

The discovery of native plants for New Zealand gardens: Exploring historic nursery catalogues

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I have been interested in the history of domestic gardening for many years and commensurate with that interest I have collected old gardening books and also, with enthusiasm, accumulated as many old garden nursery catalogues as I have been able to find. These latter are not common because of their ephemeral nature; they soon passed out of date and were invariably quickly discarded. My collection is now reasonably substantial and whilst I am still keen to add to it, I am also interested in studying what these books and catalogues might reveal about the social history of gardening.

Using my collection as original source material I wanted to discover what can be learned about the availability and use of New Zealand native plants, especially alpine plants, in settler garden culture and practice since 1840, the beginnings of formal European settlement in New Zealand. I wish at the outset to make a clear distinction between the culture and interests of New Zealand botanists and scientists on the one hand, and the culture and interests of New Zealand domestic gardeners on the other. The former were part of the Imperial system of knowledge gathering, plant collecting, describing and naming, centred on Joseph Hooker at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. This system was also, to some extent, manifest in the establishment of botanic gardens in the main New Zealand centres. For the scientists, New Zealand plants were the interest. The history of this is reasonably well known and there is an extensive literature to support it.

An examination of New Zealand gardening literature reveals a very different set of interests and priorities to those of the scientists and amateur botanists. One of the most striking conclusions that can be drawn is that native plants were of little or no concern to most gardeners until after the First World War. The evidence for this is in the literature. The oldest New Zealand gardening book in my collection, *Hay's Annual Garden Book* of 1876 (Fig. 1), makes no mention of native flora. In 1885 a more substantial work appeared. This, the first purported *Handbook of Gardening for New Zealand* (Fig. 2), was published in Christchurch and written by Michael Murphy, secretary of the Canterbury Agricultural and Pastoral Association. It was popular and ran to four editions, the last in 1907. The first edition makes no mention of New Zealand native plants at all and subsequent revised editions contain only 3 or 4 pages about them.

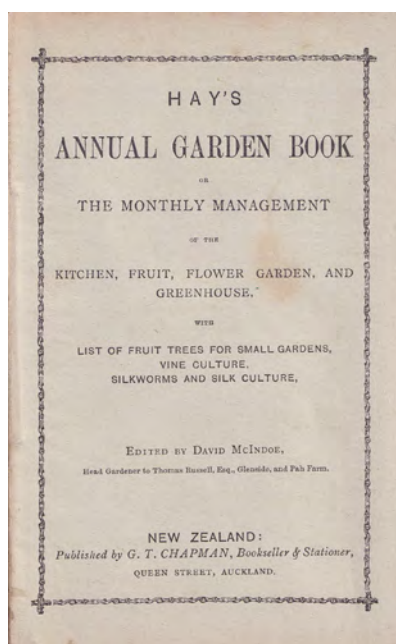


Fig. 1 Hay's Annual Garden Book. 1876.

Nursery catalogue collections and resources

There are several New Zealand nursery catalogue collections held by institutions in this country.

The National Library of New Zealand / Alexander Turnbull Library (Wellington) and Hocken Collections (Dunedin) hold modest selections of nursery catalogues.

An extensive collection of Duncan and Davies nursery catalogues are held by the Puke Ariki library at New Plymouth. This collection has a local focus as Duncan and Davies was also based in New Plymouth, and nationally the most significant nursery of its era. Most Duncan and Davies nursery catalogues are digitised and available online on the RNZIH website at www.rnzih.org.nz/pages/nurserycatalogues.html.

The most comprehensive nursery catalogue collection in New Zealand was initiated by the former DSIR Crop & Food Research library at Mt Albert, Auckland. A major contributor to this collection is Dr Keith Hammett. In 2014 these holdings were relocated to the Lincoln University library, and combined with their existing collection which was originally assembled by the late Charlie Challenger.

Catalogues that were held by Wellington Botanic Garden will soon be added to the Lincoln University holdings. Other botanic gardens such as Auckland, Christchurch, and Dunedin – and Eastwoodhill Arboretum – hold nursery catalogues.

