

# Nairn and Sons, seedsmen and florists of Christchurch

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Nairn and Sons was a Christchurch nursery, seed, and florist business that grew from a modest family run operation into one of the leading and most well-known nurseries in the country, particularly remembered for their work on red mānuka, crab apples, and floristry. The company stayed in business for an impressive ninety years or so and its owners and managers were highly respected names in New Zealand's horticultural and agricultural industries.



Fig. 1 David Nairn. *Press*, Volume LXXV, Issue 22722, 29 May 1939, Page 14.

David Nairn (Fig. 1), a Scottish farmer, arrived at Lyttelton in 1864 with his wife and young children. In the first years in Christchurch David gained work as a landscaper and gardener and spent times working for both Duncan and Son's and Abbott's nurseries. After testing out a couple of different sites around Christchurch, David Nairn opened his own nursery business, Nairn and Sons, in 1879 on an acre of land at 166 Lincoln Road, Addington.

From the late 1860s David exhibited and won prizes at Christchurch Horticultural Society's competitions for his fruits, vegetables, and flowers. His sons Jack and Robert also took an interest in the profession from an early age, themselves competing at horticultural shows and garnering a reputation for their quality floral arrangements. Through the 1880s they assisted their father with the nursery business where their sister Jessie worked on the floral side of the firm as well as being its secretary.

In these first years, David Nairn's ambitions for his business were apparent when he purchased the neighbouring nursery business of his foremost competitors, Guntrip and Line. Large sheep stations around the Canterbury Plains were common early customers for purchasing shelter trees and a large emphasis of the business was also placed on its floristry department for bouquets and floral displays (Fig. 2). General stock (Fig. 3) included conifers, hardy and climbing plants, roses, fruit trees, stove (warm climate) and greenhouse plants as well as novelties in flowers, bulbs, ornamental plants, trees, and ferns. Early customers of Nairn and Sons included notable old Christchurch figures such as the Deans family, Sir Heaton Rhodes, the Macmillan Browns, Mrs Cracroft-Wilson, and Dr Charles Chilton.

**BEAUTIFUL PALMS for hall or table decoration. Bridal and hand bouquets, wreaths, crosses, and floral designs at NAIRN AND SONS, Florists and Nurserymen, Lincoln road, Christchurch.—[ADVT]**

Fig. 2 *Press*, Volume L, Issue 8506, 10 June 1893, Page 7.

**The choicest Roses, Camellias, Magnolias, Heaths, Boronias, Rhododendrons, Paeonies and Lilium Auratum (the Japan Lily), at Nairn and Sons, Lincoln road. X337**

Fig. 3 *Lyttelton Times*, Volume LXXVI, Issue 9531, 29 September 1891, Page 5.

Their 1899–1900 Plant Catalogue (Fig. 4) lists Nairn and Sons' main nursery as Palm Nursery from where they handled all their business and where plants and trees were displayed for customers, while their Mavis Bank Nursery, "one mile beyond Palm Nursery", consisted of about 7.5 acres of plants and fruit trees in cultivation. The range of plants, flowers and trees offered included new and rare recent imports from England and America, as well as various maple trees from Japan.



Fig. 4 Cover of Nairn and Sons 1899–1900 catalogue.

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By 1904, the business seemingly drops the Mavis Bank Nursery as adverts appear only to refer to Palm Nursery and the 1906–1907 catalogue (Fig. 5A–C, 6) identifies only Palm Nursery as the business centre.



PALM HOUSE.



HIMALAYAN RHODODENDRONS.  
IN RHODODENDRON HOUSE.



ANOTHER VIEW IN RHODODENDRON HOUSE.

Fig. 5A–C Images taken from the 1906–1907 catalogue.

