



The unfurling needles of *Picea smithiana* at Pinetum Blijdenstein in The Netherlands (see pages 158 to 160). The IDS awarded a plaque to the Pinetum in 2015 in recognition of the exceptional collection of conifers there.



Pinetum Blijdenstein

In 2015, Council of the IDS awarded a Plaque to Pinetum Blijdenstein at Hilversum in the Netherlands in recognition of its remarkable collection of conifers. **MARJA MULDER TEN KATE**, writes about its history, current activities and recent progress.

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Pinetum Blijdenstein occupies less than two hectares and although this is not a large area, it is ranked amongst some of the richest collections in the world. Its aim is to present half of the species in each conifer family. In order to accommodate these, trees of the original collection, mostly cultivars, are gradually being replaced by species which these days are considered to be of more scientific interest.

The park was designed in the landscape style by Hendrik Copijn in 1909 and old, impressive trees at key positions are retained to maintain the design's structure. Recently, to accommodate more common species or spare trees from a particular taxa, the pinetum has been fortunate to have been given access to the grounds of a nearby country estate, to the benefit of both properties.

The collection at Pinetum Blijdenstein was started by a passionate amateur who was a banker, and its history is similar to that of Von Gimborn Arboretum and many others. Mr Willem Benjamin Blijdenstein bought land and built a house in the countryside near Hilversum, between the place where the bank originated, in the very east of the Netherlands, and where the bank established its head-office, in Amsterdam. The house was completed in 1883. After his father's death, he had been called back to the Netherlands from England where he had been setting up a branch of the bank.

Whilst living in England he had already been very interested in exotic plants and trees and established a relation with The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew,

Opposite, a large tropical greenhouse was built in 1985 at Pinetum Blijdenstein to protect the more tender conifers in the collection. In the foreground are plants from the Cycad family.

Right, *Larix griffithii* at Pinetum Blijdenstein with the 1903 gardener's house in the background.

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becoming friends with the then director, Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker. When he returned to the Netherlands this friendship continued and his head gardener was sent regularly to Kew.

After retirement from the bank, he dedicated most of his time to the collection. He was also interested in breeding fruit trees and had a big fruit garden with a hollow garden wall against which espalier trees found a mild climate. Fearing that the result of all his efforts could disappear upon his death, he stated in his will that the Pinetum, designed in 1909, and the fruit garden, should be dedicated to science. Mr Blijdenstein died in 1914.

The family found it increasingly difficult to maintain the property and grounds and sold most of it to a private company in 1928. This company then divided it up into parcels of land for housing. The Pinetum and the fruit garden were offered to the municipality of Hilversum and, after the municipality declined, the site was offered to the University of Wageningen. The University similarly declined the offer and finally, in 1929, it was offered to, and accepted as a gift by, the municipality of Amsterdam (that is where the bank was, after all). The municipality donated it on the proviso that it be managed by the Hortus Botanicus (now one of the oldest botanical gardens in the world), belonging to the Municipal University of Amsterdam. The Hortus was happy to use it for their conifers which thrived in the sandy soils of Hilversum, with many being planted in the former fruit garden.

The Hortus collected conifers from temperate, subtropical and tropical regions and constructed several greenhouses in order to accommodate the species that needed winter protection. The large tropical hothouse was built in 1985. Many changes were made throughout the garden, although to a great extent, the original design was respected. A rhododendron collection was started as well as an *Ephedra* collection and a Cycad family collection. Plants from Tasmania were added and a large pond was made.

Nowadays, many universities no longer want the responsibility for gardens that have been used for scientific and educational purposes. It is thought the balance between costs and benefits tips to the negative. This was the main reason the future of the Pinetum became insecure in the 1990s. In the event that the Pinetum became abandoned, it would go back to the family of its original creator. Fortunately, a solution was found by creating a fund that would generate an income to be used to maintain the garden which was handed over to the trustees of a managing foundation. Various parties, amongst which were the municipalities of Amsterdam and Hilversum, contributed to the fund. The managing foundation pays a symbolic amount to the municipality of Amsterdam for the grounds. This new arrangement began in the year 2000.

The revenues of the fund are by far outweighed by the ambitions of the arboretum management, but an army of volunteers, about 7,000 visitors yearly, together with sponsors who help to organise projects and events, all contribute to keep the garden in its close to impeccable state and interest.

The garden harbours 420 species, of which 100 figure on the list of endangered species. Among these 420 species are 85 species of Cycadaceae and 20 species of Ephedraceae. Among the plants from Tasmania a *Lagarostrobos franklinii* (*Dacrydium franklinii*) can be seen. The *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* in the garden is a tree from the first introduction to the western world. The tallest tree in the collection is an *Abies grandis* which stands at 32 metres, an impressive height for the Netherlands. *Rhododendron morii* from Taiwan reaches about two metres despite the fact that it is rather tender.

Pinetum Blijdenstein maintains contact with about 17 botanic gardens. This summer many gardens marked and drew attention to plants included on the Red List of endangered species, compiled by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature). Pinetum Blijdenstein highlighted ten species in the garden and produced a brochure explaining why and where these species are endangered. The Pinetum is a member of the IUCN Conifer Specialist Group. Samples from the garden are used for DNA research.

The garden is open every working day throughout the year, but in summer is open at the weekends too. A free publication, produced quarterly, is available for people who purchase an annual entrance card, and the arboretum's sponsors and employees. About 750 copies are printed.

The current daily manager, Hans van Roon, is fortunate enough to be able to live in the garden, in the house especially built for this purpose in 1903.