

GOOD LIVING

Nurturing natives

Sue Wickison's passion for plants has taken her from the Royal Botanic Gardens in London to the wilds of the Solomon Islands. Now she's at home on a quiet New Zealand lifestyle block, **Lisa Durrant** writes.

PETAL by petal, leaf by leaf, Sue Wickison is bringing to life an extinct native mistletoe. Not that the mistletoe will be actually alive, but her illustrations are so detailed it is just about as good as looking at the real thing, some say better. "The painting will bring the mistletoe alive again. It will be of interest to many people," Ms Wickison says.



Picture: DOMINION POST
BOTANIC illustrator Sue Wickison, who's passionate about the native plants of her adopted country.

The project will take about a month to complete, and includes viewing preserved specimens and old illustrations at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa and the Auckland Museum. To get a real feel for the plant, she has also looked at other varieties of native mistletoe. "I've been out into the field to a place in Waikanae where they're growing some."

The mistletoe painting is destined to become a prized "trophy" for a Department of Conservation award given annually to a leading conservationist. "It will be given to a different person every year. It's an engraved painting rather than an engraved trophy."

Ms Wickison is a botanical artist, a rare breed in New Zealand. There is a strong tradition of scientific illustrating in the United Kingdom, the United States and even Australia, but Ms Wickison believes the smaller New Zealand market for publishers saw pho-

tos become more acceptable in books and field guides. Her love of botany began at an early age. Born in Sierra Leone, West Africa, she would often accompany her father, a teacher and amateur botanist, into the bush on plant-collecting expeditions.

After a British boarding school education, Ms Wickison completed a university degree specialising in scientific illustration, followed by a nine-year career as a botanical artist with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London, one of the foremost botanical institutions in the world. In 1986 she was awarded a prestigious Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship, which took her to the Solomon Islands to collect orchids for Kew. There she photographed, drew and painted plants in the wild, recording pertinent botanical and geographical details.

Walking into remote areas with local guides or travelling by helicopter into inaccessible locations with geologists, Ms Wickison discovered several new species of orchids, even having one named after her, *Coelogyne susanae*. "Getting into areas where few people have been before has been one of the highlights of my life and the excitement of orchids in full bloom in such inaccessible places is an incredible experience never to be forgotten," she says.

Another highlight of the trip was "collecting" her husband-to-be. Engineer Bob Barraclough was building roads in the Solomons when he met Ms Wickison and offered to show her some orchids in the areas he was working in.

The four-month trip extended to a two-year stay, which also saw Ms Wickison produce her first stamp commission, an orchid issue for the Solomon Islands' philatelic bureau. She has also designed stamps for New Zealand, a set of six native tree flowers issued in 1999.

After years island-hopping in the Pacific, Ms Wickison and her family came to New Zealand 13 years ago, buying a 4-hectare property in Ohariu Valley 20 minutes from downtown Wellington. Never having had a "real" garden before, Ms Wickison was full of ideas and plans for the property. "When we first came, there was just a strip of garden on the side of the house. So I pinched a bit of my daughter's pony paddock."

Now her initial enthusiasm for having a large garden has been tempered by the reality of managing one. "My expectations have come back to something more manageable, not so grandiose."

The garden is basically a "paint palette, as I've laid it out in colour". No plant is refused, as long as it is colour coordinated.

There's an area of the garden used as Ms Wickison's "stock room", growing plants to be used as models as required. Among the natives, Ms Wickison likes the white kaka beaks and the juvenile lancewood - "such a daft-looking thing". "Natives have really come into their own."

Landscaping fashions change over time and more interest in structural plants has seen the demand for natives grow. Ms Wickison is particularly interested in endangered natives and hopes her work with DOC and her paintings, available as cards and prints, of these plants will help raise public awareness of the need to protect and grow more of these plants both in the wild and in home gardens.

Later this year Ms Wickison will be taking her work on natives to an international audience, when a collection of her paintings is to be exhibited in New Zealand House in London.

■ Sue Wickison is to give a talk at the Manawatu Orchid Society meeting next Thursday. See the garden diary for details. For further information about her, or to purchase prints or cards, visit her website www.suewickisondesign.com.



THE pohutukawa, *metrosideros excelsa*. Its spectacular display of vibrant red flowers and chewed leathery leaves constantly inspire Sue Wickison to paint pohutukawa. This image is shown by kind permission of Scots College Wellington, which owns the original painting that represents the numerous pohutukawa trees surrounding the college grounds.



THE white-and-purple spotted orchid, *paphiopedilum bellatulum*. The strong and dramatic structure of these orchids has always appealed to Sue Wickison, who painted this plant from the Kew Gardens collection, which can also be seen at the Wellington Botanical Gardens.



Phormium cookianum

THE twisting architectural habit of wharariki, mountain flax (*phormium cookianum*), "really excited" Sue Wickison to paint it, capturing the vibrant green flowers that the tuis love, combined with the contrasting brown of the curling pods.

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