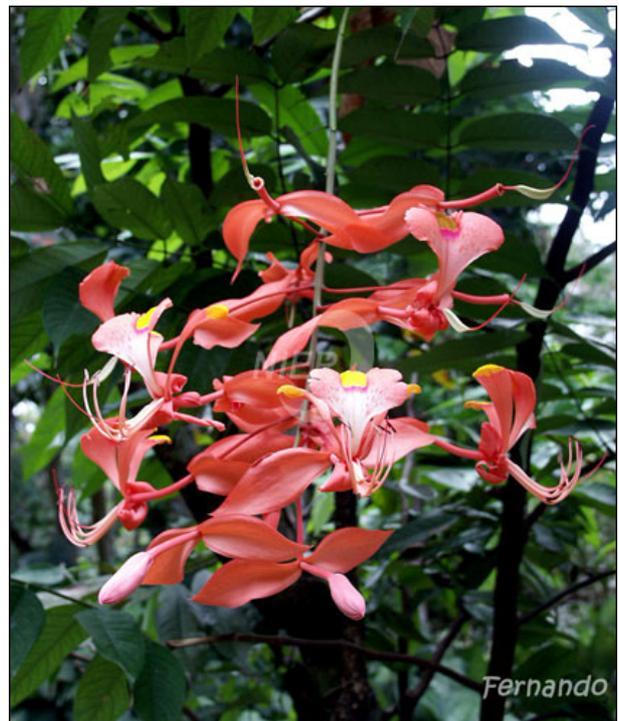
She came from and married into the highly privileged British aristocracy. She was the daughter of the second Lord Archer and through marriage became a countess twice over. Her first husband was the 5th Earl of Plymouth. Her husband subsequently died and it was as the Dowager Countess of Plymouth that in 1823 she married for the second time, to William Pitt, 2nd Baron (later 1st Earl) Amherst. In the same year Lord Amherst was appointed Governor-General of India based in Calcutta.

Lady Amherst's daughter (another Sarah) was also, like her mother, an ardent botanist. Over the period of 1823-24 while her husband was Governor-General, mother and daughter travelled extensively with Lord Amherst on his diplomatic and administrative missions in India, Burma and the Himalayas. On these trips Lady Amherst collected plants, introducing a number to Europe. Perhaps most noteworthy was that glory of the spring garden, *Clematis montana*. Her Indian plant collection is at Kew.

It seems that the two women continued after this time to collect plants in the Himalayas. Their expedition to the remote hill station at Simla in 1826 took

eight months. While there Lady Amherst and her daughter scrambled enthusiastically about the mountainsides collecting plants. A family friend was noted botanist, Nathaniel Wallich, the Danish born superintendent of the Calcutta Botanic Garden. Wallich wrote in his Journal, "after a residence of nearly five years in India (Lady Amherst and her daughter) have returned to England with a large and very interesting collection of preserved specimens of plants, gathered and excellently preserved by their own skill and industry". Her Himalayan plant collection (1823-28) was found in the herbarium of Aylmer Bourke Lambert (1761-1842) which was sold at auction after his death. An article in *Taxon* 1970 discusses the probable disposition of these plant specimens.

Her name was commemorated by Nathaniel Wallich in the tree Pride of Burma *Amherstia nobilis* Wall. This is a tropical tree in the *Fabaceae* family and is the only member of the genus *Amherstia*. It has exceptionally beautiful flowers, indeed it has been described as the most beautiful tree in the world. It is widely cultivated because of its ornamental value in the humid tropics, but is very rare in the wild and has only been collected from its native habitat a few times. It is native to Burma (Myanmar), hence the common name.



Amherstia nobilis – showing the extravagant flowers hanging from the long inflorescence.

In 1828 she and Lord Amherst introduced into England, what became known as, the Lady Amherst pheasant. It is because of this colourful bird that her name is primarily remembered today.

