

Dunedin Botanical Garden: planning for relevance and sustainability in the community

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Botanic Gardens in New Zealand: *Where we have come from?*

Botanic Gardens, Public Gardens and Reserves throughout New Zealand owe much of their origins and early development to English garden models familiar to the settlers of the day, the majority of whom came from England and Scotland. Over time NZ public gardens have developed within the framework of support and resources provided from within each local community. Subsequently there are regional differences and variations in the evolution of NZ public gardens. Unfortunately only a small number have been able to make the full transition to 'Botanic Garden' status. Nonetheless many that are not resourced to this capacity still make a significant contribution to New Zealand horticulture, botany and conservation, albeit at different levels.

Dunedin Botanic Garden was developed, like other New Zealand botanic gardens, without government or university support. The roles and responsibilities for scientific research and custodianship of national scientific botanical collections are the domain of government departments, universities and government funded research institutes. While the absence of a research function may be interpreted as a significant gap in the function and status of NZ botanic gardens this difference has allowed other challenges and achievements to be undertaken in ways that are much more relevant and specific to the needs and resources of each community.

Dunedin Botanic Garden is one of New Zealand's four main centre botanic gardens. Research functions aside it still successfully manages to undertake many roles that typify a modern botanic garden. Dunedin is the largest population centre in the province of Otago and is therefore a regionally significant business and visitor centre. As a result the Botanic Garden has a much wider regional focus. The consequence of this is that demands and expectations from within the wider community are much more diverse. To maintain integrity and relevance within this environment as a Botanic Garden, and to meet a range of community needs there are many challenges to overcome.

Dunedin Botanic Garden: A profile of where we are today and why we need to plan for a sustainable future

The Dunedin Botanic Garden is situated within Dunedin City. Dunedin is one of New Zealand's four main metropolitan centres, the largest city by area with a population of 122,400 residents. The Botanic Garden is within easy reach of the city centre a leisurely 15 – 20 minutes walk. Average temperatures range from, summer 18.6° C, winter 10.4° C, and the average annual rainfall is 780 mm.

- Dunedin Botanic Garden is New Zealand's oldest Botanic Garden, established in June 1863. It encompasses an area of 28 ha, with a mix of traditional garden displays and geographical plant collections displaying plants primarily of known wild origins that have been sourced through the international seed exchange programme.
- The Garden is managed and maintained by a staff of 24 consisting of collection curators, botanical and information services, horticultural apprentice trainees and contracted grounds maintenance staff.

- In the current financial year 2006/07 the operations budget is approximately NZ \$2million (US \$1.4 million), and is funded by the Dunedin City Council, the local administering authority.
- It has achieved endorsement from the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture as a New Zealand Garden of National Significance.
- Admission to the Garden is free, and visitations are in excess of 500,000 pa.

Each year the Dunedin City Council measures the performance and delivery of its services by undertaking a Residents Opinion Survey (ROS). In the last survey period of 2005 the Garden attained a satisfaction rating of 93%. Compared to other City Council resourced facilities such as Library and Art Gallery the Botanic Garden was the highest scoring. Since the survey's introduction more than 10 years ago the Garden has maintained this position as the city's highest publicly rated facility for several years - never falling out of the top three rated facilities.

Despite this customer endorsement there's little evidence of any link to the city's rate based funding. Typically, like all NZ botanic gardens, operational funding is sourced from the local administering authorities through rates, the local tax. However, this funding is contestable as the City Council also provides for other essential services such as water supply, waste disposal, road networks, art gallery, library, museums etc. Provision for all public services and facilities, including the operational budgets, project works and large one-off operational expenses for the Garden are determined by the City Council's professional staff and approved by elected community representatives who consider these in context with all competing city-wide requirements.

A consideration that I am sure has been entertained by some during such funding discussions is that the Botanic Garden's success could justify freezing or a reduction in the level of rate support in favour of those city services not meeting customer expectations. Therefore, the notion that ratepayer funds could be redistributed to boost the low performers is a constant threat.

Unfortunately, the contestable nature of the Council's budgets makes it difficult to predict and determine a secure pathway for future long-term development. This is at odds with the level of public and institutional support and recognition received by the Botanic Garden and over-shadows all formal strategic planning associated with the Garden. The Botanic Garden could, possibly, when it comes to such internal funding negotiations, be the victim of its very success.

The fact that the Botanic Garden successfully competes for resources with other Council service providers, yet still allows the Garden to develop and achieve the consistently high outcomes they do, is a testimony to the management systems in place, a good understanding of the political processes and the level of community support.

Dunedin Botanic Garden: *How we engage the community*

How the Dunedin Botanic Garden manages to sustain such a high level of relevance and endorsement to repeatedly remain one of the most popular city attractions is a success story combining the successful finessing of the bureaucratic system, the public's affection for its Garden and the expert and enthusiastic support of the community support group the Friends of the Botanic Garden.

