

Bloom service



» Leanne Killalea is about as down to earth as you can get. She's manager of plant collections for the Botanic Gardens.

LEANNE KILLALEA's dreams have been disturbed lately. She worries. "I was thinking of the poor little things last night . . . the plants. I think they'll be struggling a bit." Her concern is not just for the indulged plants of the Botanic Gardens, but for the entire town belt. Every winter there is a re-vegetation programme and in the winter just past, about 120,000 green fledglings were tenderly dug in by her and many others. Even the office staff blister their hands giving the pint-sized native plants their chance, but nature doesn't necessarily care. "It looks like they're needing a proper drink on the hills all round the city. That's unusual at this time of the year. It doesn't normally happen till February"

The roses, on the other hand, are all gloriously at their best, despite this week's wind, for the climax of Rose Week this weekend. "They're looking superb, the best for quite a few years."

Not that the roses have it easy to start with. In some ways they're just as much part of a struggle-or-die programme as their stancher-looking peers in the green belt. Visitors with their noses in velvety red and gold petals are probably unaware that the sturdy specimens in the central beds need to pass a strict examination to get there, unless they're part of rose folklore, such as Peace. There are a couple of long beds of roses on the western side of the Lady Norwood Rose Garden, Leanne explains, from which "nice new roses" graduate into the central collection.

Only the strong survive the three years of "Mailing". "It's very much the survival of the fittest. I wouldn't say we neglect them completely . . . but they need to come through hardy and fit and a nice rose."

"There are lots of criteria for the plants in the middle beds — we like repeat flowering and fragrance. I like fragrance. I notice visitors put their noses into the flowers and I think you can be a bit disappointed if you keep putting your nose in without scent."

"We like a different colour if we can, and if it gets a disease it's got to be able to recover quickly. They can often stand out after the first two years if they're doing well. People can be sure they're reasonably hardy if they're newer and central."

Old roses, such as Peace, require a little more attention "but we couldn't get rid of Peace". "We keep old favourites because



Part of Leanne Killalea's job is to ensure that the rosebeds in the Lady Norwood Garden are looking their best for Rose Week. Picture: ROSS GIBLIN

they're old or they've come through the monitoring process and their ratings are still high. Ratings are 1-3. If it's 1, it's right up there and if it is 3, I suspect we'd be digging it out in winter and replacing it."

The ideal is not to have to spray roses, she says, but they're tricky things to grow and often "you have to apply chemicals to keep them looking as good as they do. Some need spraying twice a season, others more."

In the past decade, spraying has been reduced by more than half at the Botanic

Gardens. "Chemicals all have to be in harmony with our beneficial insects. We don't use the nasty toxic things you still find people using. We haven't sprayed aphids for five or six years, because of good winds, beneficial insects, sparrows, all sorts of things."

"The trick with roses is that you've got to get that nice, soft foliage to harden as soon as possible. Aphids like soft foliage. If you've got good air circulation, water and plenty of sun, that's good for roses."

"There's the issue of being on landfill. I wouldn't like to say the soil is all wrong for roses, but it's a bit toxic for them. The amount of chemicals locked up in the soil is no reflection on the rose. And the soil is healthier now. We're growing the soil as well as the plants. There used to be a lot of putting on of fertilisers. It might be a quick-fix for the plants, but it might not keep the soil and organisms happy"

Leanness career in gardening has spanned more than 20 years. It has been, she says, "a hobby that's gone crazy". Even as a child she loved plants and gardening, as did her parents and grandparents. One of her abiding memories is of "big beefsteak tomatoes you'd slice and they'd take up the whole piece of toast". "I've got photos to prove it," she adds.

She grew up in the Hutt Valley and on the Kapiti Coast, leaving school at 15 to do a four-year horticultural apprenticeship in a Paekakariki plant nursery. As part of the apprenticeship she worked for a month in two consecutive years in the Botanic Gardens' tulip beds — "helping to create those displays people admire".

After her apprenticeship she worked for Lower Hutt City Council, in formal floral bedding. At 21 she left the world of mathematically arranged plants and became a postie. "Still in the outdoors, and I got extremely fit. Then I saw a job advertised at the Botanic Gardens, where I'd always wanted to work — looking after those tulips."

She left to work in plant retail management, but returned once again to the Botanic Gardens a few years ago.

In her latest job, she doesn't get her hands dirty a lot. "I do pull weeds out in the garden when I'm talking to someone—force of habit. And I'm always out and about in the garden. You meet all sorts of people there, I was working on the innovative garden by the main gate the other day and met Helen Clark's dad. He told us he enjoyed gardening and that sunflowers grow eight feet tall in Waihi. The garden's got sunflowers in it and that's how the conversation started."

Serious hands-in-dirt gardening waits for the weekend, when she's out in her own big garden in the hills above the Hutt Valley. Or out in her glasshouse, where she's "dabbling in nice tomatoes", working toward the sweet taste of her childhood.