

# Profile of a horticulturist: An interview with Beverley McConnell, creator of Ayrlies Garden

*Linda Sallabanks and Murray Dawson<sup>1</sup>*



**Fig. 1** Beverley McConnell beside some of her roses at Ayrlies.  
Photo: Alain Le Toquin.

The following article is based on an interview with Beverley M. McConnell (Fig. 1) conducted by Radio New Zealand Nine to Noon's host Kathryn Ryan on 12 October 2012. We thank Radio New Zealand for permission to adapt their content as an edited transcript.

The full and original interview can be heard on the Radio New Zealand website at [www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoonoon/audio/2535356/feature-guest-bev-mcconnell](http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoonoon/audio/2535356/feature-guest-bev-mcconnell).

**Kathryn:** Bev McConnell and her Auckland property, Ayrlies Garden, are well-respected horticultural identities, both in New Zealand and internationally. Each year thousands of people visit the garden, near Whitford in south east Auckland, to enjoy the plants, the wetlands and the woodlands. It's been almost a 50 year labour of love to develop such a huge property

on clay soil that was originally barren of plants into a striking example of landscaping design and beauty (Fig. 2). Ayrlies has been assessed by the New Zealand Gardens Trust as a garden of international significance.



**Fig. 2** Garden plan of Ayrlies reproduced from their visitors' brochure.

As the creator of Ayrlies, Bev McConnell has received many accolades and awards for her gardening prowess. In 2012, at the age of 80, she was recognised by the United Kingdom's Royal Horticultural Society who awarded her the prestigious Veitch Memorial Medal given to "persons of any nationality who have made an outstanding contribution to the advancement of the art, science or practice of horticulture"<sup>2</sup>. This is the only medal they award outside the UK and Bev McConnell is the first New Zealand woman to receive the honour.

In the Queen's Birthday honours in 2010 she was awarded a QSM, the Queen's Service Medal for services to horticulture in New Zealand.

Good morning Bev or Beverley – which do you prefer?

**Bev:** Most people seem to call me Bev. Listening to your accolades I thought, "My goodness, you know, it must be somebody else" so thank you for those kind words.

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<sup>2</sup> Ross Ferguson published congratulations to Beverley for receiving the Veitch Memorial Medal in the *Newsletter of the RNZIH*, June 2012, No. 2, pp. 3–4 and *The Auckland Garden: Newsletter of the Auckland Botanic Gardens and Friends*, June 2012, pp. 8–9, 24.



**Fig. 3** Aerial photograph of the dairy farm before the development of Ayrles Gardens on the property.



**Fig. 4** Historic Norfolk Island pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) as seen from Ayrles Garden. This tree was planted by missionaries in the 19th century. Browns Island and behind that Rangitoto Island are in the background. Photo: Carol Quelch.

**Kathryn:** Our website has a wonderful image gallery of Ayrles that we are grateful for ([www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoon/galleries/ayrlies](http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoon/galleries/ayrlies)), which will give you an idea visually of some of what we will discuss.

Receiving the Royal Horticultural Society's Veitch Medal; is there any greater an honour you could have picked up anywhere in the world?

**Bev:** Well not for me because it's acknowledgement by your peers and that's an important part of my horticultural journey. Many former New Zealand recipients are deceased and there are few other living members with the Veitch Medal<sup>3</sup>.

**Kathryn:** That international recognition from England, where there's that wonderful tradition of garden excellence, highlights the significance of your award.

**Bev:** English garden heritage is marvellous. That's really all we had to go by when we began; English garden books, there was nothing else at that time.

**Kathryn:** England has their national gardens scheme and I love reading about it and how difficult it is to become part of it. As you say, that rich heritage was what guided you in your thinking when you set out.

**Bev:** It was, although in a way we were also cutting new ground. We were developing a garden without too much of the formal English way of doing things. When I first began, my husband literally fenced off three acres (1.2 ha) for me. When we first arrived to a dairy farm in 1964, there was a house there and a driveway that ran straight down the boundary line, so there wasn't a square inch of pasture wasted, and no trees at all (Fig. 3). So we were starting from scratch.

**Kathryn:** At that moment you were standing on such bare land, did you have this garden ultimately in your mind? Did you have anything on this scale in your dreams at that time?

