

2015 Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture Awards

Plant Raisers' Award

Kathryn Louise Telford



There is a saying 'from small acorns mighty oak trees grow.' This surely applies to Kate Telford for, from an unlikely beginning in her backyard, she became one of our country's most successful plant breeders. That this was achieved is all the more remarkable because except for a year-long stint at the Botanic Gardens in Dunedin after university, she was without any formal horticultural training.

Perhaps it was in her genes. Kate Telford is one of two daughters of renowned horticulturists Keith and Pat Stuart who first met when they were both employed at the Dunedin Botanic Gardens – Keith often says that Pat was his boss and indeed she

was. The Stuarts led prominent lives in their profession as did Keith's twin brother, Ross, eventually operating a garden centre and growing wonderful cold climate plants in their nursery in Wanaka from which they eventually, but reluctantly, retired. Kate grew up against this gardening background and surely inherited some of her parents love for plants for she was to become highly successful in her field. The genus *Helleborus* became her speciality.

Following marriage to Ken Telford, son of a well known South Otago farming family (whose forebears donated the farm training school of that name near Balclutha), Kate found herself living in Clifton Homestead, a 9000 sq ft, 33 roomed old brick house near Clinton, South Otago. Outdoors was an expansive but unfinished Alfred Buxton garden, surely a daunting prospect for any bride. Ken's great grandfather had built kauri framed glasshouses and his grandfather had a fondness for bedding begonias; these old facilities were still lying around in wait. Meanwhile there was plenty to do besides domestic and farming responsibilities and also, in the course of time, three young children to care for.

But Kate did find time for riding, a leisure activity she enjoyed. One thing led to another and a horse float became high on the list of wants.

Drawing on her resolve she soon showed her grit. Making good use of the old cold frames in the backyard, she commenced her first venture into commercial horticulture in 1988 raising and selling Chatham Island forget-me-nots (*Myosotidium hortensia*) and using the profits to fund her horse float.

About this time Kate's mother had sold her wholesale business and moved to Wanaka. The opportunity arose to propagate plants that Pat Stuart had grown including an outstanding hellebore she had raised and named 'White Magic.' This was a highly successful strain of *Helleborus niger*, sometimes called the Christmas rose, that Pat Stuart had developed, grown and distributed and at one time exported in large numbers. This proved to be the Telford's introduction to an entirely new lifestyle and which eventually led to a full scale nursery operation employing up to six staff. At first perennials were included in the fledgling business but discontinued early on to concentrate on hellebores. And this was when Kate Telford began to wield her special magic.

Learning to manage the nursery which in time was to produce up to 50,000 plants a year, all grown from seed, in three purpose built, climate controlled houses, became a priority; the home-based enterprise include sheep and cattle as well.



Apricot Hybrid hellebore, with single flowers. Photo: Ken Telford.



Double Pink Spotted hellebore. Photo: Ken Telford.



Double Purple hellebore. Photo: Ken Telford.



Double White Picotee, the result of crossing the single White Picotee with a double flowered plant. Photo: Ken Telford.



Double Yellow Spotted hellebore. Photo: Ken Telford.



Pink Anemone Centred hellebore, with petaloid central nectaries, and considered halfway between a single and fully double flower. Photo: Ken Telford.

But hellebores became increasingly important. Ken and Kate Telford's enthusiasm for the production of the winter rose became time consuming where eventually they raised many thousands of hybrids and most of the species, including *Helleborus thibetanus*, a Chinese species discovered in 1869 but introduced into horticulture relatively recently.

Little systematic work breeding hellebores had been done in New Zealand before this time. As these plants are extremely promiscuous and will hybridise with their neighbours resulting in all kinds of flower colours, Kate soon realised that it was no good raising open pollinated plants from seed – perhaps the progeny of wild plants growing under a hedge. With this in mind most of her seed stock originally came from Ashwood Nurseries in England, a well known nursery breeding advanced forms of *Helleborus × hybridus*. Excellent results soon came from this decision and the resulting flowers – plants taking from two to three years to flower with multitudes of variations, proved a spur to an intensive breeding programme.

Kate Telford leaves nothing to chance. A large polythene structure was built to house container grown plants which she selected to cross pollinate; the

doorways were draped with shade cloth to keep out marauding bees and other insects keen on doing what comes naturally and consequently interfering with her work. Assembling the plants on a bench, each flower or truss is carefully hand pollinated and labelled, a step along the way to achieving a 'line' or a plant that may produce 100% true-to-type seedlings. It is demanding and time consuming work but her method of controlled hybridisation has brought spectacular results.

Many new plants resulted from the lines worked from that English seed; singles in purple, pink and greenish yellow have come remarkably true and in surprising variation. And then from a trip to England her parents brought Kate the first double hybrids. These were quarantined in Tapanui by Denis Hughes of Blue Mountain Nurseries and formed the focus of Kate's new breeding programme. The double forms she later produced were largely descended from this British stock and took the New Zealand gardening public by storm. The introduction of pollen from a beautiful white form with many petals named *Helleborus* 'Betty Ranicar', a cultivar that had originated in Tasmania, added a whole new dimension to her breeding programme. *H.* 'Betty Ranicar' and

the English *H.* 'Party Dress Group' were the forerunners of strains of plants with doubled flowers ranging the whole gamut of the colour wheel from white, pink, red, purple, green and even yellow. As shown on the Clifton Homestead Nursery website (www.hellebores.co.nz), most of their selections fall into double and single flowered lines of *Helleborus × hybridus*. The extent of Kate's breeding programme and the quality of her seedlings which subsequently delighted the New Zealand gardening public is a lasting tribute to her pursuit of beautiful plants and to her expertise in raising them.

Kate Telford's work and commitment to hellebores over many years has added much to the wealth of New Zealand gardens and to gardeners' appreciation of this outstanding herbaceous plant. Not only that, Kate is a very humble plants woman, one who has the skills to match the very best when it comes to the propagation of the esteemed winter rose.

This award recognises her contribution to horticulture, a well deserved tribute to her success and to her years of dedication.

Citation prepared by Gordon Collier, MNZM, AHRH