

2003 RNZIH Awards

Award of Associate of Honour of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture (AHRIH)

Awarded to persons who have rendered distinguished service to horticulture in New Zealand. Two AHRIH awards were made in 2003.

Rene Orchiston

It is difficult to believe this lady who looks after her own house, paints in her spare time and drives her own car without spectacles is an octogenarian. But Rene Orchiston still has a razor sharp mind and an amazing recall of the events which shaped her life. Though she doesn't bother much with the garden any more - she says her house was built on the site of an old brewery and that where it's not bottles, it's couch grass - she was almost single-handedly responsible for one of this country's most significant efforts of conservation.

Rene's story has been told before. It will be told again wherever the traditional Maori craft of weaving with harakeke, New Zealand flax, is practiced. It was she who was largely responsible for the collection and preservation of the many varieties of old traditional flax Maori have used since ancient times. "I always liked watching elderly Maori people weaving, but in those early times, over 40 years ago, not many were using superior flax. I was sad as I knew there were better kinds to be had". She also noted a general lack of interest by the young in their culture, and the flax plants that had been treasured and cultivated over the centuries were in danger from neglect.

So Rene looked for flax everywhere she and her husband Ralph went in their travels around the North Island.

The East Coast provided many of her interesting finds. "I went up the coast to Te Puia and went around the different marae to see what different flax they had. They often didn't have more than three varieties and not many of the younger girls seemed interested. I liked to speak to the older ladies and tell them I was fascinated by the flax varieties and what they were used for", Rene remembers. "There was an old lady with a moko and I used to talk flax with her. 'Would you like me to give you one in exchange'?" Rene had flax plants, fruit and honey in the boot of her car, which she always offered in exchange for the desired flax she was given, and only took one plant at a time.

During these trips around the country, Rene carefully recorded everything the Maori told her: the Maori name of the plant, its source, its description and most importantly, its uses. (Later these records became part of a fascinating and valuable, descriptive catalogue of the entire collection.) On one of these trips she went to Te Kuiti to visit the famous Maori weaver Diggeress Te Kanawa and her mother. "We have been good friends ever since and we have these two talented ladies to thank for imparting their valuable knowledge of the old crafts", Rene says.

Over the years she collected, one at a time, over 60 varieties of the best harakeke (*Phormium tenax*) and some mountain flax or wharariki, (*P. cookianum*), and planted them up in a plantation in the garden of her former home on the outskirts of Gisborne. Here, thriving in close proximity to one another, the different characteristics of each variety could be appreciated. Over the years many

visitors came to see her Pa Harakeke (flax plantation), none more valued than Diggeress Te Kanawa, who called the collection a taonga or treasure.

Rene Orchiston had the foresight to gather up this storehouse of genetic material and save it from extinction. Many varieties have already been lost from their original sites. She also had the foresight to realize that there would one day be a resurgence of interest in traditional Maori crafts and the uses of flax. She also realised that her collection was vulnerable. Over the years she freely distributed plants to various marae and schools around Gisborne and further afield. In 1987 she offered the entire collection to the Government and it is now cared for by its agency Landcare Research. "I thought these people are the ones to have them - they are responsible", Rene reflects, "I felt happy knowing they could scatter them around New Zealand".

Today, Rene Orchiston's harakeke - "her personal friends" - are growing on Landcare Research sites at Havelock North and Lincoln as the National Flax Collection, and on Department of Conservation land in other places. From here plants are available for research and as a resource for weavers. Rene says, "It took a pakeha to do it as the old Maori didn't exchange between marae". But for all that, she is a modest person saying she knows about flax what she knows, but there is any amount she doesn't know.

Rene Orchiston has made a major contribution to New Zealand horticulture and is a worthy Associate of Honour of this Institute.

Mike Oates

English born, Michael Robert Oates graduated from Reading University in Horticultural Science in 1976. Mike came to New Zealand the following year, and for just on two years (1977 and 1978) worked for Duncan and Davies Nurseries in New Plymouth. The following year, Mike was briefly attached to the Research Department at Lincoln University. He returned to England in 1980, working for a time at the Elm Ridge Garden Centre in Darlington, and then three months at the Floral Auction at Aalsmir in Holland.

On his return to New Zealand at the end of 1981, and now with his broad experience, Mike was appointed Tutor in Horticulture at The Open Polytechnic in Wellington (initially The Technical Correspondence Institute). From 1984 to 1991 Mike was Supervising Tutor in Horticulture at this Institute.

Mike's background in horticultural education led to his appointment in 1991 as Curator at the Wellington Botanic Garden, based at the recently built educational centre in the garden. He held this position, and with increasing responsibilities, until the year 2000. During this time, Mike assumed the curatorship of all four Wellington Botanic Gardens, as well as other open spaces under the jurisdiction of the Wellington City Council. He put in place information resulting from the publication of the history of the Wellington Botanic Garden in 1988, and established a collection policy for plants in the Botanic Gardens. When Mike left the Gardens, information was on a computer database, a big jump forward for understanding and programming the future of the gardens.

Mike is a member of the RNZIH, and from 1990 to 1996 was its National Chairman. A new, attractive format for the RNZIH Journal was introduced in 1995 with Mike as Editor, a position he successfully managed for three years. As Chairman of the Wellington Branch of RNZIH, Mike hosted a very successful native flora seminar at the time of the Institute's annual meeting in Wellington in October 1999. Mike's current position with the Wellington City Council is as Manager of Natural and Botanic Garden areas.

Mike Oates is recommended for the award of Associate of Honour of the RNZIH, not only for his contribution to the Institute, but for his contribution to New Zealand horticulture in many and varied educational fields.

Award of a Fellowship of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture (FRIH)

Awarded to members who have made a significant contribution to horticulture and the Institute. One award was made in 2003.

Jayson Kelly

Jayson started his career as an apprentice with the Dunedin City Council in 1986, and completed in 1989. He then spent two years at the Royal Horticultural Society, Wisley, completing a Horticultural Diploma (plus a host of other study awards) before returning to Dunedin and the Botanic Garden where he resumed employment as the Curator of the Rock Garden and Alpine Plant Collection in 1991. In 1993 he was successful in applying for the position of Parks Officer, and after three years he was promoted to Contracts

Officer for Parks. Then in 2000 he became the Team Leader for Parks and Reserves in the Community and Recreation Services Department.

He has been on expeditions to the west coast USA and the Nepalese Himalayas, studying plants and collecting seeds. He maintains an active interest in the development of training opportunities and the promotion of our industry. Jayson joined the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture in 1987. He received the RNZIH Cockayne Medal at the Annual Conference in Christchurch in 1995. He was co-opted to the National Executive at the end of 1999.

In 1998 he embarked on developing a garden registration scheme for New Zealand. He was encouraged and

supported with the proposal by his colleague Mick Reece, Community and Recreation Services Manager of the Dunedin City Council. Jayson has demonstrated an ability to persevere and succeed in spite of considerable odds. Through his enthusiasm he has gathered around him an array of famous New Zealand gardeners and garden owners. Jayson is the current Chairman of the New Zealand Garden Trust, which had its inaugural meeting in Auckland in April 2003.

Jayson is a worthy recipient of the award of Fellow of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture.