

Plant Raisers' Award

Graeme Charles Platt



Graeme Platt at the award ceremony.
Photo: Gil Hanly.

Graeme Platt was born on the 14th November, 1941, at Massey, West Auckland.

He attended Birdwood Primary School in Massey and even then Graeme could name most of the native plants he saw growing on the roadside as he walked to and from school.

During his time as a scout he experienced nature through visits to such places as the Waitakere Ranges. He was awarded the coveted Queens Scout Badge in 1959.

Aged twenty he hitch-hiked overland with a friend to Britain via Sri Lanka and India. During this period he learnt to "eat anything and accept all social customs". In London he worked maintaining gardens and creating new gardens. His travels took him to Gibraltar where he worked on a luxury yacht cruising the Mediterranean.

In 1965 Graeme returned to New Zealand via the Panama Canal. He began working for the former New Zealand Forest Service planting trees in Riverhead Forest before moving to their Kumeu nursery to propagate *Pinus radiata*.

Graeme then travelled to the South Island with the intention of working in each of New Zealand's major cities. He found a summer job fruit picking in Central Otago before finding work in Dunedin repairing and selling sewing machines. Although it was an unlikely role for Graeme, it proved to be a useful experience and he stayed for 18 months.

He met his future wife Rosemary Carr at a Youth Hostel Association (YHA) meeting in Auckland in February 1965. Rosemary then travelled around the world before returning to Dunedin six days before their wedding on 28th April 1967.

The couple returned to Auckland and Graeme continued working for Elna Sewing Machines as manager of their Queen Street shop. He then moved to New Zealand Breweries working on quality control in the laboratory, remaining there for more than four years. It was when the first of their two children arrived that he started the plant nursery to enable him to spend more time with his young family.

Graeme had been propagating native plants for three years and already had some 7000–8000 plants growing on their residential property. It was during this time that he began researching alternatives to the poor quality potting mixes available at that time. This included his first experiments using pine bark in potting mixes. Today pine bark is the most widely used ingredient in potting mixes in this country.

Graeme needed a nursery site so he leased land on State Highway 1 near Albany. About 18 months later he purchased the block of land and in late 1973 began setting up the nursery that was later to become Platt's Native Plant Nursery. The initial intention was that the nursery would be wholesale only, but garden centre resistance to native plants forced Graeme to reluctantly become a retailer and sell directly to the public. He sold his first plant, a kauri, around one year later in December 1974.

Although a few select exotic trees were originally produced, it was native plants that quickly proved to be most successful. Graeme made the decision to sell only native plants, to provide clarity about what his business offered – his nursery business was based on Graeme's strong view that all native plants are useful and should be saleable.

Graeme was unimpressed with the range of native plants garden centres were selling at the time, feeling it had changed little from the time early settlers arrived. The range was limited to classic trees like rimu, and a selection of cultivars he felt were generally of little merit. A large proportion of the stock commonly on sale was variegated, a characteristic Graeme considers an abomination. Many of the native trees on sale had been collected from the wild. As a consequence, they often failed when planted in gardens through transplanting shock. This led to the widely held misconception that native plants are difficult to grow.

For the next twenty years Graeme scoured the country for high quality plant material to introduce into the range of plants he sold. Some years he would make four or more plant hunting trips.

Graeme had purchased commercially available seed of native plants but found this often failed to germinate. He realised it was because much native seed is fleshy, 'wet' seed (such as *Coprosma* and rimu) which does not germinate once it has been allowed to dry out.

An early success was his selected (unnamed) form of *Griselinia lucida*. He made this selection in Kaikoura and it soon became his second biggest selling plant (after *Pittosporum tenuifolium*) and it still remains widely available in garden centres to this day.

Graeme considers himself a selector of plants rather than a plant breeder. He did, however, breed two hybrids, the best known being *Phormium* 'Platt's Black'. He also successfully crossed two native fuchsias to produce *Fuchsia excorticata* x *procumbens*.