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Fig. 2 Handbook of Gardening for New Zealand. 2nd edition, 1888.

The very well-known *Yates Garden Guide*, first published in 1895, with many more subsequent editions (Fig. 3), made no mention of native plants during the period of my consideration – from post European colonisation to pre Second World War. Neither did the popular Christchurch *Sun Gardening Book* of 1915 (Fig. 4). The weighty *Manual of Gardening in New Zealand* of 1914 (Fig. 5) has, somewhat surprisingly, virtually no New Zealand plant content. The author, David Tannock was director of the Dunedin Botanic Garden and stated that his intention with publishing was to replace Murphy's dated handbook with his own. Only with the 1923 publication of Leonard Cockayne's *Cultivation of New Zealand Plants* (Fig. 6) was there finally a popular gardening book concerned with the New Zealand flora.

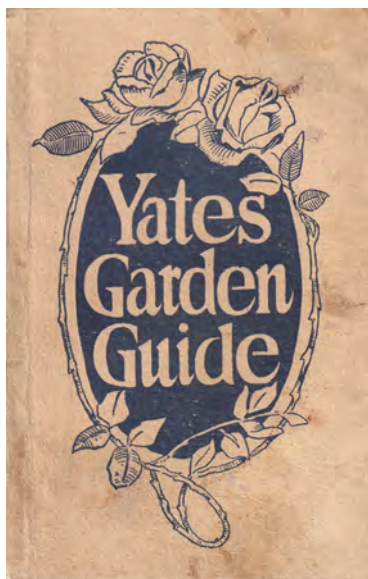


Fig. 3 Yates Garden Guide. 1918.



Fig. 4 The Sun Gardening Book. 1915.



Fig. 5 Manual of Gardening in New Zealand. 1914.



Fig. 6 The Cultivation of New Zealand Plants. 1923.

A careful study of the domestic nursery catalogues in my collection reveals a similar picture. Whilst I have no material earlier than 1892, it is clear that New Zealand flowering plants, including alpinas, were largely unknown and of little interest to the garden trade before about 1920. The occasional exception exists (as can be seen in the references) but the pattern is clear. Apart from ferns, a Victorian obsession and eagerly sought by collectors both locally and worldwide, New Zealand native plants formed little or no part of the domestic garden trade. This was presumably because of no real demand.

It might be said that native plants could simply be taken from the bush but this seems an unlikely explanation, especially when one considers that the majority of gardeners resided in urban areas cleared of bush or tussock. Native alpine plants were especially inaccessible. However, there is some evidence of amateur botanists collecting for garden use; Cockayne suggests this in his *New Zealand Plants and their Story* of 1910 (Fig. 7). In the early years of the 20th century a market for native specimen trees showed signs of developing and I would suggest that the larger Edwardian estate gardens then being developed in New Zealand by the wealthy were the source of demand.



Fig. 7 New Zealand Plants and their Story. 1910.

How are we to account for the New Zealand garden culture that this evidence reveals? I think that it was largely a question of gardening fashion. New Zealand domestic gardening preoccupations very much followed those of the 'mother

country.’ During the early period it was about essential vegetable and fruit production, but settlers also brought their established flower gardening preferences with them. Such preferences were continually reinforced by newspaper reports and gardening literature from ‘home.’ The predominant Victorian style of popular gardening, bedding, relied on mass planting of half-hardy annuals for floral effect. It was not the origin or rarity of flowers that counted but their colour and low growing habit. New Zealand native plants did not naturally lend themselves to bedding.

Nearly all of the popular garden writers of the Victorian era espoused the bedding style. It comprised plantings of mostly annual plants with flowers of white or pure colours in geometrical layouts of beds, separated by paths and grouped around a feature. The beds were mostly the same kind of plant in rows or blocks. The beds might also be asymmetrical and laid out on grassy lawns. Many hybrid flowers of brilliant colour and compact form were developed by the nursery trade specifically for bedding. They soon became garden favourites, and some of these selections can still be found today. The most popular were; alyssum, antirrhinum, calceolaria, cineraria, dahlias, geraniums and pelargoniums, lobelia, pansies and violas, petunias, phlox, and also verbena. These are the plants offered in the catalogues. The bedding style was the fashion and could be practiced even in the most humble garden. It was both a public and private gardening style and is still with us to some extent.

