

William Martin (1823–1905), pioneer nurseryman and seedsman of Fairfield, Otago

Isabella Kerby¹

William Martin is accredited as the pioneer of Otago horticulture. His nursery gardens, Fairfield Nursery, carried a remarkable selection of native, introduced, and specialty plants available to order. In its heyday throughout the 1870s and 1880s, Fairfield's popularity surpassed that of the Dunedin Botanic Garden and any other nursery throughout Australasia.

Scotsman William Martin (Fig. 1) came to Dunedin in April 1848 aboard the second of the colonist settler ships to arrive in Dunedin, the *Philip Laing*. With Martin came a wealth of knowledge and experience in botany and horticulture, having studied these subjects at Edinburgh University. He had worked as a gardener and a foreman on Scottish and English estates and had completed an apprenticeship at the Edinburgh Botanic Garden.



Fig. 1 William Martin. Date and Photographer unknown. Collection of Toitū Otago Settlers Museum, Dunedin; 1912/65/1, F 1093.

Not only did he bring experience, but he also carried with him a collection of seeds from British to Otago shores. These seeds formed the start of his nursery, and in-part showed the desire of new settlers to introduce familiar plants from their homelands.

Not long after his arrival in Otago, he acquired 75 hectares of farmland near Chain Hills, on the outskirts of Green Island, and it was there around his homestead that he established the four-hectare Fairfield Nursery (Fig. 2) in 1850, with the rest of the farm leased out. He worked tirelessly on cultivating the hard soil into fertile land suitable for a nursery before surrounding the section with forest trees and planting hedges of holly, yew, juniper, veronica, and barberry.

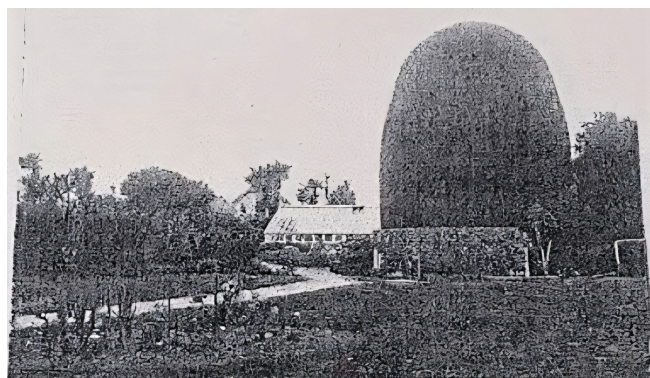


Fig. 2 Outside Martin's nursery, Fairfield, c. 1920. The 10-metre high macrocarpa (*Hesperocyparis (Cupressus) macrocarpa*) was trimmed annually in the form of a haystack. Image is possibly from the private collection of Patricia Martin and appears in Family History; "Genealogy of William Martin (1823–1905) and Mary Kirkland (1828–1884)", Collection of Toitū Otago Settlers Museum Dunedin; 2006/95/2, DC-2994.

To start, Martin advertised available stock in local newspapers such as the *Otago News* and *Otago Witness* (Fig. 3). Initially for sale in 1850 were a variety of fruit trees including apples, pears, and cherries, as well as a selection of gooseberries and currants.

FOR SALE, at FAIRFIELD NURSERY,
a select assortment of Fruit Trees, two
to three years old, and ready for bearing.
Firs, yews, cypresses, and other ornamental
trees and shrubs. Greenhouse plants and
border flowers.

The best farm and garden seeds in their
season.

Parties ordering in quantity liberally dealt
with, and orders carefully forwarded.

WILLIAM MARTIN,
Green Island,
20j FRUIT TREES, SHRUBS, &c.

Fig. 3 *Otago Witness*, Issue 919, 10 July 1869, Page 21.

That same year, Martin imported various fruit trees and conifers from California, USA, in what was the first time foreign tree species were brought into Otago. The late R. W. Shepherd traced the introduction of radiata pine (*Pinus radiata*) into New Zealand and claimed that William Martin was the first to introduce Californian conifer seed into Otago in 1869. This seed was imported from the firm of E. C. Moore and contained *Pinus radiata*. Martin's grandson, an esteemed botanist who shares William's Christian name, also credits him with

¹ Curatorial and Collections Assistant; Assistant Art Curator; Learning, Teaching, and Library; Lincoln University, Lincoln 7647, New Zealand; Isabella.kerby@lincoln.ac.nz

importing macrocarpa, Douglas fir, Lawson cypress, and *Sequoiadendron giganteum* (syn. *Sequoia gigantea*, Wellingtonia) into Otago.

Martin was a member of the Otago Horticultural Society, and in January 1861 it is recorded that he won two 2nd-place prizes for his gooseberries in their society competition. For many years afterwards he was an active contributor to their exhibits.