The Friends were formed in 1986 and today, 20 years on, the success of this initiative has proved critical to the Garden's present pre-eminent reputation as a Community recreational resource, a professional esteemed botanic garden and a New Zealand Botanic Garden of National Significance.

In 1991 the Friends led a public discussion on the future of the Dunedin Botanic Garden with a forum that reviewed a development initiative conducted by Botanic Garden staff. The Friends engaged the community

through representative community groups and interested parties at large to discuss a new direction for development of the Dunedin Botanic Garden.

Several significant proposals and projects were supported and endorsed by the forum. In the following 14 years the Friends and the Botanic Garden have acted on these endorsements to ensure that they have been resourced wherever possible.

The most significant of these has been the construction of the Information Centre/Shop in 1996 and to undertake the maintenance of its daily operation 362 days of the year. Over the 10 year period this commitment from the Friends has required a significant volunteer support group, requiring on average at least 25 volunteer personnel rostered over any given week.

In 2004, 12 years after the first publicly debated development review, Gardens staff embarked on another initiative - the Botanic Garden Strategic Development Plan, which has identified a range of new development options for the Botanic Garden. The outcomes of the Plan are likely to shape the Garden's future development for the next 100 years.

In July 2006 the Friends embraced the new Botanic Garden Strategic Development Plan, and have since solicited elected community representatives for endorsement. During the Friends own endorsement and promotion of the Strategic Development Plan they promised to accept responsibility to provide funding for all the new projects, provided that the Council continued to renew and maintain existing assets whenever necessary.

Subsequently, during the Friends 20th Anniversary celebrations in October 2006, and at the invitation of the Friends, New Zealand's newly appointed Governor General, Anand Satyanand, helped launch the Botanic Garden Strategic Development Plan. The occasion was also used by the Friends to indicate how they were going to achieve the funding required for this ambitious development programme.

The success of the Botanic Garden has not gone unnoticed by individuals within the community, some of whom have bequeathed funds to the Friends and the Botanic Garden with significant sums and donations to be used for specific Garden projects. The recently completed Southern African Garden, and the soon to be developed Mediterranean Garden are two examples, coincidentally, the last of the approved 1991 Botanic Garden project proposals.

What is it about the Botanic Garden and the place it holds in the affections of both residents and visitors that has encouraged people to give money to the Garden? Much of the funding raised by the Friends has been from institutional sources and charitable trusts, but the recent incidence of bequests has identified a new revenue source. And this, it would appear, is clearly a result of the Botanic Garden's recognition and status within the community. There is confidence in the Botanic Garden and its relationship with the Friends: its success is shown in sound financial management and the ability to select or target a favoured option from a range of approved development projects. Clear planning procedures, effective promotion and advocacy achieve guaranteed recognition for the public good.

Furthermore, there is the Botanic Garden's involvement in supporting and contributing to local conservation initiatives such as the reintroduction to the wild of rare and endangered plants. Involvement in, and recognition of, national and international initiatives by institutions such as Botanic Garden Australia & New Zealand (BGANZ) the Botanic Garden Conservation International very much contributes to the sense of community pride. In this way, the influence of the Dunedin Botanic Garden extends beyond the city boundaries.

It is clear the Botanic Garden must continue to take every opportunity to appraise and acknowledge the balance of success and threats to the Garden. The opportunities gained from the power of civic and community involvement in the Botanic Garden have often been overlooked but in fact is a significant factor in the successful development of the Garden and its continuing funding support from the City Council.

However, the most appealing factor to ratepayers is that the Dunedin Botanic Garden is accessible to everyone, 365 days of the year - and entry is free.

Dunedin Botanic Garden: Why it works and how it might improve

There appears to be a very simple formula if the Botanic Garden is to develop the pathway to sustainability. This involves engaging the community and empowering the involvement of others in achieving significant outcomes through providing resource opportunities. In short, open up the Garden, provide access to the staff and their expertise, encourage the public to become involved in Garden activities, and develop and promote opportunities that will lead to a culture of community ownership.

The pathway to secure the future development of the Dunedin Botanic Garden will be advantageous to all parties involved - for the Council there is no pressure or expectation to consider additional development funding releasing rates money to be used for other Council activities; the Friends have a long-term purpose and focus for their membership to expend their energies; and the Botanic Garden staff can get on with the detail of planning and scheduling projects and enhancements for the benefit of Garden visitors.

While it is still essential to maintain the security of the basic operational funding for asset maintenance and renewals from the Council through rate funding it is much easier if all other Garden developments can be funded by other means outside the constraints and limitations of the local administering authority.

The planning for relevance and sustainability for the Dunedin Botanic Garden has required the building of a stable relationship with the Friends and the projection and development of the Botanic Garden in a way that ensures a strong sense of community ownership and pride. If success can be measured by mechanisms such as the ROS satisfaction ratings and designation for the Botanic Garden as a New Zealand Garden of National Significance, proof of success in achieving those goals comes in receipt of endorsements and contributions for the long-term benefit and ongoing development of the Botanic Garden from the widest possible range of sources.