As the 19th century drew to a close something of a revolt against the high Victorian formality and botanical blandness of bedding set in, and a more naturalistic style began to emerge. The ‘Arts and Crafts’ garden drew inspiration from supposed historical garden styles of the medieval and Elizabethan periods and included more architectural elements than the bedding style. However, the range of available garden plants was much greater than ever before and comprised introductions from all over the temperate regions of the world. These gardens, full of ornamental trees, choice flowering plants and shrubs emphasised the now much loved herbaceous border. With their massed arrangement of hardy perennial plants for both sculptural

and colour effects, such borders were planted in even the most humble cottage garden. Some New Zealand native plants, such as flax (*Phormium* spp.), were suited to the new style, and began to find their way into suburban villa gardens here and overseas, but once again, introduced herbaceous plants were dominant, and the nursery trade supplied them.

However, what I think is most apparent from study of my New Zealand nursery catalogue collection is the huge impact of the next garden style to develop; the rock garden. The popularity of this style was almost entirely due to the garden writing of Reginald Farrer. It was also, I believe, the primary reason for the ‘discovery’ of native plants by the nursery trade. Farrer wrote his seminal and hugely popular book *My Rock Garden* in 1907 and then *The Rock Garden* in 1912. These were followed by the monumental, two volume *The English Rock Garden* written in 1914 but not published until after the war, in 1918. These books changed garden fashion completely.

Rock gardens were not new and had been a part of garden culture for a considerable time; their ancestry can be traced right back to the Renaissance grotto. The first book on alpine plants was published as early as 1845 and by 1867 there was a rock garden established at Kew. However the Victorian emphasis was really on the rocks. Romantic miniature alpine landscapes were built by those with means, in which the plants mostly died for want of their needs. What Farrer did was to put the emphasis firmly on the plants and their successful cultivation. Cockayne makes mention of this new trend in his 1910 *New Zealand Plants and their Story*. The Dunedin Botanic Garden began work on a rock garden in 1906 and the Christchurch Botanic Garden constructed its first rock garden in 1917.

Writing in 1912 Farrer stated; “but now the truth has dawned, and its full daylight is approaching: for much less cost of time and money, you can have a much more brilliant show than even Pelargoniums can give; and of plants whose personality has more interest and charm than any bedding Annual. Nothing, in fact, could possibly fill the small garden plot with perennial delight, so adequately, cheaply and appropriately as a constellation of rock plants.”

He carefully described the kind of soil in which alpine plants could thrive and stated unequivocally that most alpine plants are “easy, hearty and robust in cultivation.” At once the rage for rock gardening in suburban gardens set in. Its development was held back to some degree by the 1914–18 war, but post war the take-up of this type of gardening was dramatic. Inevitably it led to huge new demands on the garden trade to supply the plants. Earlier the market had been for European alpine plants but now the alpine regions of the whole world were looked to.

For the first time there was genuine and sustained demand for New Zealand plants, other than ferns, by gardeners here and overseas. The popular gardening world ‘discovered’ the Southern Alps, as well as mountain regions of Europe, Central Asia, China, Burma, Canada, the USA and anywhere else where alpine plants could be found. The local garden trade responded. In 1918 New Plymouth nurserymen, Duncan and Davies Ltd., published a wholesale catalogue (Fig. 8). In it they stated; “this catalogue of New Zealand Native Plants for sale is the first ever issued in this country.”

