

# An Introduction to Hamilton Gardens®

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## INTRODUCTION

Hamilton Gardens has attempted to be different from other city gardens in New Zealand. Rather than the traditional focus on plant collections, more emphasis has been given to the visitor experience of a diverse collection of garden environments.

This paper sets out to:

- Provide some background behind the development of Hamilton Gardens,
- Explain the ethnogarden theme which has led us to a different way of looking at plant collections, and to
- Outline the unusual objectives behind the Gardens.

Over the past 20 years Hamilton Gardens has had an evolving concept and without our being aware of a precedent it was initially something of an experiment. However in terms of use and local support it is an experiment that has had a very successful outcome.

## DEVELOPMENT OF HAMILTON GARDENS

Hamilton Gardens does have the advantage of having State Highway 1 on one side and the Waikato River on the other. However, despite these attributes the staff and Councillors of 45 years ago had a lot of vision in fighting to get the full 58-ha site set aside as a park. The central section of Hamilton Gardens had been used as a sandpit and as the City's rubbish dump. Apart from the Hamilton East Cemetery and farmland at the eastern end, most of the site was covered in scrub, gorse, and piles of fill material. People do not usually photograph city dumps so there are no pictures to illustrate the total transformation that has taken place.

Over the past 40 years Hamilton Gardens has evolved through three distinct stages.

In the early 1960s the display houses and surrounding gardens up by Cobham Drive were developed. Little further development occurred until the 1971 World Rose Convention in Hamilton, which prompted the development of the Roger's Rose Garden, and some adjacent areas. Then after another 10-year gap a management plan was approved for Hamilton Gardens in 1981 leading to a development programme that has continued for the last 20 years.

## THE GARDENS COLLECTION

One of the key drivers for this continuous development programme has been the general enthusiasm for the concept or more precisely the gardens and ideas that have emanated from that concept. This concept has evolved from initially being similar to the post-war European Garden shows to something that is different from the other city parks that we know about.

The aim of specialising and creating a point of difference is a major international trend for visitor attractions including museums, zoos, galleries, and new gardens. Most gardens in New Zealand, even the new ones, are relatively similar. In Europe

and North America there appears to be less emphasis on the impulsive “me too” collection of features and a trend towards integrated concepts that often focus on particular areas of excellence. For example, a focus on plants from a particular geographic, bioclimatic, or ecological area. Increasingly there is a focus not on plant collections as such but on themes like the relationship between plants and environment or the ethnobotanic theme of the relationship between plants and people. The key element is “focus”, not just a bit of everything.

At Hamilton Gardens we have adopted a different theme of “the story of gardens” or the relationship between people and gardens. This concept has led to a collection of unusual features and a different way of looking at our plant collections. We are certainly not suggesting that other gardens should follow our example, in fact we would be very disappointed if they did, particularly after we have gone to a lot of trouble to be different and to complement other public gardens. However our concept does provide one of the few examples in this country of a focused garden concept.

The theme of “the story of gardens” is being explored through five garden collections, each a different aspect of the theme. These five garden collections are:

- The Paradise Garden Collection
- The Landscape Garden Collection
- The Productive Garden Collection
- The Fantasy Garden Collection
- The Cultivar Garden Collection

Hamilton Gardens does not pretend to be a botanical garden but there are some reasonable plant collections within the framework of the concept and because the concept is different, some of the collection themes are also unusual.

**The Paradise Garden Collection.** A collection of six gardens each illustrating the traditions, lifestyles, beliefs, and customs of different cultures through garden traditions that have each had a significant influence in the history of gardening.

The Chinese Scholar’s Garden from the Sung Dynasty, 10th to 12th Century, represents the garden as an imaginative world of allegory and fantasy. Each area of the Chinese and Japanese gardens has a different geographic identity and there are specific plants appropriate for each of these zones.

