

Lawrie Metcalf ‘More than just Hebes’

Melanie Kinsey¹

We had walked through a hushed forest of ancient *Nothofagus*; had eaten our lunch amidst a grove of spooky *Dracophyllum* and now we were suddenly out in the open among stunted alpine hebes and podocarps. It was a dream come true for this New Zealand native plantophile. As I struggled to keep up with the tall bloke striding ahead of me up the track to Mt. Arthur, I marvelled how at 78, Lawrie Metcalf had come to be one of New Zealand’s most renowned plantmen.



Fig. 1 Lawrie standing in front of a *Nothofagus* tree at the beginning of our trek up Mt. Arthur.

Metcalf lives with his wife Lena just out of Nelson city and within sight of Mt. Arthur in the north of the South Island. The move to Nelson (reputedly the sunniest place in New Zealand) occurred only recently after a lifetime spent mostly in Christchurch and Invercargill. At an age when most people have well and truly retired, Metcalf spends his days tending his rambling garden full of mostly New Zealand natives, running a mail order nursery and writing yet another book on some aspect of New Zealand’s unique flora. His latest offering released by Timber Press is “Hebes, A Guide to Species, Hybrids, and Allied Genera”. This follows on from his 2001 “International Register of Hebe Cultivars” and sundry other books specialising in New Zealand’s native flora.

It was in 1928 that Metcalf was born in Christchurch. As a schoolboy, Dr L.W. McCaskill (1900–1985) noted educator and naturalist encouraged him to take an interest in growing native New Zealand plants. Metcalf received his horticultural training in Christchurch and then spent some time working at Duncan and Davies Nursery in New Plymouth. He then left his native shores and spent some time working in

both the Adelaide and Melbourne botanic gardens, before setting sail for the UK. “I wanted to work at Kew Gardens” said Metcalf in an interview late in 2005, “but once I had seen them, I felt that they were not up to the standard of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. So instead I got a job in Sussex at Ingwersens Hardy Plant Nursery where I stayed for about 12 months.” He then went on to work at Hillier Nurseries, arguably one of the most famous nurseries in the UK if not the world. After a short stint there, he went on to be a gardener at Winkfield Place in Berkshire, where Constance Spry and Rosemary Hume were running a Domestic Science School for girls.

It was while he was at Winkfield Place, that a letter came from the Director of Christchurch Botanic Gardens offering him a job as the Assistant Director. He returned to New Zealand in 1955 to take up this position, marrying in 1962 and having three children. Metcalf stayed at Christchurch until 1977 managing a staff of 39, before moving to Invercargill to take up the position of Director of Parks and Recreation with the Invercargill City Council. “It was a job with tremendous scope,” said Metcalf

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“Invercargill is a wealthy city and placed a lot of store on having sufficient parks and reserves.” Here he had a staff of over 100 with a further 100 involved in various training schemes to help the unemployed. Metcalf’s ‘retirement’ in 1992 prompted the move to Nelson and in 1995 he was awarded the prestigious Gold Veitch Memorial Medal for services to horticulture by the Royal Horticultural Society: one of only five or six New Zealanders who have been awarded this international medal.



Fig. 2 The author and Lawrie on Mt. Arthur.

Metcalf started writing in about 1960. His love of tramping led to a thesis on alpine vegetation as part of his horticultural studies (he won the Cockayne Gold Medal for the Best Performance in his year). “I asked Reed [publishers] if they would like to turn the thesis into a book and they said no” explained Metcalf “but then they said ‘what about trees and shrubs instead?’ and I said yes!” His book “The Cultivation of New Zealand Trees and Shrubs” (now published as “New Zealand Trees and Shrubs. A Comprehensive Guide to Cultivation and Identification”) was published

to loud acclaim in 1972. It was widely acknowledged as being the best book on the subject since Dr Leonard Cockayne’s book in the 1920s. It was even one of the eight finalists in the New Zealand Book of the Year Awards and has been reprinted five times including three revisions. This was followed by its companion book “The Cultivation of New Zealand Plants” and then many others including “The Propagation of New Zealand Native Plants”, “The Cultivation of New Zealand Native Grasses” and “Alpine Plants of New Zealand”. He has also written two photographic guides – on ferns and trees – featuring his photos (being a self taught photographer) taken with his trusty Pentax P50 on Fuji Velvia film, some of which he developed himself.



Fig. 3 Stunted alpine vegetation consisting of a hebe at the top, to the left is *Traversia baccharoides*, to the right is *Aciphylla glaucescens* and in the foreground is *Melicytus alpinus*.

As I wandered among the alpine vegetation taking photos of astelias, celmisias and even a ranunculus; Metcalf not only knew the name of everything, but also who it was named after, or for what it was named. He then pointed out the stunning views down towards Tasman Bay and up towards the summit, where in late November there was still some snow to be seen. As the sun was sinking swiftly towards the horizon, we reluctantly made our way back to the carpark with Metcalf not letting up from the cracking pace he had set earlier. There is to be no rest for this softly spoken (and amazingly fit) septuagenarian, with future projects including two more books and an entertaining area to be paved!

Melanie has a Diploma in Horticulture from Burnley College (University of Melbourne). She has worked as a gardener and later supervisor at a variety of educational and municipal institutions. In the early 1990s she went back to study environmental science at Monash University and later began her own horticultural consultancy. Melanie is now a freelance horticultural writer and is a regular contributor to the magazine *Australian Horticulture*. Melanie holds the Registered Hebe Collection at her garden in Victoria, Australia.