Although not strictly a plant breeder, Graeme holds the view that any breeding programme which fails to utilise top quality plant material will be unsuccessful. Material introduced by Graeme has been extensively

used in plant breeding programmes at Auckland Botanic Gardens, particularly in the *Leptospermum* breeding programme.

Graeme found that the plant introductions that proved most successful in cultivation were usually those selected from exposed coastal cliffs or other environments where plants are exposed to harsh conditions. The ability to survive these extremes enabled such selections to withstand any challenges gardens presented. By comparison selections from sheltered forests performed poorly in gardens.

When selecting plants he looks for the right balance of all characteristics including superior floral and foliage characteristics and feels that some of the very best introductions are freaks, as is the case with champion race horses.

Graeme only ever marketed plants that he rated very highly. Notable introductions made by Graeme Platt over many years include:

Metrosideros excelsa 'Plus Four', *M. excelsa* 'Te Kaha', *M. excelsa* 'Titirangi' and *M. excelsa* 'Vibrance'. Graeme rates pōhutukawa as one of the top ten flowering trees in the world. He also introduced the outstanding hybrid *Metrosideros* 'Mistral' (*M. excelsa* × *robusta*)¹.

Leptospermum scoparium cultivars he has introduced include the pink-flowered *L.* 'Julianne' and *L.* 'Sherryl-Lee', and the outstanding white-flowered *L.* 'Karekare'².

Other well-known introductions include *Coprosma* 'Hawera', *C.* 'Taiko', *C. ×kirkii* 'Goldstream' and *Phormium* 'Platt's Black'. He also introduced a superior Chatham Islands form of nikau (*Rhopalostylis sapida*), a large and dark green leaved form of *Pittosporum cornifolium* from the Poor Knights, the golden leaved

Podocarpus totara 'Albany Gold' and the blue foliated *P. totara* 'Matapouri Blue'.

Of the aforementioned cultivars, the three for which Graeme has been awarded the 2011 Plant Raisers' Award are *Coprosma* 'Taiko', *Leptospermum* 'Sherryl-Lee' and *Metrosideros* 'Mistral'.

Graeme says that today he can walk down any street in the country and see plants he introduced growing in people's gardens.

In 1995, after twenty one years of operation, Platt's Native Plant Nursery finally closed its gates. By that time the nursery had made a pivotal contribution to the profile and use of native plants throughout the country.

Graeme has also influenced the thinking of many students of our native flora. Based on his observation of native plants and their ecology, Graeme developed a theory he entitled 'The six-stage sequential order of forest succession/progression'³. He believes this theory explains the history of life on earth through the observation of plants, and that ultimately it will be his greatest contribution.

Graeme founded the New Zealand Botanical Research Institute in 1993 to continue his research into the economic potential of trees. He continued his studies into the timber potential of different species, planting more than 1000 trees on his 5 hectare Albany property and assessing these for forestry purposes.

In 1994 he received an Anzac Fellowship grant to study *Eucalyptus* trees in Western Australia and assess their potential as economic resources in New Zealand.

Graeme has a keen interest in kauri (*Agathis australis*) and in the Araucariaceae family it belongs

to. In conjunction with the former Forest Research Institute (now Scion) he endeavoured to obtain genetically superior kauri material for forestry purposes. An episode of the television programme *Country Calendar* featured Graeme collecting kauri cones while suspended below a helicopter and attracted considerable national and even international attention.

Graeme regards Araucariaceae as "the most magnificent family of trees to have graced planet earth", citing their size, history and their mana. His research into *Araucaria* and *Agathis* has taken him on numerous overseas trips, including many visits to Australia, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Fiji, Norfolk Island, Chile and Brazil. He has introduced much Araucariaceae germplasm into New Zealand. Most of the trees planted in the Gondwana Arboretum at Auckland Botanic Gardens have been donated by Graeme. His collection of Araucariaceae trees feature in other arboreta and gardens throughout the country, as well as on his own Albany property.