Lady Amherst's account book compiled while she was living as the Governor-General's consort in Calcutta was recently sold at auction. The account book presents a picture of the extravagant way of life of the upper classes serving in India in the 19th century, and of the luxuries afforded to Lady Amherst to suit her high social position as wife of the governor-general. It is interesting that interspersed among receipts for jewelry and precious stones, china, a collection of rare shells, silks, satins and garments made by tailors and milliners in Calcutta are receipts for botanical texts for Lord and Lady Amherst's library, such as *Drummond's First Steps to Botany*

Bill Whitmore

Look at that tree – *Ulmus glabra* 'Camperdownii'; Camperdown elm

Some time between 1835 1840 the Earl of Camperdown's head forester, David Taylor, discovered a young contorted elm tree, a sport, growing in the forest at Camperdown House in Dundee Scotland. The young tree was lifted and replanted within the gardens of Camperdown House. The Earl's gardener is said to have produced the first of what are commonly recognised as Camperdown elms by grafting a cutting from this on to the trunk of a Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra*.

The Camperdown elm cannot be reproduced from seed. Every Camperdown elm in the world has been produced from cuttings taken from that original sport and are grafted on to a standard approximately 2 metres high of, usually, the Wych elm. Other grafting stock has been used, including Dutch elm *Ulmus x hollandica*, Siberian elm *Ulmus pumila*, and English elm *Ulmus procera*, although this ultimately produces suckers. Many species of elms produce suckers which can cause endless trouble but *Ulmus glabra* does not.

A grafted Camperdown elm slowly develops a broad, flat head that will eventually build as high as 10 metres and a proportionately very wide, contorted and weeping habit. It needs a large open space in order to develop fully. It is a deciduous tree with the foliage turning golden in the autumn.

Camperdown elms were widely planted in mid-

Victorian times – they satisfied a passion for curiosities in the "gardenesque" gardens then in vogue

Because the Camperdown elm is a cultivar of *Ulmus glabra* it is very susceptible to Dutch elm disease and as a result the cultivar is now effectively extinct in Britain and Northern Europe. We are very lucky that we have splendid specimens in the Botanic Gardens and other older gardens around Christchurch. Have you counted the number in the Botanic Gardens?



Botanic Gardens Camperdown elm

Ulmus is the ancient Latin name for the elm tree, and *glabra* means smooth or hairless – referring to the leaves of the tree. *Ulmus glabra* originates in the temperate areas of northern Europe. It is a hardy elm, suffering more from summer drought than winter cold. Established Camperdown elms in Scotland can endure temperatures as low as -25C without ill-effect.



Original Camperdown elm

Amazingly the original sport of *Ulmus glabra* 'Camperdownii' still exists in the garden of Camperdown House. It is less than 3m tall, with a dramatic weeping habit and contorted branch structure and grows on its own roots. It was surrounded by mature

Wych elms that have all succumbed to Dutch elm disease over several years; perhaps the small stature and very contorted nature of the original tree discourage the insect vector that spreads Dutch elm disease?

Bill Whitmore

Lammert (Max) Visch - 09/03/1929 – 13/01/2014

The Friends were saddened by the recent death of Max Visch, a man who contributed an enormous amount to botany in Canterbury, to the Christchurch Botanic Gardens and to the Friends of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens.

Max was born in Doornspijk in the Netherlands. In his youth he experienced the German occupation of his country during the Second World War. He served in the Dutch Army in 1947. By the time he came to New Zealand in 1953 he had already gained considerable experience with plants, having trained at the Boskoop Nursery and acquired a Dutch Diploma in Horticulture.

In New Zealand he went to Milton where he worked in horticulture and then Dunedin as an arborist.

While working at the Ministry of Works Nursery he asked about a job in the Botanic Gardens when the Curator, Huia Gilpin, visited that nursery. Although he had a Diploma in Horticulture from Holland, he started in the Gardens in March 1955 as a labourer but was quickly promoted to gardeners' wages. Max remembered the tutorials or "mutuals" where staff studied at the Curator's house. He achieved two thirds of his National Diploma in Horticulture. This was transferred to his Science degree at Canterbury University (then across the road from work) where he studied Botany and later Geology. He attended lectures in his work clothes.

Max's special memories of work in the Gardens included rotary hoeing the area for the Murray Aynsley Lawn, (very hard work with all the tree roots) and forming the paths in the primula garden and lining them with crooked oak stems. Every Friday the gravel paths were raked and he spoke of many hours spent walking backwards.

