

GARDEN & LIFESTYLE

City's secret garden a gem

A chance turn into a New Plymouth street has revealed a park that columnist Glyn Church was unaware of. He talks of his surprise discovery.

Before realising it, I had travelled too far along Mangorei Rd on a recent outing. Instead of doing a U-turn, I turned into William St and, to my astonishment, came upon a reserve at the end of this short thoroughfare.

I thought I knew them all but this one, Balsom Park, was new to me.

The name actually looks like Balsom as timber decay has taken its toll on the entrance sign. Combined with a tatty gate and a rough stile, it's not an auspicious start but, bear with me, this is a good place. But it's a bit slippery so sturdy footwear is a must.

Apart from the poplars by the gate, all the plants you initially see are weeds like *Buddleia davidii*, gorse and woolly nightshade. It gets better with several hammer bark maples, *Acer buergerianum*, turning colour and some coastal Californian redwoods all along the way. Where the high bank comes down there's a terrific specimen of the maple turning burnished red on the right. Look left from there for a view of the river and masses of mamaku tree ferns.

Next on the right is a big drift of blue atlantic cedars looking terrible and then

some blue spruce looking great, which is a complete contradiction.

The former should like our warm wet climate and the spruce should hate it.

These are followed by lots of Japanese cedars or *Cryptomeria*.

Some have been chopped down after the recent storm and a brand new fence erected. On your left is a view to the river with woolly nightshade and tall tute and on the right a rare find - a three-headed mamaku tree fern. You hardly ever see doubles,

let alone treble-headed mamaku tree ferns.

Next along on the same bank is a *Rhododendron cornubia* with peeling pink and fawn trunks. You don't see this variety much these days because the plant gets too big for most gardens, but if you have the room the blood red flowers are superb. Now you're walking through a grove of Japanese cedars which is their equivalent of rimu but the soft timber nowhere near as good. There

is a real feel of Christmas to it and it seems like you're walking in the Black Forest as the soft feathery branches waft across the path to meet you.

Next you find yourself in a small field with two small trees. These are Himalayan snake bark maples, probably *Acer sikkimensis*. There are so many slightly different "snake barks" all based on *Acer davidii* which are named after a French priest Armand David.

He was such an interesting character and I might tell you about him next week.

Anyway these snake bark maples have smooth trunks, often in rich green with grey streaks and thus the name snake bark. They're deciduous though they often hold their leaves very late. They all hail from the Himalayas and this one has big glossy arrowhead leaves.

At the bottom end of this paddock are some very healthy looking coastal redwoods and a gate leading to the river. Make sure you close the gate behind you to keep the sheep enclosed. You'll spend the first few minutes trying to avoid their droppings, but there's so much you'll soon forget about it and you can always clean your shoes as you leave the field.

You'll see a big avenue of English beech trees in front of you. The leaves turn orange at this time of year and young juvenile trees hold these leaves all winter. Someone realised that, if you make a hedge of them and keep clipping every year, you trick the plants into thinking they're still juvenile so they hold the leaves right through winter.

There are beech hedges in England fully clothed in orange leaves all winter despite being more than 100 years old. All because they've been tricked into thinking they're juvenile. Pity it doesn't work for humans - lop a bit off and lose a few years.

Back to your left is a superb snake bark maple with orange red leaves, and beyond that a funny mix of conifers. The first upright pine looks like the stone pine, *Pinus pinea*, where we get the edible pine nuts. The pine at the front hanging over the paddock is the blue Bhutan pine, *Pinus wallichiana*, which used to be called *Pinus griffithii*.

Nearly all the plants in north India and Bhutan are named after either Nathaniel Wallich 1786-1854 or William Griffith 1810-1845. The two men couldn't stand each other, as Wallich, the older of the two, was steeped in his old-fashioned ways. Wallich looked after the Calcutta Botanical gardens and was furious to discover Griffith was put in charge of his precious garden for a year when he was too ill to continue.

Griffith is the unsung hero of plant exploration because he died so young before he had the chance to publish his achievements. Griffith botanised most parts of India and the surrounding countries. He thought himself fortunate to be part of the British invasion of Afghanistan in 1839 as it allowed him to be the first Westerner to botanise there. Luckily he left the country



Rare beast: Double-headed mamaku tree ferns are rare enough but New Plymouth has this trident-shaped beauty to boast about. Photos: GLYN CHURCH

THE CONSTANT GARDENER



GLYN CHURCH



Park beauty: This Himalayan blue pine was among the "finds" in Balsom Park.

before the British forces were wiped out in their biggest defeat of all time when just one man was allowed to escape. No-one ever wins in Afghanistan. The man who instigated this impossible war was Lord Auckland, the Governor of India, and thus our biggest city is blessed with his name.

But back to our pines: Standing in front of the blue pine, look for a small branch on your left with fluffily drooping pale green foliage. This is the juvenile form of the Japanese cedar we see around here. It's hard to believe it's the same plant as one is chord-

like and the other fluffy.

There's a real collection of young trees on this river flat including hornbeams with small pointy leaves similar to a birch. Aim towards the river and you'll see native beech trees, London planes and redwoods. It's quite easy to lose your direction in among all these trees, but head back to the bright red leaves of the snake bark maple near the gate.

Actually the track up to the road seems rather robust for a few sheep and luckily I met one of the neighbours who told me the rocks were hauled out of here for making

breakwaters when the power station was being built. He also explained how the park got its name. I thought maybe Balsom fir or Balsom poplar but the spelling's wrong.

Anyway it seems it was named after Owen Balsom, who was chairman of the North Taranaki council who pushed for this area to be a public reserve. Initially the quarry company wanted to subdivide the site but they were persuaded to sell it for a recreation reserve in 1979. What a good idea.

My thanks to Gary Spencer and Delwyn Masters.