Graeme joined the International Plant Propagators' Society (IPPS) in 1979 and in 1994 was presented with the inaugural IPPS Award of Merit to recognise his contribution in sharing knowledge.

Graeme Platt has greatly influenced the range of native plant material available in New Zealand and beyond. He has also positively influenced the way people in this country think about native plants, to the considerable benefit of our gardens and the wider environment. He is a most worthy recipient of the RNZIH Plant Raisers' Award.

**Citation prepared by
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¹ *Metrosideros excelsa* selections and hybrids are documented in the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1, June 2010.

² Documented in the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2, December 2009.

³ Outlined when Graeme delivered the 2001 Banks Memorial Lecture (*New Zealand Garden Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, June 2002).

Graeme Platt's plant selections

The following is a complete list of Platt's plant selections to date. This list includes selections released in limited quantities and subsequently discontinued, cultivars that have become major commercial successes, and unreleased material and provisionally named material still under evaluation.

| Cultivar/selection | Origin/notes |
|---|--|
| Pōhutukawa selections | |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Blockhouse Bay' | near toilet block in park near Golf Road, Blockhouse Bay, Auckland |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Centennial' | Centennial planting, Auckland Domain |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Firestone' | lower slopes of Mt Moehau, northern Coromandel Peninsula |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Glenbrook' ¹ | Glenbrook, Manukau Harbour. Selected from a 3 m tall tree Dec 2009/Jan 2010. A new selection under evaluation and not commercially released |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Hauraki' | Long Bay Regional Park, Auckland |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Kopere' | Brook Beach, near Awhitu Regional Park. Wayne and Trish Aspen of Awhitu were also involved in this introduction |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Lighthouse' | near lighthouse at the north-western end of Rangitoto Island |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Manukau' | Great South Road, near Manukau City shopping centre. Phil Jew of Auckland was also involved in this introduction |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Moehau' ¹ | lower slopes of Mt Moehau, northern Coromandel Peninsula. Selected for the very large size of the parental tree. One cutting-raised batch was sold but propagation was discontinued because the flowers are not outstanding |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Parnell' | Parnell Rose Gardens, Auckland City |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Plus Four' | Awhitu Golf Course. Jack Hobbs of Auckland was also involved in this introduction |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Pohutu' ¹ | near Pohutu Geyser, Rotorua. One cutting-raised batch was sold then propagation was discontinued |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Pouawa' | Bill Williams's property, north of Gisborne. The late Rob Bayly of Gisborne was also involved in this introduction |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Shakespear' ¹ | Shakespear Regional Park, Whangaparoa Peninsula. One cutting-raised batch was sold then propagation was discontinued |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Tainui' ¹ | Raglan Harbour, Waikato. Propagated from the tree said to have been used to tie the <i>Tainui</i> waka (one of the great canoes in which Polynesians migrated to New Zealand). Material was not sold commercially |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Tamaki' | Tamaki Drive, Auckland City |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Te Kaha' | seaward side of Te Kaha hotel, Bay of Plenty |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Titirangi' | Margan Ave, near Titirangi Golf Course, Auckland |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Turihau' ¹ | Bill Williams's property, north of Gisborne. One cutting-raised batch was sold then propagation was discontinued |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Vibrance' | Waiomu Bay, Thames coast, Coromandel Peninsula. John Smith-Dodsworth of Coromandel was also involved in this introduction and Terry Hatch of Pukekohe named it |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Waitemata' ¹ | Shakespear Regional Park, Whangaparoa Peninsula. One cutting-raised batch was sold then propagation was discontinued as it was superseded by better cultivars |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'Whakarewarewa' | Whakarewarewa, Rotorua |
| <i>Metrosideros excelsa</i> 'White Caps' | Piha Beach, west of Auckland City. A white-flowered selection discovered Dec 2009. Currently being propagated for commercial release |
| Other <i>Metrosideros</i> species | |
| <i>Metrosideros kermadecensis</i> 'Platt's Form' | Purewa Cemetery, Meadowbank, Auckland |
| <i>Metrosideros robusta</i> 'Rangitoto' ¹ | near the foreshore of Rangitoto Island. Currently under commercial production by Vibrant Earth nursery, Nelson |
| <i>Metrosideros</i> hybrids | |
| <i>Metrosideros</i> × <i>sub-tomentosa</i> 'Hauparapara' (<i>M. excelsa</i> × <i>M. robusta</i>) | Hauparapara River bank, Bay of Plenty |
| <i>Metrosideros</i> × <i>sub-tomentosa</i> 'Mercer Bay' (<i>M. excelsa</i> × <i>M. robusta</i>) ¹ | cutting material was collected 9 March 2011 from a 4 m hybrid growing on the side of a walking track near Mercer Bay, Waitakere Ranges. A new selection currently under evaluation and not commercially released |
| <i>Metrosideros</i> × <i>sub-tomentosa</i> 'Mistral' (<i>M. excelsa</i> × <i>M. robusta</i>) | Whangapoua Road, between Coromandel township and Te Rerenga |
| <i>Metrosideros</i> × <i>sub-tomentosa</i> 'Rangi' (<i>M. excelsa</i> × <i>M. robusta</i>) | Whakarewarewa, Rotorua |
| <i>Metrosideros</i> 'Maungapiko' (<i>M. excelsa</i> × <i>M. umbellata</i>) | junction of Maungapiko Track and the old Whangaparapara – Port Fitzroy Road, Great Barrier Island |
| <i>Metrosideros</i> 'Sentinel Flame' (<i>M. robusta</i> × <i>M. umbellata</i>) | Great Barrier Island or NW Nelson (Whanganui Inlet). The same hybrid, collected from these two localities, was growing at Platt's property for many years. It is not known which original provenance was chosen for commercial release. Currently under commercial production by Vibrant Earth nursery, Nelson |