**Bev:** No, just the first three acres that was fenced off. I did feel that whatever I developed should

not interfere with the land too much. I wanted the land to dictate to me and there was a certain amount of history which I wanted to incorporate. There was a huge old Norfolk Island pine planted down on the flat land where the missionaries had rowed across from Howick (Fig. 4). There was another one right out on Motutapu Island which provided a beacon to guide ships. So I felt the least I could do was to repeat the Norfolk theme at the lower end of the garden.

**Kathryn:** Has those first three acres you had in mind been the key in some ways? You don't try and look too far ahead or over-plan; you're almost guided by the garden?

**Bev:** Yes, but you can't begin without vision and I did have a dream. I had all the plants ordered and ready to bring out when we moved in. Realising the dream is tempered by circumstance so of course it's going to change. In the beginning I had three criteria, one was to have the dream and the second one was not to be scared of the hard work and determination needed to effect part of that dream. And the third criterion was to have a husband who supported me but didn't interfere too much, and he was marvellous really.

After all, gardens wherever they are eat money. As any gardener will know they don't make money – they just eat it. But my husband wrote the cheques from 1964, during an agricultural era when farming men who belonged to the women that came to Ayrles in garden groups (marvellous people) weren't very supportive of their wives when they wanted to move a fence out. Their husbands would say "What do you want to do that for?" My husband wasn't exactly a farmer, he was an engineer and his replies were always "Why not? Let's have a look at it." So I was lucky.

**Kathryn:** Your husband, Malcolm McConnell, was a very successful businessman of course with McConnell Dowell<sup>4</sup>. I remember reading of him making the joke about what an art collection

<sup>3</sup> Lawrie Metcalf (1991), Alan Jellyman (2003) and Keith Hammett (2013) are current New Zealand recipients of the Veitch Memorial Medal.

<sup>4</sup> An engineering and construction company founded by Malcolm McConnell and his partner Jim Dowell in 1961.



you could have if the gardening money had gone elsewhere.

**Bev:** He acknowledged the expense but also said he wouldn't have had it any differently.

**Kathryn:** We should say also at the time the garden gets under way you were a mother of five and a busy homemaker. Again, to some extent in that era, grandiose dreams on the side weren't as common, and certainly not often realised.

**Bev:** I'm not sure that many women would have been allowed to have those sorts of dreams or, if they did have them, they mightn't have been encouraged. I asked one of my children recently whether she felt she'd been neglected because of my garden passion. But she assured me that – even though dinner got very close to breakfast sometimes – that they were just fine and it allowed them to be independent. Because my husband was away a lot, he was sensible enough to know that I needed something of my own that I could do to fulfil a dream. That meant when we came together again we had lots to discuss and that was good.

**Kathryn:** Where did your love of gardening come from? I remember reading in your book<sup>5</sup> your father giving you a wonderful saying or statement.

**Bev:** We had a wonderful upbringing in Wairoa in Hawkes Bay where my father (Basil Jardine) was the town doctor. Our house was always full of people and we had a large garden. My father loved his garden and my mother was good with plants too, with irises and all sorts of other plantings, so we were brought up with a garden. Although there was hard work, there was lots of fun and laughter. We were also brought up around a piano where we had marvellous parties. Nearly every morning, before we went to primary school, we had breakfast on the lovely veranda of our old villa. My father, who would have been outside since about five o'clock, would say, "Come and have a look at 'Général Gallieni' this morning, he is looking resplendent." So he'd drag me off down the garden to admire the rose of the morning, it was the perfume, or the look, or whatever. So somehow, through osmosis or something like that, the enthusiasm does rub off.

**Kathryn:** So you moved to this bare land in the sixties and development of Ayrilies gathers pace in the 1970s with others who came to contribute. How did the development of the garden unfold in those early years?

**Bev:** We travelled to England in 1974 where we advertised both for men to work at McConnell Dowell and for a gardener because Malcolm thought I could do with some help. Also, when we visited some English gardens he saw water features and became very thoughtful. I said, "What's bugging you?" and he replied "No reason why you can't have water in the garden." So we brought home this marvellous hard-landscaper called Oliver Briers (Fig. 5) and his family. Oliver just adored building things and

he built them well, and he had a natural eye for good lines too. Soon after we returned to Ayrilies there was a bulldozer in the garden damming the valleys and we had water in abundance. We had three large ponds, and although I would have liked more time to have thought about them, you don't look a gift horse in the mouth, do you?



