



Good to grow



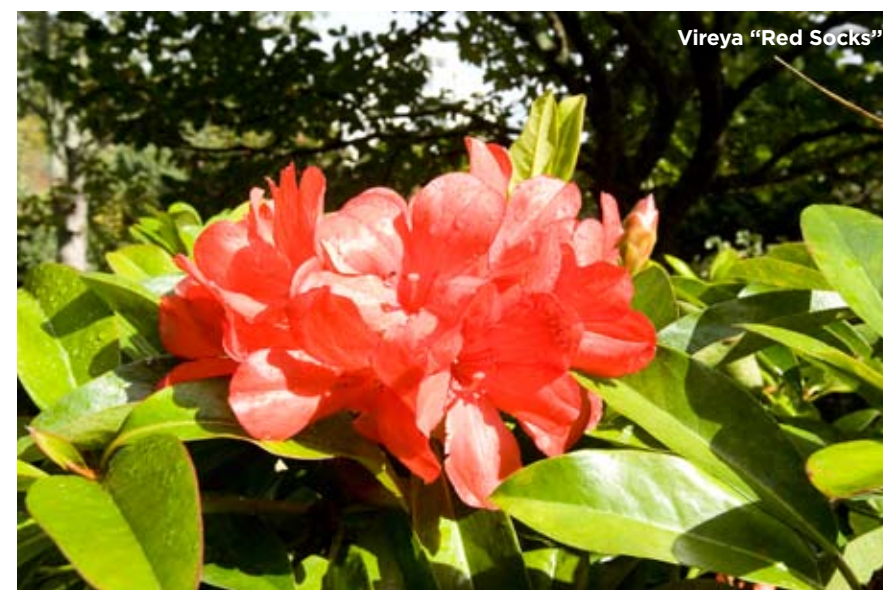
Autumn leaves: a vibrant Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum Suminagashi*) canopies a pathway in Eden Garden, Auckland.



Vireya "Cotton Candy"



Camellia "Bonanza"



Vireya "Red Socks"

Blooming lovely

Who would have guessed that the largest collection of camellias in the Southern Hemisphere can be found in central Auckland? BY MAGGIE BARRY/PHOTOS BY DAVID WHITE

Half a century ago the steep hillside would have seemed an unlikely location for a garden. Abandoned as a quarry in the 1920s and used as a dumping ground, it was completely overgrown with pine trees and blackberries. But the 2.5 hectare site on the slopes of Mt Eden did offer shelter, sunshine and great drainage, and

in the mid-1960s a couple of men saw its potential. Thanks to the generosity of Sir Frank Mappin, who gifted the land, and the hard work and vision of Jack Clark who led the volunteers, Eden Garden is now an A-rated Garden of Significance by the NZ Gardens Trust.

Eden is a public garden without any guaranteed public funding; instead it's run as an incorporated society with mem-

bers and relies on a team of 20 volunteers to do most of the work. Manager Karen Lowther comes from a background of designing public and private gardens and admits her five years in charge of Eden has had its financial challenges.

"It runs on the smell of an oily rag and all the money goes straight back into the garden. We're the cheapest entertainment in town and one of the most acces-

sible since we are open seven days a week, every single day of the year."

That ready access is important because, although many visitors wouldn't know it, Eden is a memorial garden. Endowments and interments are a major source of income: seats, rocks and shrubs marked with discreetly placed dedication plaques. A friend's ashes are there too, so I tend to call in when I'm passing and stroll through the gardens; there is always something in flower to admire along the way. Her family had wanted her there partly because her teenage sons didn't like the idea of visiting a cemetery and Eden has a homely feel with the noisy tui and wood pigeons an attraction in themselves.

The camellias are flowering early this year with the sasanquas already in full bloom by April and



Vireya "Kisses"

Vireya tips

Vireyas are rhododendrons that originate from Papua New Guinea and Malaysia and although they will grow in cold climates under shelter, they prefer warmer temperatures and mild winters. They need protection from frost and direct sun but the most important requirement is excellent drainage.

These small shrubs grow well in containers and hanging baskets and are commonly planted in a "collar" ring of punga log to raise them slightly above the ground and protect the roots, which hate to be disturbed.

At Eden Garden they fertilise all their vireyas individually three times a year using small applications of a fertiliser high in calcium, nitrogen and magnesium but low in potash, potassium and phosphorus (for example, Osmocote Plus or Nutricote).

Deadheading is essential to keep the shrub shapely and leafy and flowering most of the year.

the swelling buds of the *C. reticulata* and *C. japonica* are poised to take the display through to December. They are given slow-release fertiliser at the end of winter ("we can only afford it once a year, but that's enough"), and the volunteers dead-head and tip prune after flowering to keep them shapely. Some of the original varieties that had grown too large were rejuvenated by being cut back by two-thirds and more planting space was created by removing large lower branches.

Surprisingly, azaleas struggle a bit

with the humidity but the vireyas flower almost year round in the sheltered microclimate. Eden is building up its collection and now has nearly 270, thanks in part to an arrangement with a local nursery which propagates them from cuttings that are then shared between them. Lowther favours scented varieties and "Popcorn", "Saxon" and "Blush" do particularly well. "Vireyas have an undeserved reputation for being difficult but they're not as fussy as people think. We have three volunteers in particular that love deadheading them

and thanks to their efforts we have varieties in flower every month of the year."

Financial constraints always need to be balanced against the need to attract visitors back to the garden with new and spectacular displays. A trip last spring to the Floriade festival in Canberra was the inspiration Lowther needed to splash out on a staggering 9000 tulip bulbs that will dominate the gardens from September. There are 11 different early-, mid- and late-season varieties including 1000 "London Red", a Darwin hybrid that copes admirably with Auckland's warm climate. Tulips need at least six weeks of cold temperatures to flower well so the ever-resourceful Lowther "begged and borrowed" enough second-hand fridges to do the job and the hard-working volunteers took two days to plant them. Because tulips can't be relied on to bloom as well for a second year, they are treated as annuals, and when they're dug up after flowering they're distributed as a way of thanking the workers. The total cost of this extravagant display will be recovered from the gate sales of tulips planted in pots, which have proven wildly popular with spring visitors.

Lowther's talent for combining plants and colours is evident in her award-winning flower show gardens and she's brought that flair and attention to detail to the flower beds that are now a year-round attraction. From its unlikely beginnings nearly 50 years ago, the old quarry has now become the haven Mappin and Clark hoped for – a garden of Eden for all. ■

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The heavily fragrant autumn-flowering *Luculia* is an old-fashioned and seldom seen shrub that deserves a place in any garden. Belonging to the same family as gardenias, they prefer a frost-free, semi-shady spot and they thrive on neglect so don't bother feeding them.

To keep the blooms at a height where you can sniff them, chop the plant back by half when it finishes flowering and take cuttings at the same time to give away to friends. A recent variety is the white "Fragrant Pearl", which can grow to a height of three metres.