¹ Not included by Dawson et al.'s (2010) articles on *Metrosideros* or listed in Dawson and Heenan's (2010) checklist of *Metrosideros* cultivars (*New Zealand Garden Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1; Vol. 13, No. 2).

Other native plant introductions

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| <i>Agathis australis</i> (golden form) | Ferndown Track, Waitakere Ranges |
| <i>Coprosma</i> 'Beatson's Brown' | a side-branch sport from a plant of <i>C.</i> 'Beatson's Gold' growing in Auckland Domain. Propagation material was given to Graeme by Robbie Burns, an Auckland City Council Nursery employee |
| <i>Coprosma</i> 'Hawera' | cliffs west of Hawera, Taranaki coast. Putative <i>C. acerosa</i> hybrid |
| <i>Coprosma</i> 'Katie Reynolds' | originated in Katie Reynolds garden, Whangarei |
| <i>Coprosma neglecta</i> 'Maunganui Bluff' | Maunganui Bluff, Northland |
| <i>Coprosma propinqua</i> var. <i>martinii</i> 'Pinnacles' | cliff near Pinnacles, Chatham Islands |
| <i>Coprosma propinqua</i> var. <i>martinii</i> 'Taiko' | Taiko camp, Chatham Islands |
| <i>Coprosma repens</i> 'Gold Splash' | originated in Graeme Platt's former nursery, Albany, as a variegated seedling amongst a batch of normal <i>C. repens</i> seedlings. The first batch of cuttings was sold by Graeme under the name <i>C. repens</i> 'Gold Splash'; thereafter it was commercialised by Lyndale Nurseries as <i>C. repens</i> 'Taupata Gold' |
| <i>Coprosma</i> 'Te Puna' | Jo Dawkins garden, Te Puna, Bay of Plenty. Putative <i>C. acerosa</i> hybrid |
| <i>Coprosma</i> × <i>kirkii</i> 'Goldstream' | Mt Maunganui beach, Tauranga, Bay of Plenty |
| <i>Leptospermum scoparium</i> var. <i>incanum</i> 'Aupouri' | Maunganui area, Aupouri Peninsula, Northland |
| <i>Leptospermum scoparium</i> var. <i>incanum</i> 'Julianne' | Maunganui area, Aupouri Peninsula, Northland |
| <i>Leptospermum scoparium</i> var. <i>incanum</i> 'Sherryl-Lee' | Maunganui area, Aupouri Peninsula, Northland |
| <i>Leptospermum scoparium</i> 'Karekare' | Lone Kauri Road, Karekare, west Auckland |
| <i>Leptospermum scoparium</i> 'Snow Flake' | Oratia Stream, near Glen Eden, Auckland. A single white-flowered selection collected Dec 2010/Jan 2011. Currently under evaluation and not commercially released |
| <i>Pittosporum</i> 'Albany' (<i>P. fairchildii</i> ♀ × <i>crassifolium</i> ♂) | originated in Platt's former nursery, Albany, as a spontaneous cross |
| <i>Pittosporum cornifolium</i> 'Maunganui Bluff' | Maunganui Bluff, Northland. Has a thicker, more compact form than typical mainland New Zealand material in cultivation |
| <i>Pittosporum cornifolium</i> Poor Knights form | selection from the Poor Knights Islands with larger and darker green leaves than the typical mainland New Zealand material |