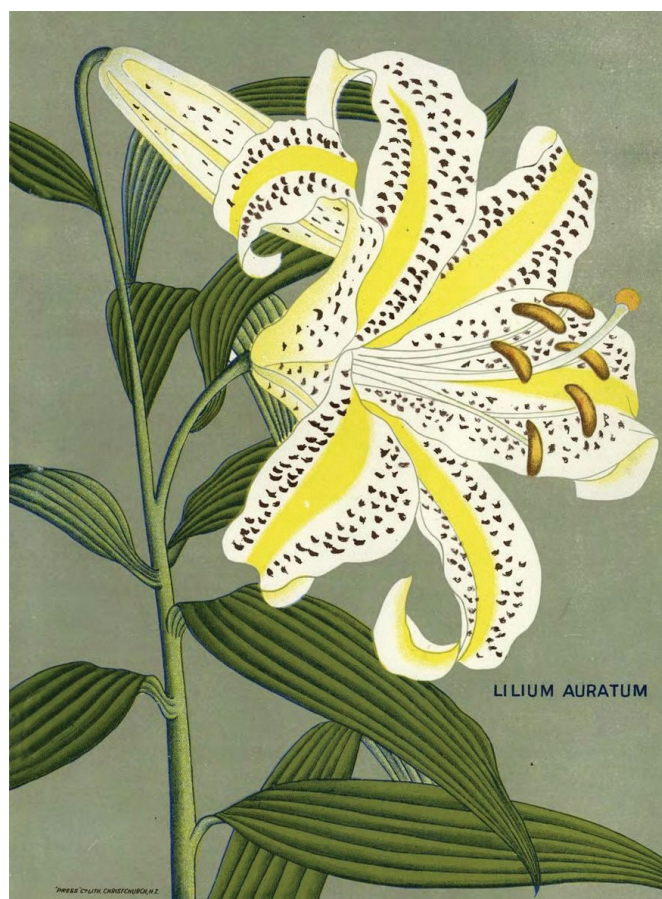


Fig. 6 Illustrated page from Nairn and Son's catalogue for 1906–1907.

Emphasis in this period of the business is still on directly importing new selections (Fig. 7), particularly of ornamental shrubs and trees, into the country but a steady demand for native plants and an increase in orders from overseas is noted as well.

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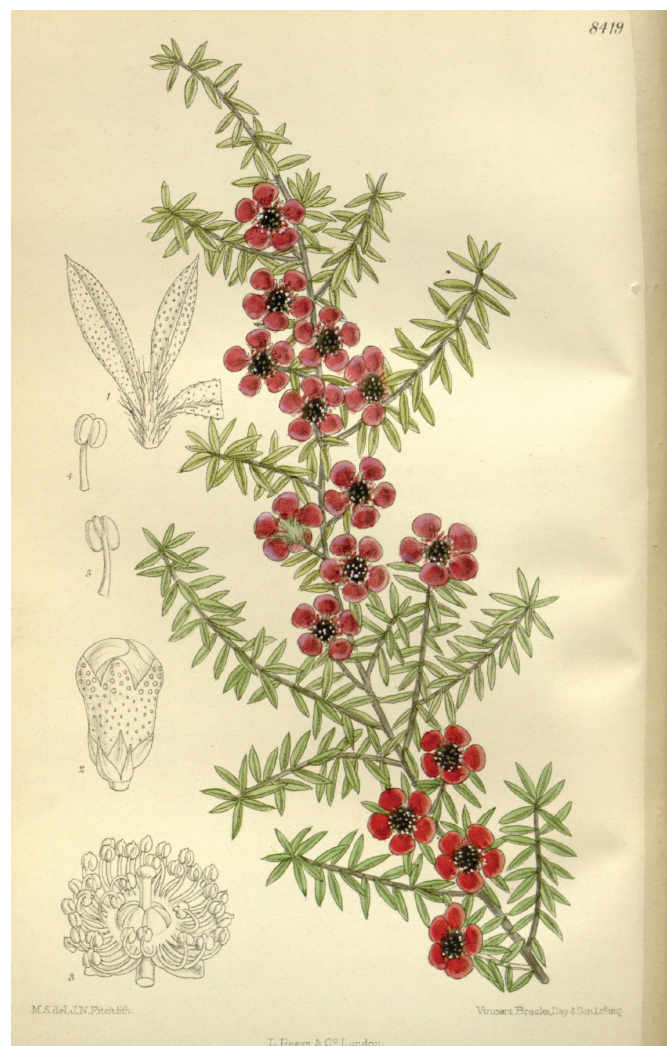
Fig. 7 Press, Volume LXVI, Issue 13906, 3 December 1910, Page 8.