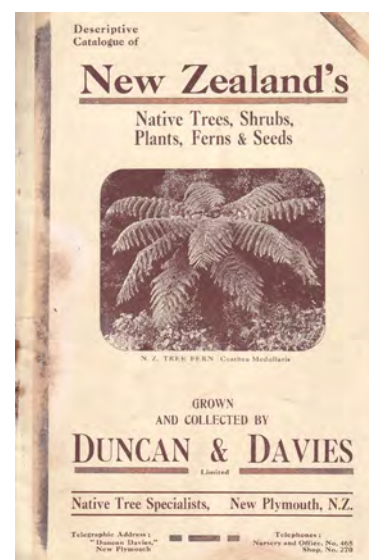


Fig. 8 Duncan & Davies Ltd. New Zealand's Native Trees, Shrubs, Plants, Ferns & Seeds. 1918.

It contained 30 pages of native trees, shrubs, plants, ferns and seeds for sale. The catalogue began by remarking; “the demand for Alpine and Rock Plants having increased so largely of late years, we have marked all varieties suitable for rockery work with an R.” Within a decade those sentiments had become almost standard. In Christchurch, Baxter's 1927 illustrated catalogue of native

trees, shrubs and plants begins with a photograph of “a native garden four years from planting.” Once the rage for rock gardening really took hold then New Zealand plants, especially alpinists, would find their place in all sorts of garden settings.

The most interesting, and now very rare, 1920s catalogues in my collection are those of the redoubtable Mrs Eva Richards of Windwhistle, Canterbury (Fig. 9). This enterprising woman collected the seeds of hundreds of native plants throughout Canterbury and possibly elsewhere in the South Island. Her 32 page catalogue lists no less than 207 species under the heading “Herbaceous and Rock Garden Plants” alone, a phenomenal achievement. There are also listings of shrubs and climbers. It was perhaps the most comprehensive commercial native plant catalogue of its time, but was for seeds only. Very many of the listings are marked with an ‘H’, to signify “hardy anywhere in England.” I believe she was primarily catering for enthusiastic rock gardeners in Britain. She put up the seeds in 1/- packets that were also priced at 25 cents for the similarly booming market in the USA. Such trade was not all in one direction. The *Otago Daily Times* reported in April 1927, that the New Zealand Rock Garden Society had “landed a consignment of over 400 different species and varieties from England.”

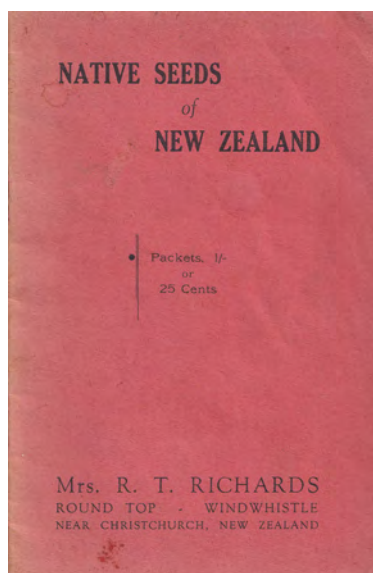


Fig. 9 Mrs R.T. Richards. Native Seeds of New Zealand. 1925?

What I believe the evidence derived from my collection demonstrates is that nearly all ordinary gardeners in New Zealand saw little to interest them in cultivating the native flora for

its own sake, but became enthusiastic as soon as rock gardening became fashionable. A fashionably promulgated by the gardening writers of the day, most notably by Farrer, a gifted garden writer. Farrer devoted his life to alpine plants and plant hunting in the high regions of Asia. He died in Upper Burma in 1920 aged only 40. His influence is still felt in gardening circles. In New Zealand, Leonard Cockayne, also a good writer, did most to encourage and support the ordinary gardener's interest in the cultivation and enjoyment of native plants. For this and other services to horticulture he was awarded the Veitch Memorial Medal of the Royal Horticultural Society (UK) in 1931. The rage for rock gardens brought about the founding of the British Alpine Garden Society in 1929 which still awards silver Farrer Memorial Medals for the best plant at its shows. A Nelson Rock Garden Society existed as early as 1925 and the New Zealand Alpine and Rock Garden Society was formed in 1928.

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The author is a former bookseller, now retired, who has a collection of botanical, horticultural and garden history books and nursery catalogues.

