

# Eight weeks at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

*Rewi Elliot<sup>1</sup>*

During July and August 2013 I had the opportunity of travelling from where I work in Wellington at the Otari Native Botanic Garden and Wilton's Bush Reserve to the Royal Botanic Gardens (RBG) Kew in England to undertake an International Diploma in Botanic Garden Management.

The International Diploma course is run by RBG Kew in association with Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) and is designed for people who are involved in the management of a botanic garden or arboretum, in a supervisory role, with operational and strategic responsibilities. People with at least a couple of years experience in middle management with a suitable qualification are ideal.

For eight weeks, eleven of us from around the world explored the changing roles of botanic gardens and the key issues they face in conservation, display, education and research. It was a truly international mix with students from Latvia, Tobago, Canada, Finland, South Africa, Georgia, Algeria and Tanzania attending the course with me. The course was facilitated by a trio of enthusiastic and supportive Kew staff, Dr Colin Clubbe, Dr Pat Griggs, and Mr Barrie Blewett. Their supportiveness, organisation and alacrity to help went a long way to making the experience a good one.

The course objectives are:

- To evaluate the different roles of contemporary botanic gardens, explore key issues they face and prioritise these in relation to each participant's own institutional strategy.
- To enhance each participant's skills and understanding to become a more effective manager of living plant collections.
- To facilitate individual, more specialised studies related to each participant's own institutional context.
- To develop a network of contacts with other professionals working in botanic garden management.

As well as management and the roles of living plant collections, the course covers strategic planning and team management, education and visitor services, leadership and communication skills. It aims for participants to gain the confidence and expertise to further develop resources within their own botanic gardens.



**Fig. 1** The Rose Garden Tea Party display, part of Kew's IncrEdibles exhibition.



**Fig. 2** Digitising herbarium specimens in the Kew Herbarium basement.



**Fig. 3** Admiring a plate from Banks' Florilegium in the extensive library at RBG Kew.

<sup>1</sup> Manager, Otari Native Botanic Garden and Wilton's Bush Reserve, 160 Wilton Road, Wilton, Wellington 6012, New Zealand; rewi.elliott@wcc.govt.nz



**Fig. 4** Tony Hall shows how plants are grown in one of Kew's nurseries.



**Fig. 5** Marcella Corcoran talks about germination protocols in the Kew quarantine house.



**Fig. 6** Piotr Kaminski removes mealy bugs from plants in the Kew quarantine house.



**Fig. 7** The inspiring geodesic domes at the Eden Project in Cornwall.

RBG Kew staff delivered several lectures, and employed a significant amount of external expertise. Staff from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh and Cambridge University Botanic Gardens visited to lend a hand, and professional consultants gave a series of lectures on education, interpretation, leadership and management programmes. Much of the course content is delivered within the framework of legislation and strategies such as the Convention of Biological Diversity, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, and the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation, providing a big picture perspective.

Tours of RBG Kew were spread throughout the first two weeks – although the grounds (e.g., Fig. 1) and buildings are so large I will have to return to see the whole of it. We visited the extensive herbarium (with more than 7 million herbarium specimens, some of which are being digitised; Fig. 2), the RBG Kew library (Fig. 3), museum of economic botany, behind the scenes of the several onsite nurseries (Fig. 4), composting and recycling facilities, the quarantine house (Fig. 5–6) and extensive glasshouses, and we toured the gardens and plant collections themselves.

We also travelled to several gardens around England including the Eden Project in Cornwall (Fig. 7), Oxford and Cambridge University Botanic Gardens and Chelsea Physic Garden. And we visited Wakehurst Place where RBG Kew coordinates the Millennium Seedbank, a facility where seeds are stored to provide an insurance policy against the extinction of plant species in the wild.

As part of the course we were required to undertake two reports, one field report comparing gardens we visited with an aspect of our own gardens and a larger project report due on completion of the course. At the end of the course each of us had an informal *viva* interview with Dr Colin Clubbe and Dr Tim Upson from Cambridge University Botanic Garden to discuss the two reports and our time at RBG Kew.

My field report compared and contrasted how interpretation is delivered at the Eden Project and the Chelsea Physic Garden with the interpretation at Otari. I concluded that to successfully interpret our messages we need to provoke active thought, as this creates the most appreciative attitude toward a subject. The plants displayed in a botanic garden are not only an end in

themselves, but also a means to an end. Our interpretation should address plant related issues by endeavouring to change behaviours toward the plant world, presenting significance that the audience themselves conclude upon, rather than only instructing facts (teaching), or holding attention (entertainment).

The project report topic was one of our own choosing but had to be relevant to the current priorities of our home institutions, and make recommendations that could be implemented upon our return home.

My project report discussed how four activity areas (horticulture, education, conservation and community engagement) at the Botanic Gardens of Wellington meet the Gardens' vision statement. I concluded that while the Gardens' presents an impressive diversity of plants, landscapes and well used public spaces, the current elements of conservation and education in the vision can be seen to be overshadowed by an emphasis on horticultural excellence. A shift in emphasis could occur from maintaining a beautiful garden as an end in itself, to being a place where a team of people work to achieve their vision, using a beautiful garden as a tool to do so. This is not to say that a shift away from being a centre of horticultural excellence is required, but a move toward achieving more with this excellence; to be more holistic in how the Gardens takes action in a range of plant related issues.

To help cover the not insignificant cost of the course I received sponsorship from the Wellington City Council (my employer), the Otari-Wilton's Bush Trust, the Peter Skellerup Fund from the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture and a grant from Botanic Gardens of Australia and New Zealand (BGANZ–NZ). This funding helped cover course costs, return flights and accommodation and travel while in England. Finding accommodation can be difficult and Kew staff do their best to find local accommodation for their visitors, but with so many other students at Kew it can be a hard task to house them all. I had the privilege of staying with a Kew staff member and as a result had the opportunity to volunteer in the evening a few times, cleaning up insect pests in the quarantine house and scanning herbarium records.

I came away from RBG Kew full of ideas and enthusiasm. Seeing just how far-reaching an organisation like RBG Kew is was a bit mind-boggling. The range of plant related activities they are involved in is both impressive and daunting to absorb in eight weeks. I certainly came away with a renewed confidence about the contribution gardens (botanic and others) can make to our communities and how we can help feed into local and national programmes to support horticulture and plant conservation.

Also highlighted to me was the importance of partnerships and building our capacity. To succeed as modern botanic gardens and help address a wider range of plant related issues we need to collaborate with others. Increasingly, success with plant conservation seems only achievable through partnerships. Preferably we should form partnerships which progressively grow the capacity of the parties involved, building our own and others ability to appreciate, understand, explain and conserve plant diversity. To successfully contribute toward plant related issues an increased focus on partnerships is necessary for botanic gardens in the future.

I've shifted my own thoughts further away from botanic gardens being beautiful gardens as an end in itself, to botanic gardens being places where a team of people work to achieve a joint vision, using a striking garden as a tool to do so. In a tough economic climate, botanic gardens need to draw on their attractions and strengths in new ways. It's important to extend ourselves beyond the display of a beautiful garden to educating people about the world of plants, participating in conservation of plants and supporting plant research, changing attitudes and behaviours, and inspiring people to value and appreciate plant life.

**Kew offers other programmes including herbarium techniques, botanic garden education and plant conservation strategies, along with the international diploma in botanic garden management. For further information about the courses at RBG Kew visit [www.kew.org](http://www.kew.org)**