he burst of colour that comes with spring is much anticipated by gardeners, and when that patch of colour is found outside the garden boundary – in an entirely unexpected place – the pleasure seems somehow intensified. Much like the thrill I imagine those first goldminers felt seeing a glint at the bottom of a pan. Just such treasure can be experienced every year between the gravestones in the older parts of Waikumete Cemetery in West Auckland. Here, a colourful array of European and South African wildflowers mix and mingle with native and exotic grasses to create dramatic wildflower meadows.

Waikumete is the second largest cemetery in the southern hemisphere and covers more than 100 hectares. Dating from the late 1800s, it is seen as a site of significant cultural and historical importance. The wildflowers are an integral part of the cemetery’s heritage and are duly protected. These exotic species are mementos of our early European immigrants. They mostly had a purpose (providing centuries-old medical cures or important components of a soup or stew), though some were no doubt hitch-hikers on boots and other items of clothing. The bobbing head of ox-eye daisy (common along our roadides) makes a syrup to ease chesty coughs; self-heal, with its lovely purple flowers, acts as a poultice to treat minor injuries such as bruises; the pungent leaves and almost fluffy indigo flowers of pennyroyal repel fleas and other insects.

In addition to their culinary and medicinal uses, the wildflowers at Waikumete also showcase the ever-present emotional relationship between plants and people. We have long used plants to express sympathy, pride, joy and many other emotions. Flowers are found in graves up to 15,000 years old.

Wildflower meadows, like cemeteries, are seemingly neglected spaces with an appealing messiness and sense of dereliction – this is particularly true of the older heritage parts of Waikumete. Being left alone to do as one pleases suits the wildflower and at Waikumete this has led to a wonderful blended landscape of native and exotic species.
These wildflowers are special as they represent a unique collection of some of our earliest imported species. Most are thought to be escapes from deliberate plantings in the cemetery. Wildflowers such as ixia, watsonia, oxalis and periwinkle were popular 19th-century graveside plants. Others are more likely pasture herbs that came with the grasses brought by our early European settlers and have since spread and naturalised throughout the open grasslands of Waikumete.

These beauties are believed to be the largest collection outside their native South Africa.

The history of immigration to Auckland, and the desire to bring a treasured memory of home to the new land, is seen in Waikumete’s South African wildflowers – the jewels of the veld. These beauties are believed to be the largest collection outside of their native South Africa and are a result of that insatiable desire of all gardeners to take cuttings. Aristea ecklonii, Amaryllis belladonna, ixia and tritonia will have travelled in the luggage of Land War soldiers recruited from South Africa or other migrants who stopped by Cape Town before the long, treacherous journey across the Southern Ocean. Encroaching development in South Africa’s unique Western Cape fynbos shrublands is threatening its floras diversity wildflowers, making this collection at Waikumete of potential conservation importance. The threat to wildflower populations is not unique to South Africa, with Europe, America and Britain all noting a steady decline in their wildflower populations. This worldwide decline coners, Waikumete’s wildflower collection with botanical significance (despite their non-native status) and reinforces the important contribution they make to the landscape heritage of the cemetery. If the explosion of insects that rises up from every step through the wildflowers at Waikumete is any indication, they also contribute to the biodiversity of our landscapes, providing food and habitat for the all-important pollinating insects that sustain our food crops. The sunshine-yellow bird’s-foot-trefol (Lotus corniculatus) and red clover (Trifolium pratense) are favoured bumblebee flowers. Like many of the exotic plants that have since naturalised in New Zealand, some of the wildflowers at Waikumete walk a fine line (albeit human defined) between plant and weed. The scourge of many a gardener, creeping buttercup (Ranunculus repens) or the wood sorrel (oxalis), ixia and watsonia that run rampant along roadsides are just a few examples. Weeds are defined by the ecological adaptations that allow them to exploit disturbed places, and it is this weedy characteristic that is a clue to the history of the cemetery itself.

