

# Book Reviews

## The Essential Audrey Eagle: Botanical art of New Zealand

By Audrey Eagle with an introduction  
by Patrick Brownsey

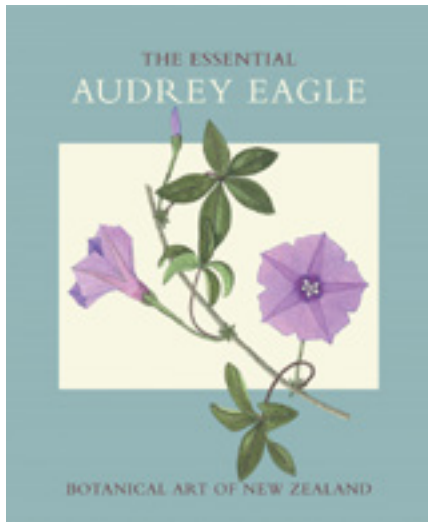
Published by Te Papa Press,  
Wellington, New Zealand, 2013

Soft covered, colour paintings and  
drawings, 232 pages, 260 × 215 mm

ISBN 978-1-877385-90-2

\$NZ49.99

Reviewed by Cathy Jones



This is a beautiful book designed to bring a selection of Eagle's tree and shrub paintings to a wider public than the botanical fraternity who have relished, and will continue to relish, the completeness and detail of her *Complete trees and shrubs of New Zealand* (2006)<sup>1</sup>. As she says in her preface, she recognises "New Zealanders' deep love for their natural world" and is motivated "to make New Zealand plants accessible to as many people as possible."

Her preface describes her involvement with plants which grew from a desire to learn about them for her own education into a goal of illustrating every one of our woody plants and make them available to all New Zealanders. She was able to translate her skill as a paid draughtswoman into accurate as well as beautiful interpretations of the flora. It has been a lifetime's unpaid

work to bring us these illustrations, a huge effort which, in later years, has been recognised with conservation and botanical awards and an honorary doctorate.

Following Eagle's preface, there is an extensive introduction by Patrick Brownsey, Research Fellow at Te Papa, which gives the reader a history of New Zealand plant illustration from Cook's 1769 voyage to Eagle's work in the present. It is long as introductions go but provides a very interesting summary in readable language, with carefully chosen images interspersed with the text. It is certainly an easier way to access information about the various artists and techniques than in some of the weightier tomes on the subject.

After being well introduced we come to the paintings. A collection of Eagle's most beautiful paintings has been chosen. They illustrate a mix of plants that are iconic, stunningly attractive, representative of their families or genera, some of them very common and some less well-known or with limited distributions. She has a gift for mixing just the right colours, capturing the essence of each plant and drawing sufficient botanical detail to hold the viewer's interest. It is possible to open the book at any page and be attracted by the beauty of the images, and then be drawn to turn the page and look further.

The list of plates which opens the final section contains summarised information about each taxon. For this Eagle has used enough information to satisfy the curiosity of her chosen audience, providing scientific name and its meaning, a Māori name or common name where these are known, a brief description of the type of plant it is, and its distribution.

This section also contains endnotes, a bibliography, details of where to find botanical artwork online, and an index. The index includes scientific names, common names, people's names and occasional subject matter. It has page numbers for illustrations usefully bolded.

By keeping the illustrations and printed information in separate sections, it is possible for the book to be enjoyed at different levels. A casual coffee guest may dip into the paintings and enjoy them without the interruption of text, while the final section provides basic information for those seeking more depth.

To me there seem to be only two minor flaws. The first is that Plates 52 and 86 are missing their labels, "*Hoheria glabrata*, houhere, whauwhau, mountain ribbonwood" and "*Schefflera digitata*, pate, sevenfinger" respectively. The other may not be of concern to a casual reader, but did strike me as a botanist: the indication of scale, which is in the other books, is missing here and this could create a false impression of the size of leaves and flowers.

This is a book that provides visual pleasure and tempts people to look further into the wonders of our flora. It is not primarily a book for botanists to use as a resource for identifying plants, although it will help with that in the absence of Eagle's other publications. It is a book that those of us who own the others will nevertheless want to own because of its beauty and our wish to celebrate Eagle's monumental achievements and share her images with all our friends, not just those with a serious botanical bent.

The first definition of "essential" in my dictionary is "of or pertaining to the essence of anything". It is in this sense that Eagle uses the word in her title. Certainly the book succeeds in portraying the spirit or essence of New Zealand's woody flora and communicating it in a way that will be of interest to a wide potential audience.

