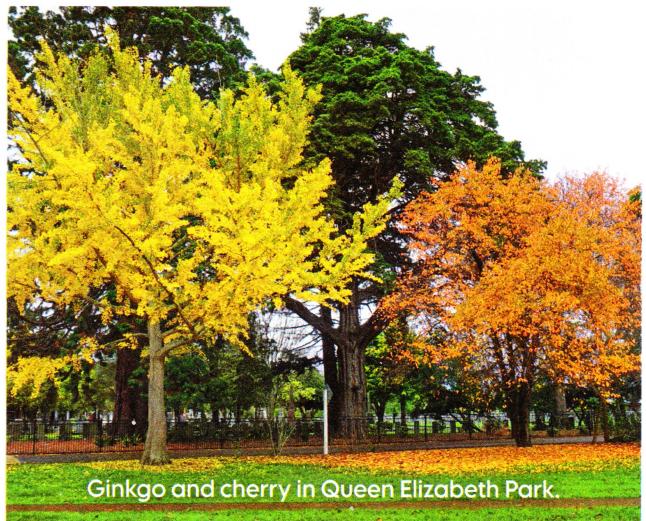




Cafe Cecil.



Ginkgo and cherry in Queen Elizabeth Park.

## lofty goals

In this restful local park, you can walk in the shade of giants more than a century old even as you learn more about their origins.

The cricket oval at the park.



## It's another balmy summer's evening in Masterton. At Queen Elizabeth Park in the middle of town, a game of cricket it in full swing at the oval.

Locals are walking their dogs along the park's neatly clipped paths or feeding the ducks at the Lake of Remembrance. Underneath the majestic trees, Pele Tulia's children and their friends are riding their scooters and playing catch while he relaxes at a nearby picnic table. "My wife and I come to the park a lot," he says. "It's a nice place for us to relax while the children are running around."

The majority of visitors to this impressive park are probably unaware of its long history. They would not realise that many of the trees which tower above them as they play, picnic or relax in the shade were planted over 140 years ago.

Not far past the Lebanese cedar at the Park's main entrance, a cheerful green and yellow sign advertises the Friends of Queen Elizabeth Park Tree Walk. On the walk, which takes a little more than an hour, park visitors can see 33 of its most notable trees, most of which are exotics that were planted under the supervision of nurseryman William McCurdle in the late 1870s.

When Masterton was first settled by Pākeha in 1854, a section of land was set aside as a "publick" reserve. However, it didn't officially become a park until the 1870s, following public pressure.

The park's development coincided with the arrival of William McCurdle in Masterton. Also well known as the founder of Pahiatua, he established himself in Masterton after six years as a nurseryman in Dunedin. He became a member of the Masterton Park Trust (the park was renamed Queen Elizabeth Park after Her Majesty's visit to Masterton in 1954), and was closely involved in the planning and implementation of the park's layout.

Former Masterton District Council archivist (and nurseryman), Gareth Winter, researched the park's history for his 2008 book, *A Very Publick Reserve*. He says while no written record exists of the park's design or the actual tree planting, it probably took place over a couple of seasons. "North American conifers were very much in vogue at the time. It only became fashionable to plant natives in the 1920s," he says.

Gareth's book reports that the government encouraged the importation of forest tree seed in the 1870s to counteract concerns about the rate of forest clearing. The head of the Government Botanic Garden in Wellington, James Hector, sent seed around the country, and both William McCurdle and the Masterton Park Trust received shipments from him.

Unsurprisingly, then, the park's most notable trees include several skyscraper American redwoods. The largest, *Sequoiaadendron giganteum*, is simply labelled The Big Tree on the tree walk. These massive specimens are planted along the park's boundaries, and with their deeply fissured red bark, provide much of the park's character.

Other interesting landmarks on the tree walk include a Californian Douglas fir; a giant macrocarpa; a Bhutan Pine with its hanging blue-ish needles and remarkable long cones; and a maidenhair tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) with its light green and fan-shaped foliage.

One of my favourites is Tree No 22, a Spanish fir, under which one may sit on a soft bed of needles, and contemplate the way its thick roots have broken through the adjacent gravel path and are slowly creeping their way towards the cricket oval. It seems it has aspirations of taking over the world – or, at least, the Park. I wish it well.

Off the main walk, there are plenty of other delights to interest gardeners. Behind the oval's grandstand are two of Masterton's largest deciduous trees. A large London plane shows off its wonderful multicoloured bark as it exfoliates, watched over by a towering tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*). At other points in the park you can find a native celery pine, a white-flowered Campbell's magnolia, an evergreen oak (complete with tiny acorns), elms, oaks, limes, cherries, rhododendrons and camellias.

The park is maintained by contractor Green by Nature on behalf of the Masterton District Council. Operations Manager Thomas Duxfield estimates there are close to 500 exotic trees in the park. He counts the Douglas firs, redwoods, elms, oaks and macrocarpas as among the tallest and most impressive.

Despite their age, he says most of the exotic trees are in good condition. "On a rating of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, most would be a 3, 4 or 5."

In the long term, the plan is to create an asset database for the trees, providing information on each tree's health and arboreal value, enabling their maintenance to be more closely planned and budgeted for.

It is a grand plan for a grand park, and Thomas agrees the park's tree collection is impressive for a town of Masterton's size. "It's pretty special standing at the oval and looking around at the wide variety and size of the trees in the park. There wouldn't be many towns with this kind of collection." ■



**MARISA KING** caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.