Nairn's published their most monumental (152 page) catalogue in 1906 detailing 5,000 different species or selections of plants, and probably kicking off the era of comprehensive catalogues.

*"Catalogues were magnificent affairs, text-books on their own account."* (S. Charlie Challenger, 1960.)

Nairn and Sons are famously responsible for the development and commercial introduction of the red mānuka plant, *Leptospermum scoparium* var. *Nichollii* (Fig. 8; since 1920 the accepted name for this cultivar became *L. scoparium* 'Nichollsii').



**Fig. 8** Botanical illustration of *Leptospermum scoparium* var. *Nichollii*. Curtis's Botanical Magazine, 1912, Vol. 138, Tab. 8419.

The story of this plant is an interesting one. The original plant was said to be first found in 1898 by Mr W. P. Spencer amongst white flowered mānuka scrub on his land at Chaney's Corner, north Christchurch, and then rediscovered in 1904. A Mr William Nicholls, a wool buyer, visited Spencer's property and obtained shoots of the plant. He was wearing a flowering red sprig of this plant on his buttonhole when he visited Nairn and Son's nursery and, upon the flower being recognised by the Nairn's as unique, was persuaded to provide some cuttings of the plant. Although these cuttings failed, seeds were obtained and germinated, with around 110 seedlings eventually raised. Only seven of these had red flowers and the best one was named for Mr Nicholls. Captain A. A. Dorrien-Smith of the Scilly Isles introduced the plant to England in 1908 after visiting New Zealand to collect many new antipodean plants for his gardens on the islands and for

export to London. The plant was then entered into the International Flower Show at Chelsea in 1912 by Rev. A. T. Boscawen of Cornwall where it won a gold cup for the best novelty plant. Plant catalogues reveal that new cultivars from progeny of this *Leptospermum* had been raised and sold throughout New Zealand, Australia, and England at least up until the 1950s. The red flower colouration from this original parent has continued in more derived descendants, many of which are still grown today.

*"He was a Scotsman, carved out of granite, but in him there was a love of flowers. He devoted much of his attention to the beautiful deep red manuka ... Love of beauty and hard work do not always go together, but both were strong in Mr David Nairn."* (Prof John Macmillan Brown, 1929.)

Following David Nairn's death in 1916, a collection of plants of the red mānuka was gifted by the Nairn family to the Christchurch Botanic Gardens in honour of his involvement with the breeding of the plant.



**Fig. 9** Robert Nairn. *Star (Christchurch)*, Volume XLIV, Issue 332, 27 January 1932, Page 5.

The management of the Christchurch business was thereafter taken over by Robert Nairn (Fig. 9–10). The eldest Nairn son, Jack, had moved to Palmerston North to set up on his own business. There he built glasshouses and found a penchant for growing indoor grapes, tomatoes, and cucumbers. Jack's sons continued with that successful line of business.

Well educated and enthusiastic on all things botanical, geographical, and historical, Robert's knowledge and management of plants was

said to be second to none by his fellow nurserymen, and he loved to teach and pass on his knowledge to others. Robert was active in many horticultural societies and served as President of the Association of New Zealand Nurserymen in 1920.



**Fig. 10** Robert Nairn in the original nursery. *The City Beautiful*, 20 June 1934.



Throughout his time as head of the firm, general stock and novelties raised at the nursery were sent around the world, including to Australia and Great Britain. In 1939 Robert Nairn made a trip around the British Isles to "widen the interest of the firm". It was a prosperous period for the business, with many plants imported (Fig. 11), sold domestically (Fig. 12), and also exported.