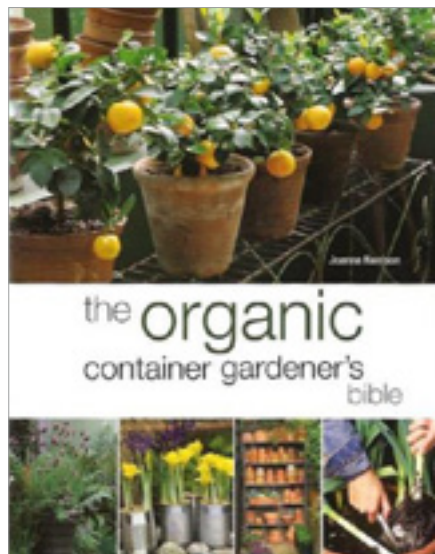
**Available from Touchwood  
Books and Te Papa Press**

<sup>1</sup> Dr Brian Molloy's book launch speech for this comprehensive work was reproduced in the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2006, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 32.

## A selection of book reviews courtesy of the *Weekend Gardener* magazine

### The Organic Container Gardener's Bible

Joanna Harrison  
Published by New Holland  
\$NZ29.99



Garden designer Joanna Harrison develops containers to both make stylish statements and to bring vegetables and herbs to the back door.

The book is designed to give inspirational and practical ideas to enhance the look and feel of your home and garden – all with flexibility to alter design seasonally.

It provides through-the-year recipes for planting combinations.

There is excellent advice on combating pests and diseases yet encouraging beneficial insects and butterflies.

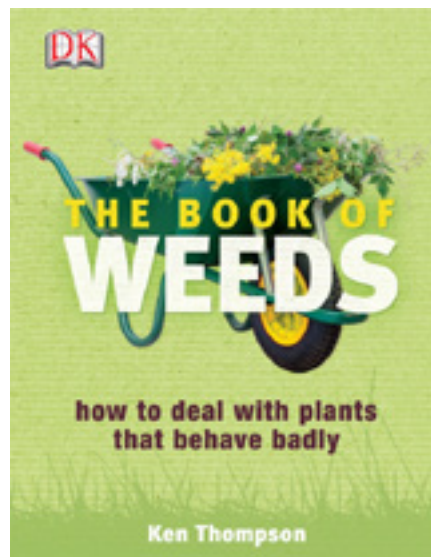
Plus there is a 50-page directory of flowers, shrubs, trees, bulbs, fruit, vegetables and herbs, showing where to plant, how to look after them and companion planting combinations.

Well illustrated, this book, at nearly 200 pages, represents value.

*Weekend Gardener*, Issue 276, 2009, Page 41

### The Book of Weeds How to deal with plants that behave badly

Ken Thompson  
Published by Penguin  
\$NZ45.00  
Reviewed by Alan Esler, an Auckland weed expert



For a good review a book must be well prepared, nicely presented, interesting and readable. Ken Thompson's *The Book of Weeds* is all of these, and more.

Other criteria are – is it relevant to other countries, is it informative, does it malign troublesome plants unfairly?

*The Book of Weeds* covers about 30 species that we also regard as troublesome in possibly the weediest country in the world.

This low proportion is no discredit to the author, a very experienced English ecologist, because it was not intended primarily for us. But it covers many that are quite significant in New Zealand.

The book is informative in giving, in the first part, virtually a compact textbook of gardening practices that hold back weeds – what every gardener should know. This is followed by what Thompson calls the rogue's gallery.

This tells for each species what enables it to succeed, and what to do about it if you are an organic gardener. Other people might give it a squirt or weedkiller or a sprinkle of a plasmolysing salt on damp leaves.

However, there are plants with large underground parts that beat all gardeners. The use of spade, hoe and mulch are well explained.

There is emphasis on avoiding spaces for weeds to occupy.

Thompson is well aware of the good and harm that a lawn mower may do. The average New Zealand lawn is starved and weedy because the mower is set below a 2 cm cut, and clippings discarded where they could be used to revitalised impoverished soil and promote earthworm activity.

No responsible farmer consistently crops his land like that with out any pay-back.

Can an author who writes of some weeds being “unwanted, unappealing” and “infuriatingly successful” have a soft-spot for some of them? He gives redeeming features such as edibility and value for green manuring and compost. The colour shots reveal elegance that is sometimes mentioned.

Those of us who illustrate plants see beauty in the plainest of weeds. An educator, illustrator and botanist writing in praise of weeds in a southern newspaper pleaded: “Don't attack your weeds, look at them closely. Encourage your children to grow them indoors in bottles so they can watch them grow, flower and set seeds. Even a grass flower is beautiful.”

We are close to nature among the uncultivated plants at the back door.

*The Book of Weeds* is not the comprehensive treatise on weeds that the title may suggest but it is a worthy volume for any gardener's shelves. It is a joy to own.

*Weekend Gardener*, Issue 278, 2009, Page 35

#### Book review archive

Our entire archive of book reviews (from the *Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture* 1981, under its various names), together with book reviews from the *Weekend Gardener* magazine (from Issue 86, November 2001) are available on our website at [www.rnzih.org.nz](http://www.rnzih.org.nz).