

Charles Sonntag (1822–1897), nurseryman of Kaikorai, Dunedin

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Charles Sonntag of Brockville Nursery was an early Dunedin settler who became well regarded locally as a successful nurseryman and horticulturist and established a particularly high reputation as an expert on the cultivation and propagation of fruit trees.

Charles was born in the town of Egel, Prussia (now Germany), in 1822 as Wilhelm Theodor Carl Sonntag, later anglicised to William Theodor Charles. Leaving Germany in 1840, and after time spent living in America and Australia, he arrived in New Zealand with his wife Catherine and their young family in the early 1860s, settling in Dunedin in the district of Brockville, on the western slope of the Kaikorai Valley (Fig. 1). Here was considered a suitable location for a nursery garden, with natural drainage from the elevation and being sheltered from the strong south-west wind.



Fig. 1 Kaikorai, Dunedin, New Zealand, 1906, *Dunedin*, by Muir & Moodie. Purchased 1998 with New Zealand Lottery Grants Board funds. Te Papa (PS.001148).

By the time of his arrival, Otago was already well populated with colonists' intent on improving the landscape to their English style of cultivation and urban settlement. For them, the introduction and acclimatisation of familiar animals and plants, especially grasses, formed an intrinsic connection with their homeland, but this was at significant expense to the native environment and indigenous flora of their new home in Otago. Perhaps also in noticing on their arrival the distinct lack of existing horticulture among Dunedin's barren hillsides and low-lying marshy bush areas, the gardeners' horticultural experience and supplies were greatly relied on for the hard task of cultivating and establishing a self-sufficient settlement. Then, in the early 1860s, Dunedin already had several seed merchants and nursery firms, like those of James Gebbie, George Matthews, and William Martin.

Charles Sonntag had "studied gardening in some of the best schools on the continent of Europe" and completed an apprenticeship near the city of Magdeburg in Germany.

This education and training in Germany certainly aided him in starting a successful operation well adapted to the local climate in Dunedin, and it undoubtedly informed his future practise and set him apart in his methods. At least one reporter speculated that his inherent "intuition" about where to plant his trees, flowers, and shrubs stemmed from taking extracurricular technological classes offered to apprentices in Prussian towns where his understanding of agricultural practices would have been honed. In 1869, a series of Charles's garden designs completed while on his apprenticeship in Germany were on display at the show of the Royal Horticultural Society of Otago (later known as the Dunedin Horticultural Society). Perhaps these showed the local audience new and experimental approaches to landscaping or, cleverly, advertised the skills of a new resident businessman.

Shortly before Charles' occupation, the site was already populated with a number of trees, including apples. Possibly these were planted when the site was developed by early English settler Frederick Brock-Hollinshead in the 1850s. After Hollinshead had returned to England in the early 1860s (Fig. 2), his land at Brockville was leased and then sold into sections, and parts of this land included gardens abundant with fruit trees. Charles had grafted onto one of these old trees so that it had 26 different kinds of apples growing over three branches from a single stem. Several of the best would then be chosen for profitable cultivation, with Brockville Nursery commencing operations around 1864.

TO LET,
On an Improving Lease,
BROCKVILLE FARM, (part of the
Brockville Estate, the property of F. B.
Hollinshead, Esq.) comprising excellent Farm
House, Labourer's Cottage, Steading, Barns,
&c., together with
120 ACRES LAND,
including about 25 Acres Bush.
Also—
At an Annual Rental,
Another portion of the same Estate, comprising
substantial Brick House, Bakehouse, Wash-
house, &c., with about 3 Acres Good Grass
Land, and 1 Acre Garden, and right of bush
for Firewood.
The Garden contains upwards of 100 full
grown choice Fruit Trees, and is otherwise
well stocked.
Apply to the Proprietor, on the premises ;
or to
MESSRS. YOUNG & M'GLASHIAN,

Fig. 2 *Otago Witness*, Issue 464, 20 October 1860, Page 10.