These plants are those that naturalist Richard Mabey says "thrive in the company of humans”. Impoverished clay soils disturbed by human activity have provided them with perfect conditions. The wildflowers at

These are:

1. *Mentha pulegium* (pennyroyal)
2. *Babiana stricta* (baboon flower)
3. *Prunella vulgaris* (self-heal)
4. *Trifolium pratense* (red clover)
5. *Daucus carota* (wild carrot)
6. *Myosotis sylvatica* (forget-me-not)
7. *Leucanthemum vulgare* (ox-eye daisy)
8. *Freesia refracta* (freesia)
9. *Anagallis arvensis* (scarlet pimpernel)
10. *Lotus suaveolens* (hairy bird’s-foot-trefol)

These wildflowers are at risk of being lost, just as their native habitats are. Encroaching development in South Africa’s unique Western Cape fynbos shrublands is threatening its floras diversity wildflowers, making this collection at Waikumete of potential conservation importance. The threat to wildflower populations is not unique to South Africa, with Europe, America and Britain all noting a steady decline in their wildflower populations.
Waikumete challenge our perceptions of the good and bad of our exotic imports. Despite their non-native and weedy character, they are healing both landscape and mind by acting as scar tissue and greening over bare land. The wildflowers provide a connection to nature in an area that may otherwise be devoid of such colour and beauty. This is confirmed by Mabey in his confronting book Weeds: The Story of Outlaw Plants: “We have no choice, if we are to survive as a species, to deal with the ‘touling’ of weeds... Many of them may be holding the bruised parts of the planet from falling apart.”

Beyond the wildflower meadows, the landscape of Waikumete reveals further botanical riches. The regionally rare native gumland scrub that thrives on these hard impoverished clay soils – a product of the early kauri logging, grazing and occasional wildfires that swept through the area – provide the perfect conditions not only for wildflowers but also for an astonishing array of native orchids, no less than 22 have been recorded here, some of which are rare, vulnerable or endemic. The planting and maintenance of wildflower plants in your own garden, be it a one-hectare sanctuary area being swept through the area – provide the perfect conditions not only for wildflowers but also for an astonishing array of native orchids, no less than 22 have been recorded here, some of which are rare, vulnerable or endemic.

Plants such as black medic (Medicago lupulina), or the Japanese Silver Grass (Miscanthus sinensis) have long been champions for the protection of the wildflowers, culminating in 1993 with the one-hectare sanctuary area being set aside for wildflowers. Irrespective of their exotic and sometimes weedy pedigree (after all, in the words of AA Milne’s Eeeyore “Weeds are flowers too, once you get to know them”), the wildflowers of Waikumete provide a much-needed escape from the generally manicured environments of modern cities. In celebration of their botanical heritage and the sheer joy they bring on a Sunday walk, I do hope the beauty and romance of this wild and weedy refuge will continue to bloom.

The ethereal mix of grasses and wildflowers surrounding heritage gravestones adds to the landscape character of the cemetery.

By the perfection not only for wildflowers but also for an astonishing array of native orchids, no less than 22 have been recorded here, some of which are rare, vulnerable or endemic. The planting and maintenance of wildflower plants in your own garden, be it a one-hectare sanctuary area being swept through the area – provide the perfect conditions not only for wildflowers but also for an astonishing array of native orchids, no less than 22 have been recorded here, some of which are rare, vulnerable or endemic.

Plants such as black medic (Medicago lupulina), or the Japanese Silver Grass (Miscanthus sinensis) have long been champions for the protection of the wildflowers, culminating in 1993 with the one-hectare sanctuary area being set aside for wildflowers. Irrespective of their exotic and sometimes weedy pedigree (after all, in the words of AA Milne’s Eeeyore “Weeds are flowers too, once you get to know them”), the wildflowers of Waikumete provide a much-needed escape from the generally manicured environments of modern cities. In celebration of their botanical heritage and the sheer joy they bring on a Sunday walk, I do hope the beauty and romance of this wild and weedy refuge will continue to bloom. Beyond the wildflower meadows, the landscape of Waikumete reveals further botanical riches.