

A colourful bouquet of *Leucanthemum vulgare* (ox-eye daisy), *Daucus carota* (wild carrot or bishop's lace) and the mauve flowers of *Ixia polystachya*.

Wild SPIRITS

The remarkable heritage of Waikumete Cemetery is very much alive, in its joyous array of wildflowers

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The 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 roadsides) 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.

The wildflower sanctuary at Waikumete Cemetery has established within and around the elaborately carved headstones and memorials of the heritage grave sites.

These wildflowers are special as they represent a unique collection of some of our earliest imported species. Most are thought to be escapees 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.

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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 florally diverse 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 confers 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 trefoil (*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

- 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 trefoil)



Leucanthemum vulgare (ox-eye daisy)



Ixia polystachya



Gladiolus undulatus



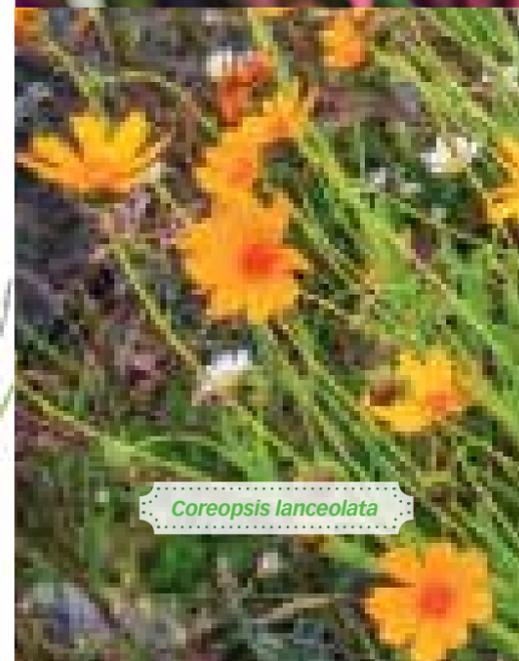
Watsonia meriana



Daucus carota (wild carrot)



Lathyrus latifolius (everlasting pea)



Coreopsis lanceolata



Calystegia pulchra (hairy bindweed)



Hemerocallis fulva (orange daylily)



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 ‘troubling’ 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

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22 have been recorded here, some of which are rare, vulnerable or uncommon, such as bronze fingers (*Caladenia atradenia*), and several sun orchids (*Thelymitra aemula*, *Thelymitra tholiformis* and *Thelymitra aff. ixioides*).

As well as the flowers, a range of heritage and commemorative tree plantings sit alongside the highly symbolic cemetery specimens of yew, palms, cypress and oak, creating a stunning arboretum that includes one of the most diverse collections of eucalypt species in New Zealand with more than a dozen represented.

The planting and maintenance of a true wildflower meadow can be more challenging than one might think. The meadows at Waikumete are maintained with a mowing schedule timed with seed set, and invasive grasses and plants require ongoing management to ensure they do not engulf the less robust

Top to bottom: *Prunella vulgaris* (self-heal); *Babiana stricta*; *Aristea ecklonii*.

wildflower species while still allowing a natural tapestry of plants to evolve.

So if you are inspired to create your own wildflower delight, or you have an area that is too dry or infertile to cultivate conventionally, then take advantage of the natural characteristics of these botanical stalwarts who adapt to and thrive in these conditions. Play with the structure of plants to create multi-layered, transparent planting schemes, with small-flowered plants and grasses intermingled with seeming irregularity. Use plants with a diffuse character such as beeblossom (*Gaura lindheimeri*) alongside feathery and light specimens such as the grass *Carex testacea* or bronze fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* ‘Purpureum’), dotted with pinpoints of colour from echinacea.

Of course, you will have to rely on your own conservation ethic to determine if and how you use exotic wildflower plants in your own garden, at the very least avoiding any that are considered noxious weeds.

When combined, some of our native

plants have the form and texture to create a similar wistful and romantic style of planting. I am thinking of the aptly named plumes of gossamer grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana*), the soft ethereal quality of oiioi (*Leptocarpus similis*) and the bobbing ink-blue berries of *Dianella nigra* (New Zealand blueberry) or even the diffuse, tangled form of *Muehlenbeckia astonii*.