**Fig. 5** Oliver Briers building a waterfall.

**Kathryn:** Was the bulldozer one of the benefits of your husband's business?

**Bev:** Absolutely.

**Kathryn:** In your book, you mentioned that some of the biggest challenges for gardeners are water and lawns. By water, do you mean waterways?

**Bev:** I think any water feature takes a lot of care – where you've got water, you've got problems. Lawns too, but I think out of the two, water will give you the most pleasure. Water adds another dimension to the garden and always draws people to it. It doesn't matter if there is a little or a lot, if it's calm and reflective, or bubbling over rocks with the added charm of sound (Fig. 6).

**Kathryn:** So the bulldozer came in and created these features. Was this on the first three acres?

**Bev:** With the addition of the ponds the garden area suddenly expanded to about 10 acres (4 ha) in 1978. This kept Oliver and I very hard at work.

**Kathryn:** Has the garden expanded since then?

**Bev:** Yes, a bit more as we developed another paddock as a garden. I was dying to get that paddock for a long time.

It was a bit like the wetlands which was a later development. I remember taking my husband to that swampy ground whenever it flooded and showing him how marvellous it would look as a lake, because it was real Capability Brown stuff. You could have wonderful trees such as kahikateas as a backdrop with flaxes and other wetland plants around the edges. I had a clear vision for this area, but it wasn't until much later that we created the wetlands.

**Kathryn:** How were you developing these gardens? Your book mentions three disciplines required to create a good garden – what are they, and how were they revealing in the work you were doing?

<sup>5</sup> *Ayrilies: My story, my garden* (2012) is reviewed on p. 34.



**Fig. 6** The finished and planted waterfall from Fig. 5.  
Photo: Nic Barlow.

**Bev:** Yes, there are disciplines. Oliver has a very good eye and built wonderful paths, steps, pergolas and waterways; all of that structure is needed in a garden. Plants need containing to allow them to be exuberant and I became the plantswoman using his structures to complement the plants, so we dreamed that dream together. And as I said before, the land really dictated the shape of the garden. If we put a path in, it probably followed a similar line to where an old ewe would have led her lambs around and so it was always in keeping with the land.

**Kathryn:** Landscape is one of those disciplines, and then the science of plants in their natural habitat is the second. The third discipline, the art of composition or plant association, is your particular passion, isn't it?

**Bev:** It certainly is. I love colour, I love plants, and the more you learn about them, the more you find there is to know. I used to go out at dusk because that's when you see the form of your garden and you're not distracted by colour at all. Colour is very distracting so you need to go out at that time of night when there is just the form and shapes of the shrubs, trees, and structures to be seen. That's when you see if your proportions stack up, whether they're going to be easy on the eye and artistic. Ayrliès is an informal country garden where the most important thing to me was harmony. I allowed



**Fig. 7** Valleys of *Liquidambar* and *Taxodium* stretch north as fingers connecting the garden to the wetlands. Photo: Chris Lewis.



**Fig. 8** Early years of the wetlands before the boardwalks were built. Photo: Chris Lewis.

each area to have its own emphasis but not to detract from the harmony of the whole. It needed to flow, to keep the vistas open to the view lines. It's all of those sorts of things as well as the knowledge of plants.

**Kathryn:** It's almost as if Ayrliès is in your mind day and night. As you said, you were busy raising five children, running a home, but is the garden ever-present like another character in the family?

**Bev:** I'm sure that I am like a lot of other gardeners, who wake up at 2 am to write ideas down or have inspiration while under a shower. I didn't confine myself solely to bringing up the children, looking after a husband, and having food on the table in an era when that seemed the only expectation of a married life. That is a difficult enough job but with all my garden ideas I found that I was ambitious. However, I wouldn't let myself admit that until after my husband had died.