| <i>Pittosporum ralphii</i> 'Hicks Bay' | Hicks Bay, East Cape |
| <i>Pittosporum tenuifolium</i> 'Jade' | originated in Graeme Platt's former nursery, Albany, amongst a batch of typical <i>P. tenuifolium</i> seedlings. Named after the jade colour of its leaves. Similar cultivar to <i>P. tenuifolium</i> 'Mountain Green' |
| <i>Podocarpus totara</i> 'Albany Gold' | Massey Universities Albany Campus, Auckland |
| <i>Podocarpus totara</i> 'Matapouri Blue' | Matapouri Bay, Northland |
| <i>Prumnopitys taxifolia</i> 'Piopio' | Piopio south of Te Kuiti. Propagated from cuttings of adult material from a male tree |
| <i>Rhopalostylis sapida</i> (Chatham Islands) | Chatham Islands |
| <i>Rhopalostylis sapida</i> 'Maunganui Bluff' | Maunganui Bluff, Northland |
| Deliberate native plant hybrids | |
| <i>Fuchsia procumbens</i> ♀ × <i>F. excorticata</i> 'Purpurea' ♂ | deliberate cross |
| <i>Phormium</i> 'Platt's Black' | derived from selecting the darkest foliated seedling of <i>Phormium</i> 'Black Prince' (a Bert Blumhardt selection, syn. <i>P.</i> 'Black Knight') and repeating this selection process for the next generation of seedlings |
| Exotic plant introductions | |
| <i>Colocasia esculenta</i> 'Kaitia Green Stem' | ancient Polynesian taro cultivar. Name used to distinguish between two forms – this is the uncommon form |
| <i>Colocasia esculenta</i> 'Moehau Red Stem' | ancient Polynesian taro cultivar. Name used to distinguish between two forms – this is the common form |
| <i>Cupressus macrocarpa</i> 'Oteha Valley' | originated in the late 1970s from a taller growing single leader tree among a row of trees at Oteha Valley Road, Albany, Auckland. Cutting-grown material do not have the growth form of the original parent |
| <i>Dracaena draco</i> 'Sky Tower' | propagated from seed collected off a very tall and linear plant growing on Anglican owned property, Saint Stephens Avenue, Parnell, Auckland. Grows true to type from seed (but in the future will probably also be propagated through tissue culture). This selection is very tall and differs from the typical lower growing material commonly available in New Zealand. Currently under commercial production by Scott Base Nurseries, Auckland; see <i>Commercial Horticulture</i> , April/May 2009 |
| <i>Taxodium distichum</i> 'Cascade Falls' | selected from a commercially purchased tray of seedlings of the species. Seedlings were very variable when grown on; this selection grows to about 3 m tall and then develops a cascading growth form. Commercially released in 2000 (and published in <i>Commercial Horticulture</i> at about this time). Now widely grown in several countries and with PVR protection |