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An advertisement placed in the *Otago Witness* in 1869 (Fig. 3) shows the substantial number of plants available at a fairly early stage in Dunedin's nursery trade. The large variety of fruit trees suggests not only was he importing, but had been busy experimenting and growing new sorts, providing healthy competition to the leading nurseries. The Brockville nursery sat on 35 acres of leased land, while Charles also owned nearby sections of farmland in excess of a further 70 acres. At the nursery he also cultivated vegetables on an industrial scale, such as cabbages and cucumbers, and ran a dairy operation producing butter.

CHARLES SONNTAG, Brockville Nursery, has on sale, Fruit Trees as under, all of the most approved varieties:—

5000 Apples, 160 sorts
3000 Pears, 90 sorts
5000 Cherries, 40 sorts
2000 Plums, 70 sorts
1000 Peaches, most noted sorts
1000 Apricots, do do
Currants, Gooseberries, Strawberries,
and other nursery stock in any
quantity.

P.S.—Catalogues will shortly be issued, and sent post free on application.

**LAW, SOMNER, and CO.,
Octagon,
Sole Agents.**

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

Charles was a fervent encourager of pomology study in New Zealand. A reporter from the *Otago Daily Times* stresses on a visit in 1870 to Brockville, Charles's apparent clear and passionate knowledge of the cultivation of fruit trees, with particular attention given to transplanting, disease treatment, and acclimatisation. We are told that every spring he needed eight to ten thousand trees to graft upon because of the many different selections. Careful seasonal grafting was undertaken to ascertain the best quality and strongest trees, keeping thousands of trees back each season to mature before they are sold, even if he must charge customers more. He used a popular German technique of hard pruning each season and propagation by sowing inch-long budded sections of the stem into new soils where they take root and are effectively considered new plants.

Charles also imported from the UK many of the best considered European and American selections to test their propagation potential in Otago. For the 1870 season, arrivals consisted of 42 new varieties of apples, 32 pears, 18 each of plums and cherries, and 12 gooseberries. Fruit stock consisted of 160 varieties of apples, 100 varieties of pears, 60 of plums, and 40 of cherries. Strawberries were also well accounted for, with new varieties including 'Premier', 'President', 'Sir John Paxton', 'La Chalonnaise', 'John Powell', and 'Cockscomb', "which were in great favour last winter in Melbourne." Other noted varieties of strawberry included 'British Queen', 'Keen's Seedling', 'Black Prince', and 'Incomparable'. Plums included green, yellow, and purple gage, 'Orleans', 'Coe's Golden Drop', 'Yellow Egg', 'Early Prolific', and 'English Damson', 'St. Etienne' and 'Coe's Late Red'. Selected imported varieties he considered best for continued propagation were the nectarine plum, 'Jefferson', 'Denyer's Victoria',

'Belgian Purple', 'Diamond', peach plum, 'Washington', 'Reine Claude de Bavay', 'Guthrie's Late Green', 'Pond's Seedling', and 'Caledonian'. Some of these selected plums can be seen listed in other nurserymen's catalogues throughout the 1870s, 80s, and 90s including those from William Reid, William Martin, James Mason, William Wilson, and Edward Morrison.

The reporter in 1870 also noted many ornamental shrubs and trees including flowering thorns, roses, and dahlias. They observed Charles had propagated from seed four new dahlias named 'Pride of Kaikorai', 'Sonntag's Yellow', 'Taiaroa', and 'Lady Grace'. Advertisements in the papers in 1870 are the earliest record of a catalogue being offered by Brockville Nursery, although, since many early physical copies of nursery catalogues have been lost to time, newspaper adverts and reports (Fig. 4–5) are relied upon in these periods of a business's youth for an idea of what stock they carried and sold to market.

Roses! Roses! Roses!

CHARLES SONNTAG, desires to call the special attention of Residents in the Wakatipu district to his magnificent collection of ROSES, surpassing any stock in the Colony. The collection contains the choicest and finest varieties possible to obtain. They will be ready for sending out from end of June till beginning of September.