The Japanese Garden of Contemplation represents a traditional Japanese Garden from the 14th-16th Century Muromachi Period. The three unique forms of Japanese garden incorporated into this garden are designed to provide a place for quiet contemplation and study. The choice of plants, their cultivation and very specialised maintenance requirements are all designed to reinforce this restful and very subtle illusion.

The English Flower Garden illustrates the classic British 19th Century Arts and Crafts tradition that enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the 1990s. These gardens were designed as a setting for plant collections and often planned for seasonal colour compositions. We have based our planting on original plans by Gertrude Jekyll (1843 to 1932) although we have to compromise by using similar modern cultivars.

The American Modernist Garden is a 20th Century garden as a space for outdoor living. This example has been designed in the American West Coast modernist tradition with low maintenance, modern, landscape plants from North America.

The 15th-16th Century Italian Renaissance Garden is still under development. While most surviving Renaissance gardens are simply a green framework of hedges, the original gardens often displayed substantial plant collections and the gardens’

patrons sponsored some of the first specialist plant hunters. The Renaissance princes and cardinals were very keen not just on collecting plants but also rocks and other natural features as part of an attempt to rationalise and improve upon nature.

One space in the collection site remains for an example of a 16th to 17th Century Indian Char Bagh Garden with its Persian carpet of flowers set between a fountain and water canals. Fundraising for this garden is currently underway.

**The Landscape Garden Collection.** This will present a collection of the main landscape garden traditions that have evolved from different philosophical theories throughout history. These include the following gardens.

A Bussaco Woodland representing the long tradition (3rd to 17th Century) of natural-looking woodland and including the existing magnolia collection. The existing Hamilton East Cemetery will be preserved and renovated as a classic example of a late 19th-early 20th Park Cemetery Movement. The Echo Bank Bush is a valuable area of remnant indigenous flora, which will be maintained in the modern conservation tradition. Another existing feature is the Valley Walk which is more of a modern landscape garden, utilising N.Z. indigenous plants, in the 20th Century Naturalistic/Aesthetic Style.

Not yet existing are The Formal Landscape Garden in the 17th - 18th Century European tradition, the English Landscape Garden in the 18th Century English Landscape tradition and the Natural Garden in the 19th Century Romantic and Picturesque French tradition.

**The Productive Garden Collection.** This includes gardens illustrating the relationship between people and useful plants. This includes the existing traditional Herb Garden displaying plants used for culinary, cosmetic, perfume, and medicinal purposes. Also a large Kitchen Garden maintained by the Waikato Polytechnic students and a Permaculture Garden maintained by a local Permaculture Trust. Still to be developed in this collection is a Tainui Maori Garden demonstrating pre-European horticulture in the Waikato.

**The Fantasy Garden Collection.** This will explore the different forms of fantasy that have been an important element in gardens. The garden as a setting for fantasy is the focus of the Perfume Garden. The Time Garden will focus on the fantasy of growing plants in the wrong geographic location. While other gardens in this collection still to be developed are The Jungle Garden, The Green Egg Garden, The Mythological Garden, and The Baroque Theatre Garden.

**The Cultivar Garden Collection.** This is already substantially developed and its more conventional theme features plants selected and bred for the garden. The Roger's Rose Garden demonstrates the history and development of the rose from the species to the modern hybrids. Within this garden a new French Rose Garden is currently under development. In November 2001 the New Zealand Rose of the Year (previously the Auckland Rose of the Year) will shift from Auckland to Hamilton Gardens. Each year a new selection of the world's best new roses will be planted for judging which is to be organised by Rose Introducers of NZ.

At the western end of the site the New Zealand Cultivar Garden features cultivars bred from New Zealand's indigenous plants.

In the Rhododendron Lawn a selection of species and cultivars will focus on the development of the modern azalea and rhododendron. Up in the top area the

Hammond Camellia Garden demonstrates the development of the Camellia from species to modern cultivars.

