The Trees and Plants of Melrose

Compiled by Debbie Daniell-Smith in 2010

Trees planted in the 1890's

An impressive **Moreton Bay Fig** or **Ficus macrophylla**, is on the Brougham street side of the property. This Australian native tree is widely used as a feature tree in public parks and gardens in warmer climates. The **Moreton Bay Fig** is known as a strangler fig and seed germination in the wild takes place in the canopy of a host tree and the seedling lives as an epiphyte until its roots establish contact with the ground. It then enlarges and strangles its host, eventually becoming a freestanding tree by itself. The **Moreton Bay Fig** is best known for its beautiful buttress roots, which are also known for damaging municipal footpaths. It has male and female flowers and can produce a fruit which although edible is unpalatable and dry.

The **Lawson's Cypress** or **Chamaecyparis lawsoniana** is a native of the lush rainforests of southwest Oregon and northwest California, where it can grow to a height of 54 meters. It was first discovered (by Euro-Americans) near Port Orford in Oregon and was named Lawson's Cypress by collectors working for the Lawson & Son nursery in Edinburgh, Scotland who introduced it into cultivation in 1854. These trees have been widely planted throughout New Zealand since early times and this is a particularly attractive specimen being multi stemmed. It towers to around 30 metres high.

A large **Redwood (Sequoia sempervirens)** dominates the garden. The name **Sequoia** is the name given to the species by a German botanist to honour the half-caste Cherokee Chief, Seqoyah who was famous for developing an alphabet to enable his tribe's dialect to be written. In its natural habitat of California these Redwoods grow as tall as 110 metres and the average lifespan is 600 years old - they can live for over 2000 years. The bark can grow to 30 centimetres thick, giving excellent insulation and protection against insects and fire which are common in their natural habitat. In North America the timber is widely used for general building purposes because of its high durability and lack of odour. It is imported into New Zealand for joinery and exterior finishing. Timber grown here is not as good a quality as the trees tend to grow more rapidly. This specimen has managed to survive some serious gales but its small twin fork is watched carefully.

Useful plants used by settlers

Some plants were planted for very practical purposes. The **Camphor tree, Cinnamomum camphora** is a native of east Asia, mainly China and Japan. The evergreen tree was traditionally used extensively in many East Asian cultures for its fragrant incense and wood. The tree has small and fragrant flowers which are yellow in color, and oval red berries in season. An oil can be distilled from the leathery leaves. Traditionally camphor was used as a cure for cold and related illnesses. The affected person wore a little bag or sachet around the neck that contained camphor crystal and inhaled the fumes for respiratory ailments. The analgesic qualities of the camphor made it a useful liniment for direct application to treat all

sorts of problems like sprains and bruises, gout, rheumatism and arthritis. Treatment was carried out traditionally by rubbing the oil of camphor into the affected areas of the body. Ingesting the oil of camphor was more dangerous as it can be toxic. It was tried for problems such as hysteria with unproven results. In the old days, fragrant camphor wood was used in the manufacture of sailor's chests, as the wood of the **Camphor** is both durable, strong and resistant to the corrosive ravages of salt air and water. The fragrant wood acts as a repellent to clothes moths, and the wood itself is immune to the majority of wood boring insects. **Camphor** "Glory" boxes were used by generations of women to store bed linen, bridal trousseau, baby clothes and woolens.

The Rose collection at Melrose

An attractive selection of **David Austin** old English roses are found around the base of Melrose House in three rose beds . David Austin has been breeding roses in England for over fifty years. In the 1940s, a copy of George Bunyard's book on old roses gave him the idea of crossing old roses with modern roses. The old roses had all but died out at that time. His objective was to create new roses in the style of old roses, thus combining the unique charm and fragrance of old roses with the wide colour range and repeat-flowering qualities of modern roses. He was also particularly interested in producing well formed shrubs that would make good garden plants.
Two beds feature a selection of red varieties. **The Dark Lady** is a dark crimson rose with fragrant and rather loosely formed flowers which open wide. They have a special character of their own, looking rather like the flowers of tree peonies, as sometimes seen on fabrics and wallpapers. The name is taken from the so-called "Dark Lady" of Shakespeare's sonnets. **William Shakespeare** has rosette-formed flowers with a rich, damask scent; and the velvety, crimson blooms develop a hint of purple as they age. Other red roses in the beds are **The Squire, Fallstaff, LD Braithwaite , The Prince** and the exuberant climber **Tess of the Dubervilles** clambers up over the verandah.