The first published catalogue for Fairfield Nursery came in 1872–1873 (Fig. 4). A wide range of stock was listed, with more than 600 plants available. In the introduction to his catalogue, Martin declared to his customers: “I may add that my ambition lies more in the way of Selections than of mere Collections, throughout the different sections of fruits, flowers, shrubs and forest trees.”

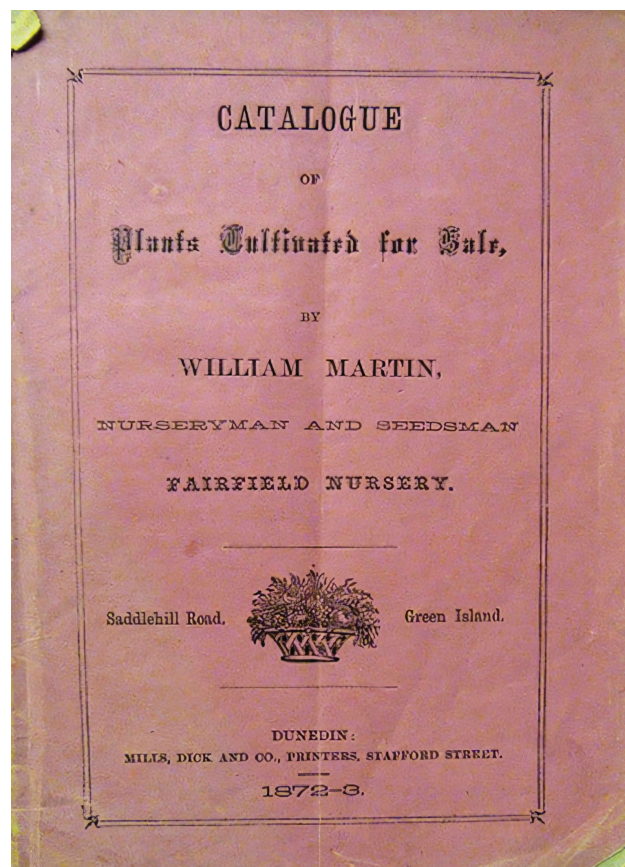


Fig. 4 Cover of the Fairfield Nursery 1872–1873 catalogue.

These included conifers, trees and shrubs, hardy climbers, herbaceous plants and bulbs, greenhouse herbs and shrubs, fruit trees (apricots, cherries, currants, English damsons, gooseberries, loquats, mandarins, peaches, pears, plums, strawberries, and vines), and farm and garden seeds to order.

Although, as his business grew rapidly – evident in the number of plants for sale and new, imported selections available – collecting seemed to become a prosperous necessity. A visitor to Fairfield in 1878 noted how Martin was “constantly adding new varieties to his collection from all quarters.” The visitor observed the presence of many uncommon plants hard to find in New Zealand, including the Amazon lily, *Urceolina* (*Eucharis*) *amazonica*, from Peru, the slipper orchid

Paphiopedilum (*Cypripedium*) *insigne* from Asia, and the Madagascar jasmine, *Stephanotis floribunda*. The visitor also noted that Martin imported a *Spiraea* from Japan (which he called “*S. palmetta*”²), the Royal fern from the Hebrides (*Osmunda regalis*), and various succulents from London including *Dyckia brevifolia*, *Echeveria retusa* (a synonym of *Echeveria fulgens*), and *Rochea falcata* (a synonym of *Crassula perfoliata* var. *minor*). It is likely most of these plants were raised by Martin directly from seeds, rather than shipping live plants, which would be expensive and difficult to keep them alive during transit and establishment in Dunedin. These seeds were likely purchased then received from international commercial nurseries, particularly in Britain. It is also written that he obtained seed of the rarely available spring gentian, *Gentiana verna*, a Eurasian alpine plant, from Edinburgh by way of local Dunedin man, Mr A. C. Purdie. Martin’s grandson writes in 1953 that his grandfather raised numerous plants from seeds of a well-grown Chilean kōwhai tree (*Sophora macrocarpa* ‘Sun King’), of which many customers purchased for their own gardens believing it to be a native kōwhai tree.

The 1880 catalogue lists Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Spanish, English and Irish tree selections in addition to his established collection of Californian and local stock. By this time, the nursery advertised more than 1400 different selections for sale. The nursery included a greenhouse, fernery, tropical house, and vinery, as well as the various store sheds.

But it was Martin’s hybridisation of rhododendrons that became his specialty. By crossing *Rhododendron thomsonii* and *R. griffithianum* Martin produced his famous *R.* ‘Marquis of Lothian’, a cultivar with petals of salmon pink and a smooth beige bark. Raised at Fairfield in the late 1870s, it was advertised for sale in the c. 1882 catalogue and claims to be New Zealand’s first registered home-grown rhododendron – this cultivar is still grown today. Also, by crossing two New Zealand native hebes, *Veronica lavaudiana* with *V. hulkeana* he successfully “produced a very beautiful profuse-leaved and flowering variety” which he named *V. fairfieldi* (the hybrid combination is known as *Veronica* × *fairfieldii* and the cultivar is *Veronica* ‘Fairfieldii’).