Fruit Trees.

C. S. has also on hand a limited supply of FRUIT TREES, comprising Apples, Cherries, Plums, Peaches, and Vines, all of which are newly catalogued.

Early orders necessary.

**CHARLES SONNTAG,
BROCKVILLE NURSERY, KAIKORAI, NEAR
DUNEDIN.**

Fig. 4 *Lake County Press*, Volume III, Issue 109, 4 July 1873, Page 3.

**SATURDAY, 15th AUGUST,
At 12 o'clock.**

**Important Sale by Auction of
CHOICE FRUIT TREES, ORNAMENTAL
AND FLOWERING SHRUBS, GRAPE
VINES, BULBS, &c., &c., &c., from the
Celebrated Nursery of MR CHARLES
SONNTAG, BROCKVILLE.**

M^r LANDRESS, HEPBURN, & CO. have been instructed by Mr Charles Sonntag to sell by auction, at their Rooms, Manse street, on Saturday, the 15th August, at 12 o'clock,

The above-mentioned Trees, &c., all carefully selected, well-grown, and true to name, including

Apples, pears, plums, peaches, cherries, apricots, nectarines, &c., &c.

Roses—including, besides other new sorts—Chesstunt's hybrid (new red—Marshal Neill); also, Exhibition prize gladiolas, dahlias, double white, scarlet, and new crimson hawthorns, quicks, &c., &c.

The well known care that Mr S. has taken years back, and the great expense he has gone to secure the newest and best varieties from Europe and the Colonies, will make this sale the most attractive of the season.

Terms at sale.

Fig. 5 *Evening Star*, Issue 3581, 14 August 1874, Page 3.

Some information on the 1872 catalogue can be gleaned from features in the papers. In the *Lake Wakatip Mail*, he was advertising 14,000 grafted fruit trees with many varieties limited in number. There were 211 varieties of apple (sixty more than two years ago) and 250 varieties of roses; the roses consisted of new sorts imported from "the celebrated florist of London" Mr [Thomas?] Rivers, via an agent in Melbourne. This agent was quite likely nurseryman George Brunning, renowned for importing recent plant and flower novelties from England for his St Kilda nurseries. With this relationship, Charles was able to supply the New Zealand market with the same seasonal trends in roses as the Australian and English markets. Selections in bloom at the time were noted as *Rosa* 'Horace Vernet', 'Madame la Baronne Rothschild', 'Glorie de Deutschen', and 'Baron de Adolphe Rothschild'. Other flowers at the nursery included gladioli, dahlias, carnations, and new Italian verbenas and veronicas. Flowers were clearly also a strong interest for Charles. He had made garlands to decorate Dunedin's Octagon for the Duke of Edinburgh's visit in 1869, and in 1874 exhibited at a show of the Dunedin Horticultural Society (of which he was a member) a Japanese lily, *Lilium leichtlinii*, for the first time in Dunedin. His roses and verbenas were awarded prizes at the 1873 DHS show and his dahlias were later featured in shop windows around town.

The years following 1870 were incredibly prosperous for Brockville Nursery (Fig. 6–8). Once they were old enough, Charles's three sons, Tom, Herman, and Charles (Jnr) all assisted with business management, and a large number of staff was employed, including many Chinese miners who hadn't found their luck at the goldfields. By the 1890s the nursery had reportedly grown to a considerable 100 acres in area and included what was possibly the largest greenhouse in the country, growing beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, grapevines, cabbages, peas, etc. Fish offal was apparently used as a fertiliser, to the dismay of many close residents who complained about the smell. The nursery by this time also concentrated on popular forest trees, growing tens of thousands of *Pinus insignis* (a synonym of *Pinus radiata*), *P. ponderosa*, *P. austriaca* (a synonym of *Pinus nigra* subsp. *nigra*), *P. corsicana* (a synonym of *Pinus nigra* subsp. *laricio*), and *Cupressus* (*Hesperocyparis*) *macrocarpa* and *Abies excelsa* (a synonym of *Picea abies*) for "re-afforestation purposes."

