

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

Grant ('Gus') Gordon Evans



Glenys and Gus Evans AHRIH, with their dog Pippi. Photo courtesy of David Haxton, *Kāpiti News*.

An Associate of Honour of the RNZIH (AHRIH) is the highest honour bestowed by the RNZIH, awarded to persons who have given distinguished service to horticulture in New Zealand.

Gus Evans has contributed to the practise of horticulture over many years and in different ways.

The seed for Gus's love of horticulture, and the thriving plant business he would later create, started to germinate when he was a boy growing up in Silverstream, Upper Hutt.

Gus's mother Zita Evans was a very good gardener. His grandfather Frank Humphrey, a WWI veteran, lived with the family and had a great love of gardening; he used to import polyanthus seed from England and germinate them in the hot-water cupboard. Frank would help Gus's mother in the flower garden and also assist his father in the extensive vegetable garden. Large sections were usual in those days and the family was very self-sufficient, with chickens, eggs, and a large orchard and they would swap produce with neighbours. These formative experiences led to Gus as a schoolboy knowing that he wanted to work in horticulture.

Fortuitously, Gus's mother took him to a presentation at the Pinehaven garden circle by Graham Bradbourne (Deputy Director of Parks and Reserves for Lower Hutt City Council),

and this led to an offer of working part time in the school holidays for the council. Gus thoroughly enjoyed this experience and it made him more determined that horticulture was to be his career path. This was much to the angst of his father who had encouraged him to follow in the family footsteps as cabinet makers, working with timber, or as a plumber. Back then, horticulture was not a glamorous industry and was considered by some to be a lowly profession. That all changed when the kiwifruit industry bloomed, and suddenly horticulture was centre-stage.

In 1968, Gus was offered an apprenticeship with Lower Hutt City Council, thereby formally beginning his career in horticulture. The Director of Parks and Reserves was Monty Reitchesen, who took immense pride in all his apprentices and wanted them to succeed. Monty had the apprentices 'eating out of his hand'; he was the big boss yet loved getting out of his office and lending a hand, dressed in his suit and tie and braces on his trousers. The young apprentices had to learn a new plant every day and look out if you could not answer his questions about that week's plants on Friday. Gus recalls being taught how to prune roses, with Monty saying, "Below the knee son", and that was how it was to be ever after. "We don't grow show blooms here, just plenty of flowers, remember that son." The first time

Gus was left to the pruning, members of the public passed by saying, "You have murdered those roses – they will never come back". As the day went by, Gus progressively increased the below the knee height to about thigh level. Monty was furious, telling Gus in no uncertain terms that he was the boss and the public can get stuffed. Gus was told, "Now get back and start again!" Lesson learnt; always do what Monty says. Gus and the other apprentices received a sound grounding, being taught in many different facets of horticulture. They spent several months at each area, including bowling greens, aviaries, grass tennis courts, cricket wickets, rugby fields, swimming pools, bedding plant displays, floral clocks, nursery work, propagation, rose gardens, and formal civic ball decorations, emerging at the end of these placements with a thorough training. For the last six months of their apprenticeships, they were allowed to choose to go back to their favourite place. Gus chose the nursery, setting the scene for his future.

Gus feels fortunate to have worked with so many encouraging people. Some were English gardeners who wore flannelette shirts and a tie all year round, and although they had their quirks they were brilliant tradesmen to be around. They instilled pride in the work, "Always put the Queen's finish on those edges when you have finished hoeing". Council workers are often stereotyped as being unmotivated but for Gus this was as far from the truth as you could get.

As part of his apprenticeship, Gus attended block courses at Lincoln College (now Lincoln University) where he met such great icons in horticulture such as the late Gordon Scott (who established Scott Base Nurseries in Auckland), Ruth Henderson (first woman President of the International Plant Propagators' Society), and Alan Jolliffe (who became Curator of the Christchurch

Botanic Gardens and Director of Parks and Recreation at Lower Hutt City Council).

Having attained his trade certificate and beginning study for the diploma in horticulture, Gus decided he needed further training in plant propagation which is where his interests lay. In 1973, he began work at Upper Hutt City Council and was mentored by Chris Gill, another fount of knowledge, and Gus learned much from him.