Lawrie Metcalf, Assistant Director of the Gardens, worked alongside staff and took Max and Jimmy Coles to collect rocks from the Port Hills for the Fern House, then being built. This heavy work exacerbated a bad back that had developed while Max was in the Dutch Army. With other staff members,

Max accompanied Lawrie on seed collecting expeditions to the Port Hills, Arthurs' Pass area and Mt Fyffe in the Seaward Kaikouras. When back troubles continued Max left the Gardens in February 1958 to study full time and graduated with an MSc in 1965. During his years of study he worked as a laboratory technician and collected botanical specimens for Professor Philipson and began his own collection of lichens, liverworts and mosses.

Max went to Ashburton to teach for 2 years before returning to the Netherlands in 1966. Here he met his wife-to-be, Riet. On their return to New Zealand he taught at Christchurch Girls' High School for 23 years. His former students remember his study trips with them to the Botanic Gardens and his involvement in their outdoor education programme. He was a keen tramper and continued botanising and adding to his very large collection of cryptograms. These specimens are only now being properly processed for incorporating in the Lincoln Herbarium. One lichen was described as a new species by a lichenologist and is now named *Pannaria vischii*.

Max's quiet, gentle, unassuming way, very obliging manner and sheer joy in sharing his interest in and love of all plants (except roses) made him very many friends.

Max was a very early member of the Friends of Christchurch Botanic Gardens, always supported ably and often accompanied by Riet. He was a conscientious and willing contributor to so much volunteer effort at the Gardens. He served as a Committee member from 1991 until 2001. He also worked in the propagating group, teaching techniques, bringing boot loads of plants for cuttings and often riding from home on his bike at weekends and holidays to attend to watering. His vast knowledge and experience was willingly shared. He regularly drove two other keen propagators to the Gardens, one of whom continued working in the team till she was 90, even after a broken hip. The morning tea and goodies supplied by his team members kept him happy. He in turn brought in surplus vegetables from his garden for colleagues. The sale of plants from the propagating group has been the major source of funds the Friends use to support the Gardens.

Max retired from active plant propagating when he turned 80 but was still on hand as an advisor. Being a true plantsman he wanted to spend more time in his own garden where he grew many unusual plants. He was always dividing them and giving away plants to make space. Some were donated to Lincoln University. He was very proud of the beautiful, very

straight and well-shaped ginkgo tree he planted when in he built his house in Hoon Hay Road.



Max, guiding in the Cuningham House conservatory

Max was the leader of the early Friends' guides and contributed much to their knowledge and was great fun to work with. A superb teacher, with the ability to encourage, inspire and enthuse others about his subject, he was greatly valued in the training of new Friends guides and awakened in them a higher level of understanding and interest in plants. When there was an unexpected vacant slot in the Guide roster for guided walks, he would offer. Max led numerous walks for members, overseas specialist groups, students and tourists. He carried a cane to help bend down branches to demonstrate leaf shapes or special features. No question was too simple. He was always obliging and full of information, but did come around to realising that detailed botanical explanations did not always appeal to every visitor. Because Max was so often in the gardens fully occupied with projects with the Friends, a former Curator suggested the Gardens were Max's second home.

Max knew the plant collections in the Gardens intimately. He knew where to source material for teaching purposes for the Friends' plant group and guide training, bringing many specimens collected from far and near and his own garden. When he found an unknown or mislabelled tree or plant, he worked diligently, using his own extensive library and the Botanic Gardens' library, to sort things out. His gentle way of often appearing in the office of the Botanical Resources Coordinator, with fresh research, was enthusiastically received and his name is in the data base on many plant records as the identifying authority.

The early training at Boskoop Nursery in Holland gave him much experience of Northern Hemisphere

plants and he was frequently consulted by other botanists, Botanic Gardens' staff and the Friends for identification, verification and names of trees and plants, particularly exotics and conifers. After the Friends' outings to significant private gardens, he was often encouraged back to assist with plant identification. He readily helped when asked about plant names prior to a church or other plant sale, with the hope perhaps of finding a special plant.