References

The list of books and nursery catalogues consulted follows, with notes and comments added in square brackets.

1. Gardening books

1876. David McIndoe. *Hay's Annual Garden Book*. Auckland. 56 pp. [Fig. 1. No NZ native plant content.]
1885. M. Murphy F.L.S. *Handbook of New Zealand Gardening, with a chapter on Bee-Keeping*. Christchurch. 1st edition. 188 pp. [No NZ native plant content.]
1888. M. Murphy F.L.S. *Handbook of Gardening for New Zealand, with chapters on Poultry & Bee-Keeping*. Christchurch. 2nd edition. 224 pp. [Fig. 2. 3½ pages devoted to NZ plants – a list supplied by Adams & Sons of Christchurch.]

1895. M. Murphy F.L.S. *Handbook of Gardening for New Zealand, with chapters on Poultry & Bee-Keeping*. Christchurch. 3rd edition. 240 pp. [3½ pages devoted to NZ plants – a list supplied by Adams & Sons of Christchurch.]
1907. M. Murphy F.L.S. *Gardening in New Zealand*. Christchurch. 4th edition. 311 pp. [5½ pages devoted to NZ plants – a list supplied by L. Cockayne.]
1910. L. Cockayne. *New Zealand Plants and their Story*. Wellington. 190 pp. [Fig. 7. Includes a 'List of Native Plants suitable for School Gardens' and a 'List of Easily Grown Alpines'.]
1914. D. Tannock, F.R.H.S. *Manual of Gardening in New Zealand*. Christchurch. 1st edition. 298 pp. [Fig. 5. 8 pages devoted to NZ native plants.]
1915. A.E. Lowe. *The Sun Gardening Book*. Christchurch. 1st edition. 92 pp. [Fig. 4. No NZ native plant content.]
1915. J. Lockhart. *An Easy Guide to New Zealand Gardening*. Wanganui. 5th edition. 151 pp. [No NZ native plant content.]
1918. Yates Garden Guide. Auckland. 12th edition [First published in 1895]. 114 pp. [Fig. 3. No NZ native plant content.]
1922. Sir George Fenwick. *Romance of the Flora of New Zealand*. Dunedin. 61 pp. [Collected newspaper articles on NZ native plants.]
1923. Sir George Fenwick. *New Zealand Native Flora, Celmisias, & J. Speden, Olearias*, Dunedin. 42 pp. [Collected newspaper articles on NZ native plants.]
1923. L. Cockayne. *The Cultivation of New Zealand Plants*. Christchurch. 1st edition. 138 pp. [Fig. 6. NZ native plants only.]
1924. W. Martin. *Native Plants of Dunedin and Surrounding District*. 37 pp. [NZ native plants only.]
1925. Arnold Wall. *The Flora of Mount Cook*. Christchurch. 55 pp. [Includes a 'Catalogue of Alpine Plants'.]
1926. Marguerite Crooks. *Plant Life in Maoriland*. Auckland. 190 pp. [Collected newspaper articles on NZ native plants.]



Fig. 10 William Gimblett's Catalogue of Nursery Stock and Seeds. 1892.



Fig. 13 Mrs Sibun's Catalogue of Fruit, Ornamental and Shelter Trees. Hedge Plants, Roses Etc. 1912?

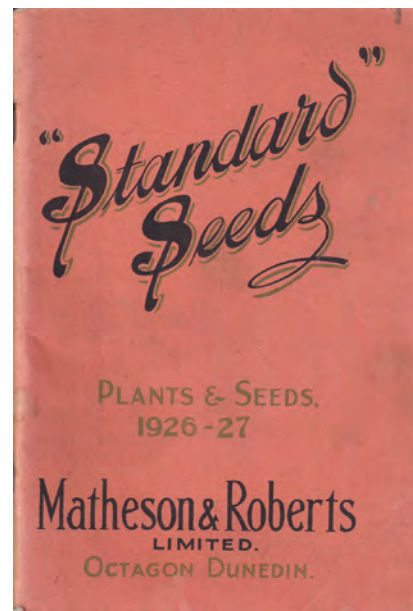


Fig. 16 Matheson & Roberts Ltd. Standard Seeds. 1926-7.