I returned to England early in the 1980s when my daughter was doing an archaeological dig at Beachy Head. I hired a Mini car and drove around thinking, you know, there's no reason why we can't have gardens as good as these English estates in New Zealand. I would drive to Wakehurst Place, which is Kew's alternate garden in the south of England, a truly lovely garden. It was bitterly cold, it was Easter, and with my pencil and notebook in hand I paced





**Fig. 9** The team from Auckland Botanic Gardens on an annual outing to plant the wetlands, June 2011. Photo: Jack Hobbs.



**Fig. 10** Scylla and Charybdis, two resident swans enjoying their wetland habitat. Photo: Jack Hobbs.

out all the areas of plants, their composition and juxtaposition, how they related, and the plants used, knowing I would have to find substitutes in my climate. I became so numb with cold I'd jump into the car and go to the nearest pub to warm my hands over the fire with all of those British eyes staring at me. So I had to explain what I was doing and then they were really good about it, before travelling on to another garden.

**Kathryn:** We're starting to hear not just about the physical labour but about the cerebral effort that goes into garden development. One hundred acres of land, a lot in trees and some grazing; the twelve acres (4.9 ha) in garden and then around the early 1980s the woodland. Have you planted a lot of trees in a woodland area?

**Bev:** Yes we did. There were forestry grants available then that enabled me to buy in about 15,000 saplings. We planted three fingers of trees that would colour in autumn down the north-facing valleys (Fig. 7). I did a lot of research before choosing liquidambars as the right tree to provide the desired effect. And they have; they've been just wonderful. And I had the right young man, David Johnstone, to do the plantings. David was about 18 or 19 then and that young man is now 50 and still with us. He actually dug the whole of the wetlands out and that area has been his baby since. David owns a couple of diggers and he organised a few more to create the wetland (Fig. 8). I've been very fortunate to have both Oliver and David still working at Ayrlires.

**Kathryn:** The wetlands project; finally you indulge in this great dream you've been carrying all these decades which is a very personal part of the whole enterprise for you. Starting this difficult project after suddenly losing your beloved husband in an accident would have been very hard. Someone else might have just said, "Oh I just want to walk away from all this now," but that was absolutely not your response. The wetlands became your great tribute to your husband and your marriage.

**Bev:** Yes, you're right, and the children too took up the challenge and were responsible for encouraging me to get on and do this. There were five years between the time he died and

when we began the wetlands in the millennium year. We were going to put a lake there, and my husband Malcolm had gone down with Oliver to measure the water flows. They'd done all the right things, and then he died. By the time the millennium came the terms 'conservation' and 'wetlands' had become household words so David McConnell and my other children said to me, "There's no reason why we can't do something better than he'd ever have imagined to commemorate him." Because we live in a place with lots of lifestyle blocks around, we needed to have the area part beautification and part wetlands.

The wetlands part is really important because Auckland had lost a lot of its wetlands for wading birds. We were really about restoring a habitat for the waders, and it's been just delightful to achieve this. With the help of the Auckland Botanic Gardens and my friend Jack Hobbs, who would bring a team out every year, we'd plant 3,000 *Carex* sedges, or kahikatea, or flaxes on one day a year (Fig. 9). We are continually adding to the planting and making safe nesting habitats for the swan and the little dabchicks and baby scaup, it's just a joy (Fig. 10).

**Kathryn:** What is clear throughout your book is, despite the personal involvement, solitude, contemplation and inward looking aspects of the gardener, their family and those around them are completely intertwined over the decades and life-spans in which something like this builds.

**Bev:** There have been people visiting the garden since we planted those first 500 trees during the first year. You're right, and I still have visitors nearly every day, except during the wettest part of the winter. Sunday is the only day I say, "That's my day," but I think that a garden needs to be shared to live. Now that might seem an unusual statement but plants love being admired and I think they really benefit from the people who walk round and say, "Oh you are so beautiful." I have hosted these marvellous garden groups and they're all around the country, and when they come I learn so much, that was especially true in the early days. When you share a passion for plants you know you're

not boring each other, so you can talk to your heart's content about them and enjoy it.

Today in this technical age I've grown even more aware of the importance of the garden. It's all computers and cellphones with people demanding immediate answers. More and more I think we need green spaces in our lives, places of restoration. I'd say restoration for the soul because I believe that's true; what I see happening in the garden are smiles returning to people's faces.

