

WHERE IN THE WORLD?

Ōtari-Wilton's Bush is a six-star garden of international significance. © Chris Coad

Old podocarp forest stands alongside rare native plant collections cared for by gardeners, conservation scientists, and community volunteers at Wellington's Ōtari-Wilton's Bush. **✍️ Kathy Ombler**

It's dusk. Kākā screech around an old hīnau tree, epiphytes dripping from its upper branches. Nearby is a subtropical Manawatāwhi kaikōmako, from the Three Kings Islands, grown from a cutting taken in 1945 from the last tree left of the species.

Turn around and you'll see a 1000-year-old northern rātā, while just down the path stands a smaller rātā moehau. Only 13 of these white-flowering trees remain in the wild. A spiky taramea speargrass lurks beside the tarn of a native alpine garden.

A number 14 city bus pulls up, its stop just 5km from the Wellington CBD. Welcome to Ōtari Native Botanic Garden and Wilton's Bush Reserve, known more simply as Ōtari-Wilton's Bush and officially recognised as a six-star garden of international significance.



Job Wilton

How can it be that such old forest, botanical rarities, and sub-alpine plants exist in our capital city? The answer, essentially, is foresight.

In the 1860s, much of the land at Ōtari was cleared for farming, but one forward-thinking settler, Job Wilton, recognised the value of the lowland podocarp forest and fenced off 7ha of the land for its protection.

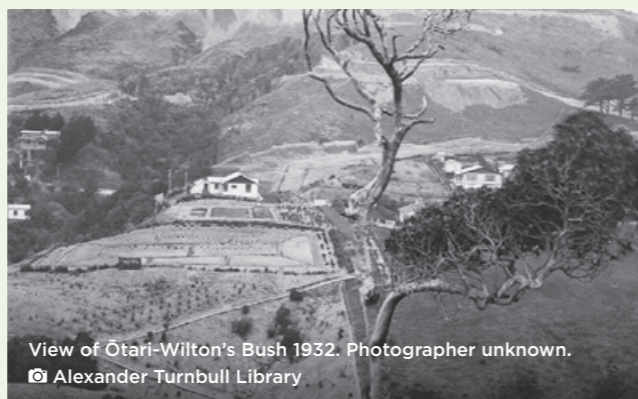
He also welcomed the public to visit, and weekend picnics at Wilton's Bush became quite the thing for Wellington families and church groups. A gently

graded dray road, built by Wilton for access to his farm, today forms one of Ōtari's most popular walking tracks.

As a settler/farmer, Wilton was perhaps a man ahead of his time. Later, when farming stopped and adjoining land was reserved, his unfelled forest became the best possible seed nursery, allowing rapid natural regeneration in the valley.

Fifty years on, another visionary, botanist Leonard Cockayne, one of Forest & Bird's founder members, expressed alarm at the pace with which New Zealand's native vegetation was being destroyed.

With support from Wellington's Director of Parks and Reserves, J G MacKenzie, and promotion by the Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture, five acres at Ōtari were set aside for an "Open Air Native Plant Museum",



View of Ōtari-Wilton's Bush 1932. Photographer unknown. © Alexander Turnbull Library

which officially opened in 1926.

Here, native plants gathered from around the country were planted in traditional taxonomic living collections, and Cockayne became one of the first to attempt to recreate ecosystems from around New Zealand that replicated the plants' natural habitats.

Today, Ōtari is officially a botanic garden – in fact, the only public botanic garden in New Zealand dedicated to native plants. Around 1200 species, 340 of them threatened, from all around New Zealand and its offshore islands grow here.

Alongside stands Wilton's Bush, now a 100ha reserve of mature native forest, most of it more than 100 years into regeneration, along with the original remnant forest protected by Wilton. Together, the forest and gardens combine to make one grand interdependent nature experience.

Cockayne's four-point vision for Ōtari was to grow as many native species as possible, demonstrate New Zealand's many different plant communities, show how native species could be worthy garden plants, and restore the adjoining native forest to its natural state.

Almost a hundred years on, aided by a succession of similarly motivated curators each adding their own enhancements – Walter Brockie's Rock Garden, Ray Mole's Fernery, Mike Oates' Canopy Walkway and Alpine Garden, Rewi Elliot's 38 Degrees Garden, and current manager Tim Park's Rēkohu and Epiphytes Gardens – Ōtari-Wilton's Bush continues to evolve, always inspired by Cockayne's vision.

The place is also incredibly popular, not only for learned botanists and scientists. Families, friends, walkers, runners, garden clubs, students, kairaranga

(weavers), photographers, locals, and visitors all regularly enjoy the garden collections, the forest tracks, the picnic and barbecue lawns, the birdlife, and spotting tuna in the Kaiwharawhara Stream.

And let's not forget the volunteers: from retired botanists to keen locals to teenage trappers, there is huge community commitment to support and enable what is happening here.

"Our gardening staff simply couldn't do what we do without our wonderful volunteers," says Ōtari Manager Tim Park. "They also bring a spark of energy due to their love of the place. This really encourages our determination to inspire people with our native plants."

Bringing people and plants together and building relationships with mana whenua will be Tim's ongoing focus for Ōtari-Wilton's Bush. He says the new Rēkohu Garden, showcasing plants from the Chatham Islands, is an example of this.

"Mori have shared their knowledge. Now, we are using this to tell the story of the evolution of plants in New Zealand, with and without influence such as moa. Our staff have also contributed to restoration on Rēkohu, so we've built a two-way relationship."

At last December's opening of Ōtari's Pā Harakeke, a collection of harakeke plants especially chosen and planted for weavers, Tim spoke with emotion about embracing the cultural use of plants.

"These plants are not curiosities. They are able to be used, and they are resources that can strengthen our cultural connections."

Ōtari-Wilton's Bush is managed by Wellington City Council. Staff include gardeners, plant conservation scientists and a plant collections archivist. They are a dedicated lot with specialist knowledge. Gardener Dave Bidgood, for example, has been at Ōtari for 25 years and developed a huge understanding of the specific nurturing required for the many rare native plants in Ōtari's care.



Tim Park



Lily Yochay harvesting harakeke.



Ōtari staff Dave Bidgood and Megan Ireland. © Chris Coad