Fig. 11 Nairn & Son's. Plant Catalogue. 1906-7.



Fig. 14 Buxton's Seed List. 1924-5.



Fig. 12 C.C. Rasmussen's Catalogue of Roses, Carnations, Ornamental, Fruit, Hedge and Shelter Trees, Etc., Etc. 1911.

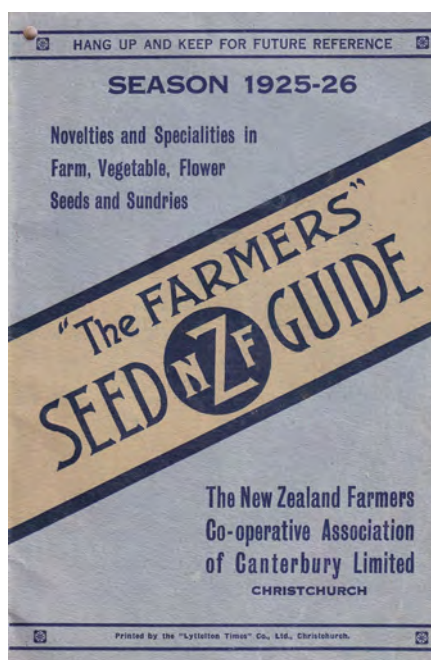


Fig. 15 The Farmers Seed Guide. 1925-6.

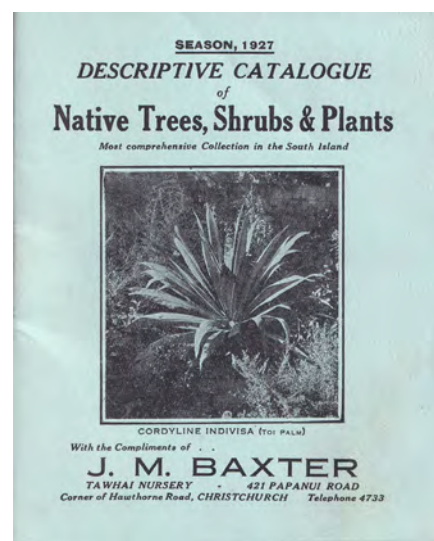


Fig. 17 J.M. Baxter. Descriptive Catalogue of Native Trees, Shrubs & Plants. 1927.



Fig. 18 A. & S. Reid. Seedsman & Florists. 1928.



Fig. 19 Duncan & Davies Ltd. New Zealand Native Trees, Shrubs, Plants, Ferns & Seeds. 1933.

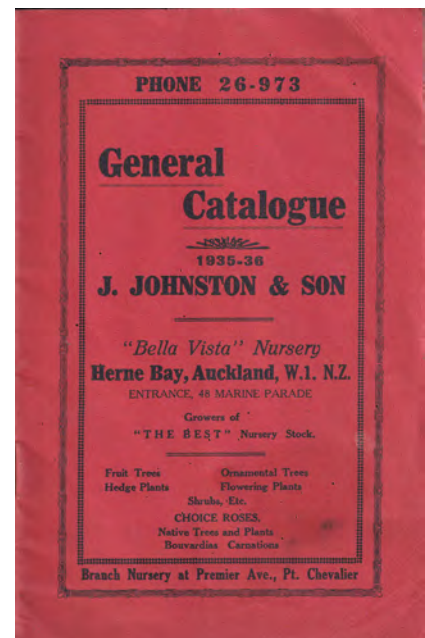


Fig. 20 J. Johnston & Son. General catalogue. 1935-6.