Gus then worked for Todd Motors in Porirua who were setting up a new 100 acre site and needed a contract propagator. The propagators were assigned to grow a million plants for the site to be planted over three years. Gus and the team had to create from scratch a purpose-built nursery and gather staff to work on site. When he arrived Waikato Earthmovers were still forming the site which had many steep banks and batters to plant, and extensive grass areas to create. It was a formidable task. Several people told Gus he was mad to accept this challenge, but a challenge is what he regarded it as. Gus found the company excellent to work for. Their business was building cars so large-scale landscaping was new to them and any suggestions were always met with approval. After a few years Gus progressed to head gardener. In 1982, for the first time in the history of Todd Motors, they offered voluntary redundancy. Redundancy provisions in those days were generous and Gus accepted the offer.

With his redundancy payout, Gus ventured to Waikanae on a wet Saturday afternoon in November 1983 and told a real estate agent he was looking for a piece of land. He was shown an overgrown block in Utauta Street which was almost an acre. Gus thought "this is it", then found there was a house that went with the land. A bulldozer cleared the grounds before Gus Evans Nurseries started to evolve.

To earn enough income in those early days, Gus contracted his gardening skills to the Horowhenua District Council under Mike Cardiff to look after Waikanae township and its environs. He also worked weekends as a consultant at Carol and Phil's Garden Centre in Rata Road, Raumati Beach. As the funds

came in, Gus was able to build tunnel houses and develop the propagation and other facilities at the nursery.

After a few years, Gus gave up contracting work to focus solely on being a full time owner/operator of his nursery which had grown and was now sustainable, although there were certainly some challenging times.

Initially the nursery produced plants for councils, landscapers, and garden centres. However, garden centres were starting to dictate prices and supply, so Gus took a bold step and started retailing directly to the public. Initially the business suffered, but slowly things improved and it turned out to be one of the best decisions he has made.

Over the years the nursery, focusing on quality, went from strength to strength, growing a wide range of ornamental plants, New Zealand natives, perennials, trees, and shrubs. They would produce about 750,000 growing on lines and 650,000 ornamentals and natives per year.

Gus and his wife Glenys discovered and named a new native plant selection *Veronica (Hebe) 'Waikanae'* in the 1980s. It was a chance seedling that came up in a batch of *Veronica (Hebe) hulkeana* seedlings, but its exact parentage remains unknown. It was assigned the new combination *xHeohebe hortensis 'Waikanae'*, then reclassified as a *Heliohebe* until the taxonomy of New Zealand hebes settled down. This cultivar was granted Plant Variety Rights (PVR) protection from 1996 to 2009.

Managing the nursery six and a half days each week was not always easy, but sharing a love of plants with customers, many becoming friends, was a highlight.

Gus has always had a close relationship with local community groups, garden clubs, schools, and churches, donating many thousands of plants over the years. In 2009 the nursery was awarded a certificate by Waikanae Lions for services and donations of plants and time, and assisting in organising garden trail visits. In 2014 the Kapiti Branch of the NZ Camellia Society awarded the nursery with a Certificate of Appreciation for sponsorship and outstanding support. Gus has also given many talks and presentations

to local organisations, garden groups, school groups, and advice to planting groups.

Although Gus and Glenys closed their nursery gates in November 2021, after nearly 40 years of service, their lifelong passion for horticulture continues to thrive. Gus has started a consultancy service providing help on planting and choosing plants.

Gus summed up his thoughts for *Commercial Horticulture* (Aug/Sept 2021), saying, "It has been a wonderful journey. Have met the best people along the way, customers and suppliers. It was a tough decision but in the end it was a no-brainer to cash up as the nursery sits in Residential A and we both thought the timing was right ... We cannot express enough gratitude to our customers and suppliers. Thanks for the wonderful journey and making this great living possible for us."

Gus is a strong supporter of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture (RNZIH) and International Plant Propagators' Society New Zealand Region (IPPS-NZ). He has been an RNZIH member since 1970, and in 1990 received a Fellowship (FRIH) for his significant contribution to horticulture.