**Kathryn:** There's no instant response from a plant, it will do what it wants in its own time, regardless of what you're googling.

**Bev:** Some of them can be thugs; we deal with those you know.

**Kathryn:** You've had some dreams where nature defeated you and the plants just wouldn't deliver what you wanted?

**Bev:** That's always on the cards. I took the challenge up from the great English gardener, Vita Sackville-West from Sissinghurst. Years ago her challenge was to have some area or plant at its best every week of the year and that's really quite difficult to achieve.

You're always going to get the odd thug. Some plants will get out of hand and others will die; for some the moment of perfection is short-lived. You think you've got it just right and then the next year comes around and it's all gone to custard again.

So there's always a mass of restoration and refurbishment that goes on in gardens. Sometimes people want to keep developing and they go further and further out, when really they should be coming back in and looking at what they began with and re-doing that, refurbishing it, making it live again. Although perhaps I shouldn't say this, I think men are particularly bad at that.

Sir Peter Smithers, UK international politician and garden visitor once said something that meant a lot to me. He said "the most important part of the gardener's body is not the muscles or even the brain though he needs both in reasonable working order. It is the eyes which make or break a gardener."

I believe you have got to observe every plant and area; you've got to look up and down, sideways, and look every day. That will tell you more than any other thing what needs to be done.

**Kathryn:** Having created the gardens at Ayrilies, you've been thinking a great deal lately about its future, and I think you've even approached your children about this. What do you see as its long-term future, having built it into the beautiful and internationally recognised garden that it is now?

**Bev:** Gardens are never finished of course, they're only abandoned, and I think that happens too often. But I've got these marvellous children who I wrote to separately. I wrote to them because there's always a danger in burdening your own children with your dreams – and I was so fortunate to be able to pursue my dream. They individually replied saying how much the gardens mean to them. It wasn't the money, it was their total heritage. All things being equal, they would love it to continue so we're going to strive towards that.

**Kathryn:** Many people will be very glad to hear that. At the back of your book you've listed 22 treasured plants, but there's one other plant we should mention because it may illustrate that idea of people and plants being linked. Going back to your dad, who began your whole love of gardening, I think there is a rose of his that you have transplanted?

**Bev:** You're absolutely right, and it is the rose I talked about, *Rosa* 'Général Galliéni' (Fig. 11). My father loved that rose, which was growing beside the path where I left for school, and I used to take its flowers for my teacher. My father would have planted it in our garden in Wairoa about 1928. It's lovely to feel I've grown from a cutting that same rose at Ayrilies where I have lived for the past 50 years. Gardens are made up of people; you'll hear that wherever you go, and plants have come from people, which is a lovely part of gardening.



**Fig. 11** *Rosa* 'Général Galliéni' growing at Ayrilies. Photo: Jack Hobbs.

**Beverley McConnell was made an Associate of Honour (AHRIH) of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture in 1998. From 2010 she has been the RNZIH Vice-Patron. Beverley has been involved in the RNZIH New Zealand Gardens Trust since its beginnings – Ayrilies is a founding garden and Bev was one of the first assessors and trustees.**

**Bev McConnell's self-published book, *Ayrilies*, is available from her garden website [www.ayrilies.co.nz](http://www.ayrilies.co.nz)**



# Some plants of Ayrilies Garden



*Hemerocallis* 'Flaming Nora' has impressive bright orange-red flowers on tall spikes and flowers for many months of the year.  
Photo: Jack Hobbs.



*Passiflora quadrangularis*, the giant granadilla, produces the largest fruit in its genus. Photo: Jack Hobbs.



*Alcantarea imperialis*, the most regal and one of the largest of this genus of bromeliads.  
Photo: Jack Hobbs.



*Ranunculus cortusifolius*, the giant buttercup or Canary buttercup, has bright yellow flowers and is one of the largest and most impressive buttercup species. Photo: Jack Hobbs.



*Astilbe*, a long flowering perennial with showy flowers. Photo: Jack Hobbs.



*Cyathea brownii*, Norfolk tree ferns, in keeping with a Norfolk Island theme. Photo: Jack Hobbs.



*Gunnera manicata*, giant rhubarb, is an iconic lakeside plant. Photo: Jack Hobbs.