With a bit of experimentation with form, structure and layered heights, the look and feel of a meadow can easily be achieved, providing your own little corner of wilderness. This approach of naturalistic-style planting is used by Dutch planting design guru Piet Oudolf and British landscape designer of the moment Sarah Price, who both use bold drifts of herbaceous perennials and grasses to achieve planting schemes that speak to our nostalgic love of wildflower meadows.

Auckland Council has recently reviewed the management plan for Waikumete Cemetery with the aim



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

of balancing ongoing use for burials with recreational use and ecological protection. Thankfully, the wildflowers of Waikumete have a strong following of supporters. The Friends of Waikumete (who occasionally provide guided tours showcasing the heritage and botanical features of the cemetery) have long been champions for the protection of the wildflowers, culminating in 1993 with a 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. 🌿

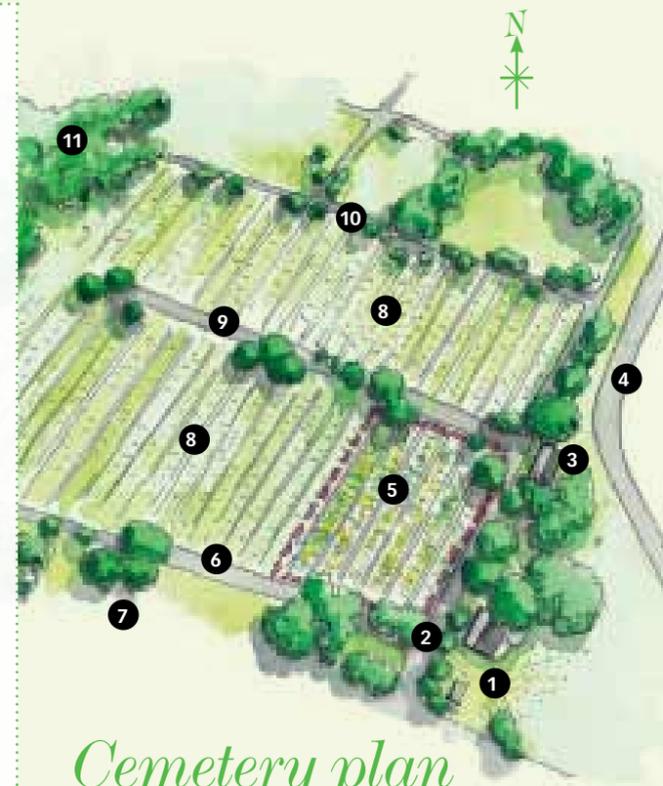
HOW TO VISIT

Visitors access the cemetery through the main gates at 4128 Great North Road. The eucalyptus glade is to the left along Parade Road. The wildflower sanctuary is in the southeast corner, near the historic sexton’s house. Opening hours: 7.30am-8.30pm (closes at 6pm outside daylight saving).

OTHER WILDFLOWERS AT WAIKUMETE

- Allium roseum* spp. *bulbiferum*
- Amaryllis belladonna*
- Centaureum erythraea* (centaury)
- Centranthus ruber* (spur valerian)
- Coreopsis lanceolata*
- Crepis capillaris* (hawkesbeard)
- Gladiolus undulatus* (gladioli)
- Hypoxis capensis*
- Ixia maculata* and *paniculata*
- Leontodon taraxacoides* (hawkbit)
- Leucojum aestivum* (snowflake)
- Linaria purpurea*
- Linum bienne* and *trigynum* (pale and yellow flax)
- Lotus pedunculatus* (lotus)
- Lythrum hyssopifolia* (hyssop loosestrife)
- Medicago lupulina* (black medic)
- Narcissus species
- Parentucellia viscosa* (tarweed)
- Picris echioides* (oxtongue)
- Romulea* spp. (purple orchid)
- Scilla peruviana*
- Sparaxis bulbifera*
- Tritonia crocata* and *lineata*
- Vicia sativa* (vetch)
- Watsonia borbonica* and *pyramidata*

Adapted from Waikumete Cemetery Conservation & Management Plan



Cemetery plan

- 1 Sexton’s house
- 2 Old Chapel Way
- 3 Chapel of the Faith in the Oaks
- 4 Glenview Road
- 5 Wildflower sanctuary area
- 6 Eucalyptus Avenue
- 7 Feature eucalyptus trees
- 8 Heritage Anglican burial area
- 9 Ixia Street
- 10 Crocus Road
- 11 Native gully planting

Plan drawn by Renée Davies at Unitec’s Landscape Architecture Department