Near the heart of a small university city in the south of the South Island of New Zealand, is the beautiful Dunedin Botanic Garden. Within this garden lies the world’s most southern International Camellia Society Garden of Excellence.

Dunedin is a hilly, harbour city, whose weather is influenced by the open Pacific Ocean that stretches towards Antarctica. The influence of the Antarctic teases with her chilly fingertips and has on one occasion sent out a rather large iceberg to float past Dunedin just off the coast. Hardy souls enjoy life in Dunedin and though we are considered to be in a temperate zone, we do receive light snowfalls most winters on the hills around town. Luckily, the site of the Botanic Garden has proven to be well chosen.

**Dunedin Botanic Garden**

The Garden’s landscape consists of two quite distinct areas. The steep hilly slope is north facing and sunny with a rolling topography of terraces, spurs and gullies. Locally known as the Upper Garden, it provides a range of microclimates suitable for several large plant collections.

These include the Rock Garden (the largest in the southern hemisphere), the New Zealand Native Plant Collection, Geographic Collection, Arboretum and Rhododendron Dell. All are planted within and sheltered by blocks of regenerating New Zealand forest.

The wide, level valley floor at the base of the hill, called the Lower Garden, is more easily accessible and well-suited to the more formal arrangements of the Collections planted there. Here you can find the Camellia Collection, Edwardian Winter Garden, Herb Garden, Rose and Herbaceous Collections.

**Celebrating the ICS Camellia Garden of Excellence**

The nomination of the Botanic Garden’s Camellia Collection for this prestigious award was received with great anticipation and, following the success of the application, Marianne Groothuis, Camellia Collection Curator, travelled to China to receive the certificate during the formal presentation ceremony. Upon arrival back in Dunedin, the good news was broadcast in the daily papers, congratulations were received from His Worship, the Mayor of Dunedin, and the success was celebrated by Botanic Garden staff, Friends of the Garden, our volunteers and Executive managers of the City Council.
The ICS Garden of Excellence award is another milestone in the Garden’s proud history. The Dunedin Botanic Garden is New Zealand’s only botanic garden to be recognised as a Garden of International Significance by the New Zealand Gardens Trust (NZGT) and this year the Garden celebrates 150 years since its establishment as New Zealand’s first botanic garden in 1863.

**Camellias Break Records**

Dunedin had a mild winter in 2012. This was uncharacteristically followed by the warmest summer that garden staff can recall in the last 20 years. The balmy weeks along with some truly hot days (for Dunedin), was accompanied by reasonable periods of rain, which resulted in extra vigorous growth and awesome flower bud formation.

The 2013 camellia flowering season is proving to be early and impressive and shows quite a dramatic change from previous records. In comparison to 2012, *Camellia hongkongensis* and *C. brevistyla* var. *microphylla* are one week early, *C. transnokoensis* two weeks early, *C. grijsii* four weeks early, *C. trichocarpa* five weeks early and *C. saluenensis* an impressive six weeks early.

**The Dreaded Blight**

*Ciborinia camelliae*, camellia petal blight, has had a phenomenal impact on the popularity of camellias in New Zealand among the enthusiasts who collect and love this genus. Camellias are extremely popular and widely grown throughout New Zealand. Upon arrival and establishment of camellia petal blight here in 1993, the disease has spread systematically through the country. Large collections are more heavily devastated, so with one curator and one apprentice to deadhead and clean up over 500 shrubs, it is a daunting but rewarding task.

This is when the volunteer dead-headers become invaluable. Each year, volunteers start the season off with a garden party, the ‘Dead-Headers Picnic’. Appropriately glamorous garb is donned for some social deadheading, good humour and appreciation of the beautiful genus, followed by a communal picnic and a cup of Cha.

**Future**

We have three main areas of focus for the Collection’s future. First, to keep it kiwi, with a strong emphasis on collecting New Zealand-bred camellia cultivars. Using New Zealand herbaceous plants, such as fern species and drifts of the megaherb, Chatham Island forget-me-not, *Myosotidium hortensium* amongst the camellia planting helps to solidify the Collection’s kiwi character.

Secondly, the Collection will continue to expand and improve in quality. Available *Camellia* species are evaluated for garden worthiness in our local conditions. Cultivars that are consistently poor performers are removed upon confirmation they are available elsewhere in New Zealand. Trialing potentially blight resistant cultivars, in cooperation with other Camellia Society members, is an exciting possibility.
Thirdly, the plan is to further enhance the Camellia Collection in conjunction with the Botanic Garden landscape plan.

A Mix of Science and Art

The Garden strongly supports horticultural training and education programmes providing hands-on work experience opportunities for youth trainees and international students and volunteers.

Important plant collections need conservation and protection. It is important for educational purposes to have plants grouped in botanical relationships, but it is in the end imperative that the Collection is a place people want to be, because camellias are beautiful and Camellia Gardens of Excellence provide us with knowledge as well as joy.

Vergelegen, Somerset West, South Africa
Laura Dickenson

Vergelegen has been a gardener’s paradise since the van der Stel era in the 1700s and today there are seventeen exquisitely themed gardens for visitors to enjoy.

The camellias at Vergelegen all started with Lady Florence Philips who planted the first plants in about 1920, beneath the 200 year-old Camphor trees in the Octagonal Garden. Later on the next owners of Vergelegen, the Barlow family, planted extensive areas of camellias from 1950 onwards until the 1980s. From 1990, Mir Jan Van Bergen donated his camellia collection to Vergelegen and a new era began for these gardens.

In 2010 we received recognition as an ICS Garden of Excellence.

Vergelegen celebrated their camellias over the weekend of 24 and 25 August 2013 with guided walks for the general public through the extensive Camellia Gardens. There are over a thousand camellias in the Vergelegen collection and five hundred and fifty varieties and a tour can take up to two hours.

Visitors have enjoyed the flowers tremendously this year and you can see why they are referred to as the ‘Winter Rose’. We have had a very wet winter and whilst this is not unusual because Cape Town is a winter rainfall area, we have not experienced this amount of rain for several years. Nevertheless, the camellias have been a shining light in the Vergelegen gardens.