Max wrote submissions and supported others in the Friends when lobbying the City Council on matters relating to the Management Plans for Hagley Park and the Botanic Gardens. Regular contributions were received in his very clear handwriting of many scholarly reference papers and notes for guided walks and the Friends' Newsletter. How lucky we are to have these. Max was very generous in the way he shared his research and made available books on plants from his frequent forays around the second-hand book shops.

Max was honoured with several significant awards. In the Queen's Birthday Honours in June 2000 he received Honorary Membership of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) for services to the community. The Senior Bledisloe Trophy from the Botanical Society was awarded to him about this time. In 2009 a Certificate of Appreciation was awarded from the Friends and in 2010 he received a Community Service Award from Christchurch City Council.

Max was a highly respected member of the Canterbury Botanical Society, contributing enthusiastically to their Field trips and studies. His plant identification work for the Botanic Gardens, Mona Vale, Victoria Park and Orton Bradley Park have greatly clarified botanical records and left a lasting legacy. As a member of the Canterbury Arboretum Association he worked planting trees at Orton Bradley Park and identifying exotic trees in the collection along with botanist Bill Sykes, and planted trees on Quail Island with the late Colin Burrows. He assisted with botanical editing for "The Gardeners' Journal" and gave lectures at the WEA.

Adrienne Moore, long time member of the Friends, spoke at the service of remembrance and celebration of Max's life. The contents of this obituary are based upon her eulogy.

Adrienne commented that Max was held in awe locally and throughout New Zealand as a "real botanist" by professional and amateur botanists and gardeners alike for his encyclopedic knowledge of all plants, including weeds, acquired from his academic

studies, field trips, overseas visits to see trees in the wild and practical hands-on plant collecting and gardening. His fellow members of the Friends of the Botanic Gardens and plant colleagues remember him as an exceptional person, fantastic plantsman and kind and generous personal friend. She said, quoting the words of a former Curator, that Max was "a true friend of the Botanic Gardens".
Bill Whitmore

Jeremy Hawker and the Cuningham House

David Fisher and photographer Mark Mitchell travelled the country looking for the greatest Kiwi yarns. This is one of those from The New Zealand Herald Thursday 28 November 2013.

Jeremy Hawker gives a lovely description of the wonder of plants as he closes the doors to a botanical wonderland. "I love it" he says, making sure he properly shuts the door to Cuningham House, opened in 1925 and the oldest conservatory at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. "It's exotic. It's tropical. It is a little bit of fantasy."

The fantasy comes in travelling without ever leaving home. "I'd never travelled" he says, now 53, but still as fascinated with plants as he was when young. "But neither did French painter Henri Rousseau" says Jeremy. Rousseau, who died in 1910, never left France but his best known works are of jungles and fantastical plants. It was art that spoke of distant places, inspired in large part by his visits to Parisian conservatories at the Jardin des Plantes.

Once, Rousseau told a journalist: "When I go into the glass houses and I see the strange plants of exotic lands, it seems to me that I enter into a dream." And that, says Jeremy, is what happens inside Christchurch's wonderful conservatories, closed to the public since the earthquakes.

"If you don't travel outside Christchurch, you would never see these plants" he says. "Coming here, to the conservatories and the gardens, takes you places you would never otherwise go. It opens doors. he says. "It shows you other lands."

The doors to those other lands have been closed for more than two years. The possibility of a strong quake shattering the glass panels, raining shards on people below, was too awful to contemplate. Engineers have since been through and the damage has been revealed as slight. Jeremy is hoping the doors will open again by Christmas. It is also

hoped, for the first few weeks at least, visitors will be able to see how wild it has become. For two years, the plants inside have grown without restraint.

The morning of the 4 September 2010 earthquake, Jeremy and family leapt out of bed as startled as the rest of Christchurch. They checked themselves and then ran to check on the neighbours. "Then I said I'd better go and check work. I suspected that the roof might be down. If the roof is gone then the heat is going out."