Alongside Cobham Drive the Victorian Garden features plants bred for colour and displayed in the 19th Century Gardenesque tradition. This garden also includes the newly renovated greenhouses with their collections of cactus, tropical, and temperate plants. The gardens within Hamilton Gardens are diverse but there is an underlying direction and theme aimed at achieving our longer-term goals and objectives.

## **OBJECTIVES OF HAMILTON GARDENS**

Often city gardens have varied objectives related to plant conservation, education, and recreation. Many of our local parks share these objectives but the goal for Hamilton Gardens has always given more emphasis to being a visitor attraction and an event venue that promotes Hamilton City. We have measured our success not by plant collections but in terms of visitor numbers, visitor satisfaction, community support, and more recently economic benefits to the community. There is an acknowledged danger that this emphasis could lead to a commercial theme park and there are frequently pressures to include elements unrelated to the garden themes.

Taken to an extreme there is the option that must surely catch on soon, of selling plants directly from the public garden. Rather than inspecting immature plants set out in rows in a retail nursery, modern technology means that mature plants growing in a public garden could be directly ordered from the wholesaler using an onsite terminal and modem to compare prices from different suppliers and then make the order. This could provide a potentially lucrative source of income and a new role for some botanical gardens. However at Hamilton Gardens we have focused on the potentially substantial economic benefits of a visitor attraction. This was illustrated two years ago by a visitor survey and an economic study carried out on Hamilton Gardens.

The survey by Research Solutions Ltd. indicated that there were about 600,000 visitors to Hamilton Gardens each year. Of these 45% were classified as tourists. We believe these figures have subsequently improved but we can already confidently say that Hamilton Gardens is the most popular visitor attraction in the Waikato. Professor Warren Hughes of Waikato University used this survey data combined with a "87-sector regional economic model" to study the economic benefits of Hamilton Gardens from tourists (Hughes, 1999). The results can be interpreted as suggesting that for every \$1 the Council and community invest in the Gardens, the annual financial return to the community at large may be about \$3. This result indicates not only that Hamilton Gardens is succeeding in its goal but that amenity gardening probably makes more of contribution to the New Zealand economy than most of us imagine.

Hamilton Gardens did not start out as an events venue but it has become an important element of the concept and is proving a cost-effective way of promoting the Gardens to people who may not otherwise consider coming to the park. This was demonstrated in recent Hamilton Community Needs Surveys, which indicate that 85% of Hamiltonians had visited Hamilton Gardens at least once in the last year. This figure compares extremely well to other city gardens and other local parks. There are approximately 1400 prebooked events at Hamilton Gardens each year. About two-thirds take place in the central Pavilion and it includes about 300 weddings in the gardens themselves. The Hamilton Gardens Summer Festival has

been particularly important both in promoting the Gardens (33,000 patrons this year) and in encouraging a diversity of local community involvement.

There are of course other objectives for Hamilton Gardens. For example, the Horticulture Education Centre run by the local Waikato Polytechnic is located within Hamilton Gardens. This provides — amenity horticulture, landscape, arboriculture, and floristry students with a unique practical teaching resource.

Community support has also been a crucial element in the success of Hamilton Gardens. A variety of trusts and associated groups have raised funds to develop most of the theme gardens and have been active in advocating for Hamilton Gardens ongoing development. Several local groups are involved in onsite promotional events like the Hamilton Gardens Summer Festival. The Friends of Hamilton Gardens support several projects including the Information Centre, which is staffed though out the year by a team of 56 friendly volunteers.

### **SUMMARY**

Hamilton Gardens has a focused concept that has endeavoured to be different from other city parks in New Zealand. We hope that the growing success of these gardens will encourage others not to duplicate what we have done but to focus on other unusual themes. If most major gardens had an integrated concept and more emphasis on specialist areas of excellence they would not only be more interesting as individual gardens but the collective garden resource as a tourist attraction would be substantially improved.

### **LITERATURE CITED**

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