2. Commercial nursery catalogues

1880. Naturalists Field Club
Catalogue of Indigenous & Introduced Flowering Plants Occurring in the Dunedin District. 14 pp. [Not commercial but had an exchange column for collectors in the UK and USA.]
1884. Adams & Son. Christchurch. Advertisement, Lyttelton Times, 10.04.1884. [12 varieties. Native Plants. Spores of the principal Tree and Dwarf Ferns. Alpine plants. Also cases of Alpine Plants and Ferns. (NB. These would have been Wardian cases intended for export).]
1892. William Gimblett's Catalogue of Nursery Stock and Seeds. Christchurch. 36 pp. [Fig. 10. No NZ native plant content.]
1903. William Gimblett's Catalogue of Nursery Stock and Seeds. Christchurch. 24 pp. [No NZ native plant content.]
1904. H.C. Gibbons & Co. Wellington. 48 pp. [No NZ native plant content.]
1907. Nimmo & Blair. Dunedin. 150 pp. [No NZ native plant content.]
- 1906-7. Nairn & Son's. Plant Catalogue. Christchurch. 142 pp. [Fig. 11. 5 pages of NZ trees, shrubs and plants, also ferns. Mostly intended for sending overseas.]
- 1906-7. Buxton's Descriptive Catalogue. Christchurch. 112 pp. [1 page of NZ trees, shrubs and plants, "little known about Canterbury."]
1910. Yates Seed List. Auckland. 94 pp. [No NZ native plant content.]
1911. C.C. Rasmussen's Catalogue of Roses, Carnations, Ornamental, Fruit, Hedge and Shelter Trees, Etc., Etc. Wanganui. 20 pp. [Fig. 12. A handful of NZ native plants only.]
- 1912? Mrs Sibun's Catalogue of Fruit, Ornamental and Shelter Trees. Hedge Plants, Roses Etc. Auckland. 16 pp. [Fig. 13. Includes a short list of nursery grown NZ trees. 'The Rockery' list is almost all introduced plants.]
1918. Duncan & Davies Ltd. New Zealand's Native Trees, Shrubs, Plants, Ferns & Seeds. New Plymouth. 30 pp. [Fig. 8. 1st edition wholesale catalogue. Earliest published NZ only plant catalogue.]
- 1924-5. Buxton's Seed List. Christchurch. 74 pp. [Fig. 14. No NZ native plant content.]
- 1924? Mrs R.T. Richards. Native Seeds of New Zealand. Windwhistle, Canterbury. 32 pp, Illustrated. 1/-. [Ferns, Herbaceous and Rock Garden Plants, Orchids, Climbers & Shrubs. Illustrations include a NZ gentian grown in the UK from seed sent from NZ.]
- 1925? Mrs R.T. Richards. Native Seeds of New Zealand. Windwhistle, Canterbury. 32 pp, Illustrated. 1/- 25c. [Fig. 9. Ferns, Herbaceous and Rock Garden Plants, Orchids, Climbers & Shrubs.]
- 1925-6. The Farmers Seed Guide. Christchurch. 64 pp. [Fig. 15. No NZ native plant content.]
- 1926-7. Matheson & Roberts Ltd. Standard Seeds. Dunedin. 104 pp. [Fig. 16. 1 page of NZ trees and shrubs.]
1926. Duncan & Davies Ltd. New Zealand Native Trees, Shrubs, Plants, Ferns & Seeds. New Plymouth. 30 pp. [NZ native plants only catalogue.]
1927. J.M. Baxter. Descriptive Catalogue of Native Trees, Shrubs & Plants. Christchurch. 26 pp, illustrated. [Fig. 17. NZ plants only with reference to "A Native Garden."]
1928. A. & S. Reid. Seedsman & Florists. Christchurch. 48 pp. [Fig. 18. No NZ native plant content.]
1929. Dalkeith Rock Gardens. Rock and Alpine Plants. Dunedin. 4 pp. [Imported alpinines.]
1933. Duncan & Davies Ltd. New Zealand Native Trees, Shrubs, Plants, Ferns & Seeds. New Plymouth. 48 pp. [Fig. 19. NZ native plants only catalogue.]
- 1935-6. J. Johnston & Son. General catalogue. Auckland. 43 pp. [Fig. 20. Includes a 2-page list of NZ native trees and also a few native flowering shrubs in the general list.]