The remaining bed has mixed varieties such as the strongly fragrant creamy white **Fair Bianca** and the salmon pink **English Elegance**.

New Zealand native trees at Melrose

Karaka native bush are very noticeable in autumn when their berries ripen from green through to yellow and red. The pulp of the fruit is edible, although bitter, but the fresh kernels contain the lethal alkaloid poison karakin. Accounts from the 19th century record that extensive processing was used by Maori to convert the kernels to an edible form, and mention that if the processing was not done with the greatest care, poisoning would result with symptoms including violent convulsions and severe muscle spasms which could leave the limbs permanently fixed in contorted positions. Death resulted in a few cases. The **Karaka** tree, whose berries are a source of food, is thought to have been brought to New Zealand on the Kurahaupo canoe.

Karaka is widespread in mainly coastal situations. Most botanists accept it as native only in the northern half of the North Island, although the original distribution is unclear because of widespread planting by Maori. When found in concentrated numbers like this, as it is in this

part of the garden, it often denotes previous Maori occupation of an area. Maori would have lived in a pa on Pikimai where the cathedral now stands

The stately **Totara** or **Podocarpus totara** , was prized by Maori because of the remarkable qualities of its timber. The heartwood is very durable and the Maori found the wood could be readily split and shaped with primitive stone tools for canoes, building, and carving. The same properties made it a valuable timber to the first European settlers for house and wharf piles, and for those parts of buildings requiring durable members.

The tree is a conifer with a wide distribution across NZ. It can reach a height of around 36.5 metres and has a diameter of up to two metres through. Along with other conifers, in particular **Rimu**, it usually forms the scattered, emergent storey stretching above the dense canopy of broadleaf trees. It is thought **Totara**were very abundant in NZ pre human habitation, at a time when the climate was milder and wetter. Although few existing forests remained by the time the first Europeans arrived, when early settlers cleared the land many large logs were uncovered in the ground around Nelson. These needed removal before ploughing could begin.

The garden also features recent plantings of native trees - **Titoki** and the golden flowered **Kowhai**, which is much loved by tui which visit in large numbers when they flower in spring.

A well established **Puriri (Vitex lucens)** has pretty salmon-pink flowers. **Puriri** is an invaluable food source for native wildlife, as it provides both fruit and nectar in seasons when few other species produce these. It is often used in restoration planting and it is highly valued as an aid in increasing kereru (native pigeon) populations. Maori used infusions from boiled **Puriri** leaves to bathe sprains and backache, as a remedy for ulcers and sore throats. The infusion was also used to wash the body of the deceased to help preserve it. **Puriri** trees or groves were often tapu through their use as burial sites and **Puriri** leaves were fashioned into coronets or carried in the hand during a tangi (funeral). **Puriri** provides the strongest timber in New Zealand and was often used for implements and structures requiring strength and durability, for example bridges, paddles and garden tools. Legend has it that buckshot used to ricochet off **Puriri** palisades. It was also used to make hinaki (eel traps) because it was one of the few timbers that would sink. For carving Maori preferred other timbers, because of its cross-grain.

Puriri was first collected at Tolaga Bay by botanists Banks and Solander during Captain Cook's first visit in 1769. Solander, besides describing the tree excellently, made a beautiful drawing of it. The tree was also called by the English 'New Zealand mahogany' and 'New Zealand teak' in the past, especially in reference to the timber.