C H A R L E S S O N N T A G
 will offer for sale, in the OCTAGON MARKET,
 on SATURDAY, the 29th MAY,

A Choice Collection of Fruit-bearing Trees, in
 numerous varieties.

Also,
 Ornamental Trees and Shrubs.

Chrysanthemum blooms of new varieties will be
 exhibited for selection. 27my

Fig. 6 Otago Daily Times, Issue 4142, 28 May 1875, Page 3.

C H A R L E S S O N N T A G
BROCKVILLE NURSERY,
 KAIKORAI, NEAR DUNEDIN.

Cultivates for sale and for experimental purposes all the Apple, Pear, Plum, and Cherry varieties, which have been introduced to the Australian Colonies since the latest publications. Besides, selected Peaches, Nectarines, Apricots, and Grape Vines. Collections of the best Gooseberries, Currants, Raspberries and Strawberries not deficient of novelties, Quinces, Medlars, Mulberries, Walnuts, &c.

Coniferae, Ornamental Trees and Shrubs.

Herbaceous Plants, Bulbs and Tubers, amongst which the new Chrysanthemums, Phloxes, Penstemons, and Dahlias comprise first-class collections.

The advancement of Roses in choicest exhibition varieties, together with the increase of Fruits and other articles, are published in new Catalogue of Plants, which is obtainable on application, and will be forwarded to all parts of New Zealand for a remittance of 6d. postage stamps.

He does not intend trading in Catalogues, but is desirous that the best use may be made of the information they afford respecting horticultural progress.

The extraordinary increase of new varieties of Fruits from all parts of the world, now for sale here, and to become better known to every friend of gardening, requires an ampler description of each variety than a catalogue publication can give. Reliable information of strictly New Zealand observation and experience of what to plant and what to avoid of these varieties after they have been proved will benefit the intending fruit-grower in many ways, so that it would be worth while to subscribe a trifle towards a future publication, which will be a permanent guide for the future.

Very little information has been diffused amongst the colonists concerning the blight-proof Majetin Stork, on which to graft Apples, full particulars may be seen in the catalogue.

C. S. has great pleasure in being able to offer this season, for the first time, whole collection of Apples, about 400 varieties, grafted on Majetin Stork and Roots, one and two year old, ready for sending out at the latter end of June. The quantity amounts to 3000.

The earliest orders the first attention receive.

Fig. 7 New Zealand Tablet, Volume IV, Issue 160, 2 June 1876, Page 4.

BROCKVILLE NURSERY,
 KAIKORAI, NEAR DUNEDIN.

Charles Sonntag - Proprietor.

LARGEST AND BEST STOCK IN OTAGO

TO SELECT FROM IN

Fruit Trees, of every kind

Ornamental Trees and Shrubs, in great variety

Herbaceous Plants, Bulbs, Tubers, &c.

Dahlias—the finest collection in New Zealand

To secure these, orders should be booked at once.

Roses—a grand collection, strong plants

Pot Plants of every description.

All goods from Brockville Nursery are carefully packed and forwarded with expedition. Sonntag's Trees have proved most satisfactory to all former purchasers.

✂ SEND FOR CATALOGUE.

ADDRESS:

BROCKVILLE NURSERY,
 KAIKORAI, NEAR DUNEDIN.

Fig. 8 Cromwell Argus, Volume XII, Issue 606, 21 June 1881, Page 3.

The 1880–1881 catalogue (Fig. 9) is so far the only physical catalogue for Brockville Nursery in the Lincoln University library collection, and while it intends to be a general plant catalogue, this copy is representative only of the stock of fruit trees and nuts. His collection of apples comprised nearly 500 selections, of which only half are listed in the catalogue to represent the best.

