

Obituary

John Osborne Taylor, MBE

31 October 1925 – 26 July 2005

It is a privilege and indeed an honour, to be able to share with you some thoughts, memories and achievements of someone so highly esteemed among family, colleagues and friends alike, by many of the Christchurch community, and others throughout New Zealand and beyond.

Whilst reflecting upon what I have known of John Taylor's life, it quickly became apparent that it would not be possible here to do more than touch on some of his numerous accomplishments and the immense contributions he has made both professionally and in the community at large: and equally important, the influence he has had at a personal level on the lives of so many of us.

My first recollections of John go back some fifty five years when as a foreman at the Christchurch City Council, he supervised the work and training of young horticultural trainee/students, myself among them. In trying to describe those first impressions, words like encouraging, supportive, knowledgeable and competent, and someone with a sense of humour are among those that come to mind. Most of all however, I remember him first and foremost as a good friend, and secondly as the boss who was fair and impartial towards all those under him. These were among the qualities that were to become increasingly evident during the years that followed.

John commenced his horticultural career as a trainee/student at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens in January 1941. This was followed by acceptance as a student at

the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, during which time he was awarded the Kew certificate and the C. P. Raffill prize for the best paper presented by a student. Returning to Christchurch in 1948, he was appointed foreman of the City Council's plant nursery and later senior foreman at the Botanic Gardens. During this period he gained the National Diploma in Horticulture with honours and was awarded the Cockayne Gold Medal as the top New Zealand student that year.

In 1950 he was granted a fellowship to study at the Harvard University, the New York Botanic Gardens and the University of California Berkeley Botanic Gardens. He completed these studies with distinction. Two years later upon returning to New Zealand he was appointed assistant curator, Christchurch Botanic Gardens.

In 1954 John entered the commercial sector establishing a successful horticultural business. While in business he was appointed a visiting lecturer at Lincoln University (then Lincoln College) for various periods between 1955 and 1969. In 1972 he was appointed senior lecturer, Department of Horticulture, Landscape and Parks, initially to establish the first course in park and recreation administration in New Zealand. He continued full time in that position right through to his retirement in 1986. While at Lincoln he also initiated and supervised several horticultural and parks research projects. Many who were his students during those years can today testify to John's excellence as

a teacher and mentor, to his caring compassionate nature and the personal interest he took in each one of them.

In 1979, in recognition of his outstanding contribution in the fields of parks and horticulture and to the community, he was awarded an MBE.

For many years John was an executive member of the New Zealand Institute of Park and Recreation Administration and his services to training and research were recognized by him being made an Honorary Life Fellow of the Institute in 1985. He was further honoured by the Institute in 1991 when he received the Ian Galloway Memorial Award for 'outstanding services, achievement and professionalism'.

Another of his major contributions was to the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture. His first official involvement began in 1951, serving in various roles and later for six years as chairman of the Executive Committee. He was elected an Associate of Honour in 1973 and President in 1991. For over 25 years he was a member of the Institute's examining board and for eight years National Moderator for the oral and practical examinations.

Of special interest to John was the Canterbury Horticultural Society. Elected to the Society's Management Committee in 1956, he served on the committee and numerous sub-committees, including a term as president, over a period of some 40 years. It would be difficult to overstate the contribution John made to the

Society during his long tenure. Involved as he was in virtually all aspects of the Society, he was frequently the initiator and driving force that saw so many events and other activities, come to fruition. These included major garden shows from the 1950s through to the 1990s, floral festivals and like events. He also led the Society's move to its new premises in Hagley Park in 1989, taking in his stride the extensive administrative and practical changes involved. Most of all, he was ever willing to share his extensive horticultural knowledge with members and anyone else seeking advice.

In 1989 he was appointed coordinator for Christchurch's and New Zealand's participation in the 1990 International Garden and Greenery Expo being held in Osaka, Japan, a six month long event involving 80 countries and some 23 million visitors. This was a quite complex undertaking and, typical of his nature, John willingly gave many hours of his time over a period of months, which saw a very successful outcome for Christchurch and New Zealand.

In 1994 he became the first New Zealander to be elected to the prestigious Kew Guild. The Guild had just celebrated its first centenary, which meant that John Taylor also became the first president of the Guild's second century. This was an honour of which he was particularly proud.

As the new millennium approached, the Christchurch City Council was seeking ideas as to how best celebrate this momentous occasion. John soon found himself chairman

of the 'garden city' committee whose role was to come up with a project that would celebrate the city's garden image. His suggestion of an international park including gardens representing Christchurch's six Sister City's won the day. John's vision eventually became a reality and the Halswell Quarry Park with its Sister City gardens is now attracting increasing numbers of visitors locally and beyond. John's commitment to this project has been an inspiration to many of us, and perhaps for him his most satisfying achievement, providing as it does, an enduring legacy for future generations. He also initiated and played a leading role in establishing the Friends of Halswell Quarry Park, and was its president at the time of his passing.

Other of John's commitments has included the Christchurch Garden City Trust, the Friends of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens and other special interest groups.

As indicated at the start, it has only been possible to touch on some of the many organizations and projects with which John Taylor has been involved over the past sixty or so years, and the extent of his influence professionally and in the wider community. What truly stands out however, and perhaps his greatest legacy, is the kind of person he was. His sense of commitment, duty and willingness to serve, to lead rather than be led, to act rather than leave it to others, have no doubt been an example and inspiration to many. When others said, "I'm too busy", John would respond "I will do it". When others said "It is too difficult" or "It

can't be done" John would respond "Lets give it a go". What others saw as impossible, he saw as an opportunity. ('Know how, can do'). Whether as teacher, practitioner, businessman, employer, chairman, horticulturist, garden judge, television presenter, writer, researcher, plant breeder, visionary or whatever, he invariably left his mark.

John will indeed be greatly missed, especially of course by his loving family, but also by his numerous close friends and colleagues, and many others who were privileged to experience his hospitality and friendship. He was such a great person to know – a true friend on whom one could rely through thick and thin. It could in fact be said, he was everybody's friend. His strength of character, integrity, wise counsel, respect for others, compassion, generosity, cheerfulness and sense of humour endeared him to all. For me, and no doubt many others, because of these and other sterling qualities, John will be long remembered with affection, love and esteem.



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From a eulogy compiled by Neiel Drain.
neiel@xtra.co.nz