With family in tow, he drove to the gardens and headed for the conservatories. "I did an outside loop. My first thought was if the glass was gone the plants would be cold." It looked fine, as he stood there in the dark, so he went inside. "Inside a big glasshouse with aftershocks happening? That wasn't the smartest thing to do" he says. "I had to go and get the torches out of the office. Then I said to my wife I'd better go and check on my parents. Looking back now, I can see where my priorities lay."

Jeremy's parents are accustomed to their son's love of plants. "I used to be a crazy collector" he says. His parents' backyard was called the "mouse cemetery", so named because of the white markers next to freshly planted bulbs. Arrayed across the lawn, they took on the look of tiny tombstones. "Since then, I'm probably more people-orientated. I'm more interested in how people enjoy plants. A lot of plant people aren't interested. I like seeing people enjoy themselves. Listening and hearing people's reactions is where I get pleasure.'

Jeremy started as an apprentice at the Dunedin Botanic Garden and stayed with "amenity horticulture", with just a short spell working for a Government agency. Now he is Team Leader- Garden and Heritage Parks, based in the Gardens in the heart of the city with its beautiful trees, river and conservatories.

"The reality of the botanic gardens is it is open to the public" he says. It needs to interact with the public and meet needs that go beyond the plants and trees. For some that is enough - Jeremy has spoken to people since the quake who describe it as the only place they can find peace. For others, though, holiday programmes for children or theatre make good the promise offered by the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. "It's more than just a park."

For Christchurch, the pleasure derived from the botanic gardens ended on February 22, 2011, when so many people lost their lives and homes in that quake. "In February, this one came through fine

again” he says, standing outside Cunningham House. “The band rotunda on the other side has major damage. In the gardens, several large trees came down with the water coming up.” All the irrigation mains broke. When Jeremy came in, the lake next to the conservatories was bubbling. Across Christchurch, the water table had shifted towards the ground. After that they (the conservatories) were shut down completely.”

Like everywhere in Christchurch, the gardens never quite went back to normal. Like elsewhere in the quake-struck city, it adopted a new normal. “People didn’t want to come into the CBD” he says. “We didn’t see people in here.” For almost two years, the conservatories became a restricted area. “There’s an expectation as time goes on that some things should be repaired” he says. “It’s the slowness of getting things moving ... waiting on others all the time to make calls.”

Only two staff were allowed inside, and then with safety helmets and fluoro jackets. “For other staff, it’s a restricted area. I’ve got no worries with the building. There’s no damage and the glass hasn’t broken.”

And so Jeremy took us to the conservatory where the wild things are. Stepping inside the closed conservatory, the first impression is an unconstrained wildness. The growth inside sprawls through the heavy, humid air. The light filtering through the glass is only slightly strained by the thin algae growth which has built up. The benches that lined the walkways were cleared and the plants sent to other conservatories. Each had a marker on which

the name of the plant was written. As the plants were removed, the markers were lined up. “All the plants will come back” he says. Jeremy, years on, has a new “mouse cemetery”.

Regardless, the plants are taking over the conservatory. On the benches, new plants have sprouted. Dormant seeds have come to life. “A whole lot of seedlings have grown up” he says. And there are hybrids, not seen before, as plants cross breeding lines in their struggle for survival. “Anything that looks different is being potted up.”

Jeremy’s delight is clear. “We were going to pick plants to see who won the battle. They’ll be striving for survival. There won’t be much food here.”

But it is in the centre where the true wildness is unleashed. The plants there have been in Cunningham House for decades – “some of the plants will be from the 1925 original planting” - and reach from the ground beyond the walkways at the next level, stretching to the roof. “It’s creating its own little display” says Jeremy, pointing to a climber. “*Tetrastigma*” he identifies it, adding “I love these plants, don’t know why. I had these as an apprentice. It took over Mum and Dad’s sitting room. “You’ve got a jungle forming in there, which is interesting. Who’s going to be the most dominant plant? Who will win?”

Doors are expected to open again before Christmas, showcasing the oddity of the garden unrestrained. Inside awaits a journey to other lands, even wilder than before.



Jeremy Hawker says many hybrids have sprung up in the Cunningham House Conservatory during its two years of closure. Photo / Mark Mitchell