Along with advice on planting, treating blight and preventing frost damage, he ensured his apples were all free from disease, having grafted on reliable, blight-proof 'Winter Majetin' stock. Although Charles's 1880–1881 catalogue did not specify any business arrangements, it is known that fruit trees from Brockville were bought by clients in Central Otago, so he likely provided postage of plants around the country just as many other nurseries did to gain an edge on the national market.

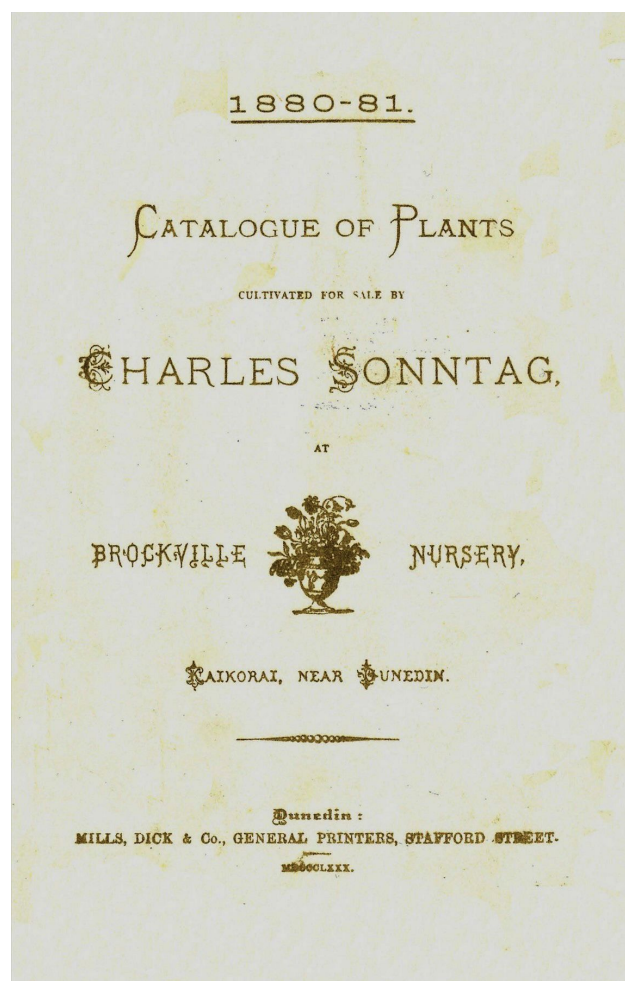


Fig. 9 The cover of Charles Sonntag's Brockville Nursery catalogue for 1880–1881.

Charles continually showed his fruits, vegetables, and flowers at society exhibitions. He was the treasurer of the Kaikorai Horticultural Society (formed in 1881) and at its inaugural show he won prizes for roses, verbenas, apples, pears, and blackberries. Over the years he received many prize placings for his produce and exhibited new varieties at the Dunedin Horticultural Society shows. In 1899, he introduced a new peach to the district called 'Wonder', and exhibited rhubarb imported from France. He came third in the special exhibition of raspberries in January 1900, and at the March show, showed a purported novelty strawberry-raspberry hybrid. His respect in the industry and knowledge on fruit growing granted his position as a judge of fruits at the Taieri Amateur Horticultural Society show in 1886. He was also a founding member of the Jubilee Horticultural Society in August 1887, a society more welcome of professional gardeners than the Dunedin Horticultural Society was said to be at that stage, but it only saw one show and was soon disbanded. In 1888 he presented a well-received paper on his experience of fruit culture to the DHS.

Charles Sonntag was an enthusiastic nurserymen and absolute scientist of his trade. He was known to be lively and hardworking but extremely stubborn in nature, occasionally appearing in the newspapers regarding issues with the law or with banks. One case was a famous grievance he had with the bank about money owed.

He died in March 1897, aged 75, followed by his wife Catherine in 1900. Charles and Catherine had married in San Francisco in 1853 and had three sons and three daughters together, though two daughters did not make it past three years old.

