

Profile of a horticulturist: Jack Hobbs

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Possibly New Zealand's most affable plantsman, Jack Hobbs' (Fig. 1) contributions to horticulture in New Zealand are almost too numerate to iterate: including, but not limited to, his nearly 25 years as Curator Manager of the Auckland Botanic Gardens in Manurewa; an eight-year stint as president of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture; more than 20 years running the Auckland Botanic Garden plant breeding programme; hosting various gardening television and radio shows (including eight years as a presenter of *Maggie's Garden Show*); and the authorship of several books and hundreds of articles published in *NZ Gardener*.



Fig. 1 Jack Hobbs working in his home greenhouse. Photo: Sally Tagg/NZ Gardener/ Stuff.

"Oh but I am usually by far the least qualified person in the room," Hobbs insists, in spite of such overwhelming evidence to the contrary. "Usually everybody else knows more and is much smarter."

It's true that Hobbs took a few detours down the garden path into horticulture, starting out in his working life as an accountant. "But I didn't really like it." So he went back to university to do an arts degree and took a holiday job working in the gardens at a Fisher & Paykel factory.

"From the beginning I just loved playing with plants," Hobbs says. "I don't know if I can really explain it.

But I really felt something for plants. I think it connected to something in me that was already there. I just loved going to work, for really the first time."

He went on to take a job on a council landscape crew. "And the manager of parks at the time, Phil Jew, sent me straight out to the Botanic Gardens and I started here in January 1977. I came here and thought, 'Nice place, I'll stick around for a year or two'."

Around the same time, Hobbs and wife Sandra bought the property they still live on, 2 ha of land in Pukekohe, south Auckland. It had previously been a demolition yard and was littered with junk and old car bodies. The first time they visited, Hobbs took one look and turned around and drove away. "But then we thought about it," he says. "And thought, well, we can afford it."

A couple of years were spent cleaning up the site, then Hobbs started planting. "There weren't any worthwhile trees here," he says. "Well, there was one fig tree, but it subsequently died. Now I have trees all over it. Far too many, according to Sandra! Every tree, every plant here, I have planted."

And at the same time as he was developing his own garden (Fig. 2), he was working at the Botanic Gardens so what he planted often reflected the plants, and indeed the people, he was working with there. "When I worked on a bulb book with Terry Hatch, I planted a lot of bulbs; when I was working with Sandra van der Mast on a book about ferns, I got right into ferns (Fig. 3). I worked a lot with camellia breeder Neville Haydon and planted a lot of camellias.

"And I planted lots of magnolias, I have always absolutely adored magnolias. I have about 25 and they are nearly all New Zealand-bred. I was given my first one by Os Blumhardt in Whāngarei, and

there are also some from Peter Cave, Vance Hooper and the Jury family. We are just so lucky in New Zealand to have such great plant breeders.



Fig. 2 The large greenhouse just north of the house was built by Jack's brother Jeff Hobbs, a boat-builder, cabinet maker, furniture maker and former builder of tiny houses. Jack says the greenhouse is his refuge all through winter and "anytime that it rains". Photo: Sally Tagg/NZ Gardener/ Stuff.



Fig. 3 Hobbs planted the Tasmanian tree fern (*Dicksonia antarctica*) in the 1990s while researching for *Ferns for New Zealand Gardens*, which he collaborated on with Sandra Van der Mast. *Farugium japonicum* var. *giganteum* flourishes below. He loves divaricating plants, like the *Coprosma virescens* on the right, underplanted with *Begonia* 'Dragon Wing'. Photo: Sally Tagg/ NZ Gardener/ Stuff.

"When I look at my trees now, I think immediately of the person I got the tree from. I guess a lot of people are like that. The garden becomes very personal over time."

But this approach does mean the garden wasn't exactly planned as a single cohesive space, Hobbs admits. "I like to describe my garden as a spontaneous event."

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However, as he spent more time with people with a deep understanding of garden design – he cites Ayrilies' creator Bev McConnell as a particularly significant influence on him – he started to think more about structure in his own garden too (Fig. 4–5).



Fig. 4 In the border, colourful and floriferous drifts of *Penstemon* 'Garnet', *Geranium* 'Rozanne' and *Salvia leucantha* surround a young Chatham Island nikau (*Rhopalostylis*). Photo: Sally Tagg/NZ Gardener/Stuff.



Fig. 5 This part of the garden features subtropical plants, and *Aloidendron barberae* make dramatic statement trees. Photo: Sally Tagg/NZ Gardener/Stuff.

At that point it had become, he admits, so densely planted that it was almost impenetrable in parts; and Hobbs, perennially short of time and too busy with work, found it harder and harder to keep on top of. "It was really going to Ayrilies and seeing and feeling what a great garden can be, that inspired me.

"I got to a point where I had too much clutter. Too many plants. I had to deal with that and it was so liberating to get rid of what was, basically, a whole lot of fluff that was taking over. Getting space back, getting light back, getting the opportunity to do new things again. It was the best thing I ever did. Gardens are not static. They change and evolve and hopefully improve."

After a few years working at the gardens, Hobbs was put in charge of the native plant collection. At that stage, it consisted of a few clay banks where flaxes and hebes grew. At the time native flora was regarded as positively second-rate by the gardening public, he admits, and not up there with roses and exotics as desirable garden plants. "If you had an area that was a little difficult, you didn't want to do much maintenance and it was a bit out of sight. That's where you planted your natives."

But Hobbs had always been drawn to hebes. "They were my first real plant love".

He was frustrated that they were prone to disease in Auckland conditions, especially the more colourful sorts. So he started to grow them on from seed, throwing out any that became diseased and growing on the ones that stayed healthy. If they looked good, he would grow clones on from cuttings to trial. It eventually developed into a hebe breeding programme which produced many cultivars grown all over the world today (including the Wiri series).

"Again I was really helped by others," Hobbs says. "The likes of Graeme Platt and Terry Hatch gave me the best germplasm to put into the breeding programme, the genetically superior plants. Whatever you are breeding, you need the very best breeding stock to get outstanding results. And I learned from Keith Hammett you have to have a plan. You have to know what you're trying to achieve. And you have to have a pathway to get there."

Hobbs went on to work closely with Hammett for years, looking at polyanthus and sweetpeas, but mainly focused on breeding dahlias. The modern dahlia at the time had been derived from such a small genetic base, Hammett felt, that its potential was limited. So he and Hobbs collected species dahlia from the wild and from collections all over – Mexico, Denmark, Copenhagen, the UK – and began a breeding programme which has gone on to all but reinvent the dahlia genus worldwide.

"That was such a fun time of my career," Hobbs says. "We came from different perspectives – Keith from an exhibition background, while my focus was on garden performance. But I think we both contributed to our goal of forming the perfect dahlia. Keith is the leading dahlia breeder in the world. I learned so much from him."

Hobbs feels like we are currently seeing a resurgence of interest in plants, although perhaps people are not focusing on high maintenance planting schemes and fussy cultivars as they might have done in the past.

"It's more an appreciation of plants for what they are," he says. "And that's heartening. Because plants are so good for our well-being, so important to our quality of life."

And plants are just so interesting too, I suggest.

"So interesting!," he agrees. "I have been working with plants for nearly 50 years and it's still not long enough! I am only just getting started."

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