Joining the IPPS-NZ opened up a new world for Gus, allowing him to meet many others who love plants and go out of their way to provide help and encouragement. Some of the best horticulturists he has met are members. Gus considers that the motto 'seek and share' is at the forefront of this organisation. Gus has been a member of the IPPS for nearly 50 years, has served on the committee from 1982-88, was 2nd Vice-President in 1985, and treasurer 1986-88. In 2005 Gus received the IPPS Award of Recognition for services to the NZ Region. In 2014, Gus delivered a presentation at the New Zealand and Australia combined IPPS conference in Wellington. Entitled 'Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow', Gus outlined changes that have occurred in the horticultural industry since his apprenticeship days. In 2016 he was awarded the first Presidents' Choice Award that recognises contributions to the IPPS. Gus has served on numerous organising committees and attended every IPPS-NZ conference

and most field days over the years. This has allowed Gus and Glenys to travel the world with a group of like-minded horticulturists. A highlight of this travel was in November 2019, when Gus and Glenys joined a group of IPPS international members on a fact-finding trip at the invitation of the Singapore Government¹. Eddie Welsh was the organiser and the group were treated like royalty. They were taken on many tours around Singapore Gardens and Singapore Zoo, to areas off-limits to tourists. They also visited housing communities to look at communal gardening atop high rises.

Gus's sentiments were captured well in a *Kāpiti News* interview (16th June 2021), where he said, "The New Zealand region of the society is one of the strongest in the world and an amazing group of people who will be friends forever."

Upon learning of his Associate of Honour, Gus says, "To the wonderful people who have been so good to me, and always been there for me over so many years, too many to acknowledge, from the bottom of my heart I will never know how to repay you all. You are my family and have

made my career so memorable. Thank you all. It is with enormous pleasure I accept this award and I dedicate it to all those amazing people I met on this journey."

Citation prepared by Alan Jolliffe, and based in part on an article published by David Haxton in *Kāpiti News* (16th June 2021) and *Commercial Horticulture* (August/September 2021, p. 20–21).

¹ Hayden Foulds published a report of this trip in the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2020, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 14–17.

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

Dr John Clemens



Dr John Clemens, RNZIH Associate of Honour (AHRH) for 2022.

John Clemens is a landscape ecologist, plant biologist and horticulturist with qualifications and experience gained progressively in chemistry, landscape ecology, horticulture and, most recently, landscape architecture.

Working initially as a chemist at the University of Zürich and botanising in alpine meadows at the weekend, it soon became apparent to John that he was more interested in field

ecology than working in a chemical laboratory. Returning to England he retrained at Wye College in Kent and was reborn a horticulturist/landscape ecologist in time to secure an academic position in the Department of Agronomy & Horticultural Science at the University of Sydney. Discovering there was more joy than terror in teaching, he developed horticultural courses and researched in urban ecology, the domestication of Australian ornamental plants, and land reclamation.

He emigrated to New Zealand and worked with the International Plant Propagators Society – New Zealand (IPPS–NZ) and the nursery industry while Director of the New Zealand Nursery Research Centre at Massey University from 1987 to 1993.

Research with co-worker and wife, Professor Paula Jameson, blossomed with several Public Good Science Fund projects on the floricultural development of New Zealand plants in association with the (then) Crop & Food Research CRI. John and Paula co-supervised numerous talented masters and doctoral students who went on to positions in science and

the horticultural industry. John was awarded the RNZIH Peter Skellerup Plant Conservation Scholarship in 2000 for work on kākābeak (kōwhai ngutu-kākā) biodiversity.

The family moved to Christchurch in 2004, where John completed a Master of Landscape Architecture degree with Distinction at Lincoln University. He worked as a landscape architect, briefly with Di Lucas & Associates and then with Peter Rough Landscape Architects, receiving gold and silver awards for landscape research from the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects.

He was appointed Curator of Christchurch Botanic Gardens / Te Māra Huaota o Waipapa in 2009 and Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Biological Sciences, University of Canterbury in 2010. With the support of the Friends of the Botanic Gardens, and international and local collaborators, he revitalised botanical research conducted within the Gardens to a level not seen since the promising early careers of Curator John Armstrong and his son Joseph Armstrong 150 years earlier.