His three adult sons were well placed to continue the running of the successful business and could produce the same lines of plants. The family was also closely involved in sports. Thomas represented Otago in rugby for 1899–1890 and was a champion wrestler and Charles (Jnr) was a skilled marksman in rifle shooting and often competed in national events. His son was named William Theodore Charles after his grandfather. This Charlie played rugby for Otago and the All Blacks in 1929 as a lock and gained honours for playing in eight matches against Australia, whilst his wife Enid played representative hockey for Otago.

Brockville Nursery (Fig. 10–11) continued to be run by Herman's sons until sometime in the mid-late twentieth century when traces of the nursery's existence run dry (Fig. 12–13). In the 1960s it is recorded that the Sonntag family members still living there were evicted and the land of "Sonntag Estate" was cleared for a housing development. One of the early residents there was even able to recall memories of gathering fruit from trees left behind from the orchard. The old nursery site now lies within the suburb of Glenross.



Fig. 10 "A large Dunedin vinery: C. Sonntag and Son's grape house, Brockville, Kaikorai. Morris, photo. The late Mr Sonntagg [sic] is seen working among the grapes." As original quality. *Otago Witness*, Issue 2470, 17 July 1901, Page 45.

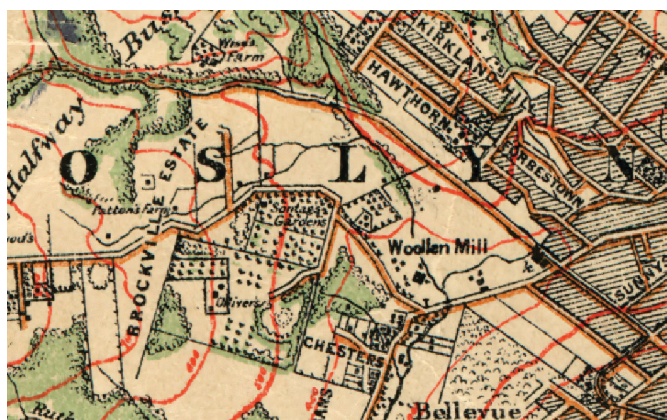


Fig. 11 Sonntag's Gardens within the curve of Brockville Road and Ettrick Street. Topographical map showing Dunedin and vicinity / from surveys by W. T. Neill, district surveyor, 1922. Sourced from LINZ. Crown Copyright reserved.

FOR SALE,

FRUIT TREES. delivered to rail or in Dunedin free, from 2s each to 20s dozen, all varieties. Apples, Pears, Plums, Peaches, Apricots; well-grown trees. Hedge Plants—*Prunus Myrobalana* (Cherry Plum), 30s 100; *Olearia Fosterii*, 20s to 25s 100; Privet, 20s 100; Laurels, 20s 100. Rhododendrons, best colors, 3s each; Flowering Shurbs, 1s 6d. Strawberry, Raspberry, 1s. Loganberries, 1s. Gooseberries and Currants, the best, at 5s per dozen, or 30s 100. Strawberries, 6s 100, 40s per 1000. Raspberries, 2s to 4s dozen, 16s 100. Rhubarb Roots, 6s dozen, 30s 100. Walnuts, 2s 6d. Quince, 2s. Monkey Puzzle, 5s; Weeping Ash Elms, 2s per foot. *Macrocarpa*, 20s 100. *Pinus Insignis*, 20s 100. Bulbs, Bulbs, leading varieties. Violet Plants, 2s dozen. Plenty of Violet Flowers to be picked from

**SONNTAG'S BROCKVILLE NURSERY,
ROSLYN (near Dunedin).**

Fig. 12 *Evening Star*, Issue 19026, 22 August 1925, Page 7.

FOUND, all varieties beautiful Spring Flowers For Sale at Sonntag's Brockville Nursery; all varieties daffodils.

Fig. 13 *Evening Star*, Issue 20612, 11 October 1930, Page 26.

Acknowledgements

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