Throughout these later years, Fairfield’s flowering garden was a noteworthy destination for visitors, even international horticultural and botanical specialists. It included rhododendrons, an azalea path, a huge macrocarpa tree, and a kauri tree. Rows of Australian bluegum (eucalyptus) trees enclosed this garden and grew over 100 ft tall. The garden was said to attract up to 500 visitors a week.

For his own reference, Martin also amassed a large herbarium of dried specimens of native flora, to which his son added considerably. He had also accumulated a complete collection of British ferns for the nursery.

Of his character, it was said he “makes one feel at ease” with his “quiet genial” nature, and was “an enthusiastic grower of native plants.”

² The closest match to this *Spiraea* found is *S. pumila*, a synonym for *S. japonica* (Japanese meadowsweet). M. Dawson, pers. comm. 2023; <https://www.gbif.org/species/5690776>

William Martin was born on 22 October, 1823, in the village of Lesmahagow in the county of Lanarkshire, Scotland. On arrival in Dunedin, a letter home remarked that he found the number of local ladies to be scarce, and any hopes of marriage were looking futile. Yet, he married twice and had several children. First, to Mary Kirkland in 1852. Mary died in 1884 and his son, also called William, was later killed in a tram accident in 1896. Martin later remarried Janet Thomson.

After suffering a severe illness, William Martin died at his home in Fairfield on 26 November, 1905, at 83 years of age. He is buried at Green Island cemetery.

He had been an active member of the Provincial Council of Otago, the Road Board and School Committee, and a serving Justice of the Peace (J.P.).

After his widow Janet died in 1918, the executors of Martin's will had his files of horticultural correspondence burnt, sadly resulting in the loss of much recorded historic information.

His grandson, also William Martin, followed in his grandfather's footsteps by becoming a noted New Zealand botanist. He kept an assortment of mosses that were collected and named by his grandfather in 1850.

Fairfield was passed onto Martin's grandchildren, William and James, but both were not living in Otago at the time. It was decided instead that the estate was to be passed to their aunt Jane's husband, Mr Frederick Seaton, who sold his own nursery at Mosgiel to take over Fairfield (he was acknowledged as the property owner in 1924 by a visit from the Dunedin Gardening Club). Mr Seaton's parents had also arrived in Dunedin on the *Philip Laing*. In 1927, Fairfield Nursery, including all the land and buildings, was advertised for sale in the *Otago Daily Times*, after Frederick's death in 1926.

In 1953, William Martin (grandson) noted that Fairfield had a few different owners after Frederick Seaton but, by the time of writing, the nursery and garden had all but disappeared (Fig. 5). Some of the site of the original nursery now forms the Fairfield Tavern Reserve (Fig. 6), recently renamed William Martin Reserve to honour the site's history. Many full-grown trees around the area are said to be the original ones planted by Martin. Martin Road also commemorates the location, while the wider district preserves the Fairfield name.



Fig. 5 The copse of trees central to this image show the site of Fairfield nursery as it appeared in 1963. The long straight road running from the lower left to the upper right corner is Main Road, with Martin Road encircling the nursery site from behind. *Green Island, Dunedin part of Green Island, Dunedin. Whites Aviation Ltd: Photographs. Ref: WA-61143-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/23024615*

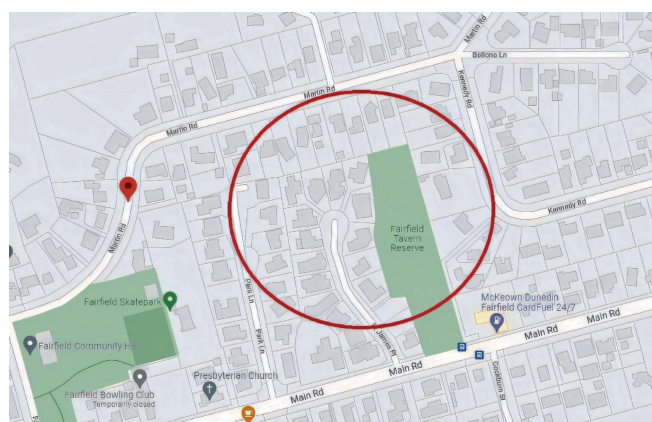


Fig. 6 The estimated location of Martin's nursery today is within the red circle. Part of this former nursery was until recently known as the Fairfield Tavern Reserve. Martin's original farmland would have stretched from Main Road up to Flower Street, just out of frame to the north. *Image via Google Maps.*

Acknowledgements

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