## "Gardening, the Pastime of Kings, and the Choice of Philosophers"

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AZALEA MOLLE SEEDLINGS, mixed colours; set with flower buds.  
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RHODODENDRONS, Nature's species; many of the best not procurable elsewhere.  
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JAPANESE TREE PROWEA, a very fine lot, in best varieties.

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PURPLE BEECH—Of this handsome foliage plant we hold a very fine lot, and ask for inspection of same.  
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Fig. 11 *Press*, Volume LXXV, Issue 19620, 16 May 1929, Page 6.

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Price 20/- per 100, or £7 10s per  
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NAIRN and SONS,

Lincoln road,

CHRISTCHURCH.

P.S.: Nairn and Sons established in  
1879, and still retain their youth-  
ful outlook.

Fig. 12 *Press*, Volume LXXII, Issue 21885, 11 September 1936, Page 1.

Closer to home, "Very many of the trees and shrubs in the Christchurch parks were reared by the Nairns, and very many were given to the city by the firm," as *The Press* newspaper reported in 1935. They also wrote that "Mr James Young, during his 20 years as Curator of the Botanic Gardens, chose freely from the extensive stocks of the Lincoln Road nursery, taking shrubs of all kinds and many novelties to furnish the gardens under his control. Beside the Christchurch gardens, many other public gardens in Australia and New Zealand have bought from Nairn and Sons."

In 1924, a special collection of trees from the nursery was donated and planted at Barrington Park. Of those included were "a weeping elm, a horizontal elm, a weeping ash, a weeping golden ash, a Kilmarnock willow, a weeping rowan, a weeping birch, a horizontal thorn and a weeping thorn."

It was also noted by botanists that the only ginkgo tree known to have fruited in New Zealand at that time was one at Nairn's nurseries in 1937 at the age of fifty.

Robert Nairn delivered the 1932 annual Banks Lecture to the New Zealand Institute of Horticulture on "The Early History of Horticulture in New Zealand," showcasing his interest and knowledge in the development of horticultural practices in New Zealand as well as the efforts of his fellow nurserymen. Robert died in 1938 at the age of 78 leaving no further family.



Fig. 13 W. J. Humm. *Press*, Volume LXXXV, Issue 22722, 29 May 1939, Page 14.

William John ('Jack') Humm (Fig. 13) next managed the nursery, which by this time had dropped the "and Son" part of its name. Jack Humm had worked at the nursery since 1900 and was still there 60 years later. He started out in the delivery and despatch unit (Fig. 14) before becoming nursery foreman and overseeing a staff of thirty. Jack Humm bred and introduced many selections of crab apples. Forty different crab apples and flowering apples were developed between 1900 and 1950, and one early success produced was

the cultivar 'Sir Heaton Rhodes' in 1925. He also named new yellow selections after David Nairn and Robert Nairn as well as a crimson 'Nairn's Centennial' and one after himself, a red called 'Jack Humm'. The business still traded strongly in floristry too (Fig. 15). In 1958 it was noted that the nursery made about eighty-five floral wreaths a day. To help with the demand, cut flowers were kept in cool stores to keep them fresh.



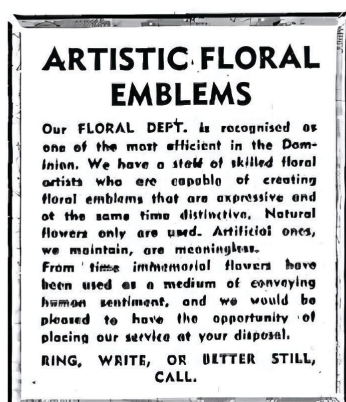
Fig. 14 Arthur Collett, an apprentice, standing next to a Ford van belonging to Nairn & Sons, with tools on the ground beside him, outside a workshop, probably Canterbury Region. 1919. Williams, Edgar Richard, 1891–1983: Negatives, lantern slides, stereographs, colour transparencies, monochrome prints, photographic ephemera. Ref: 1/4-121137-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/32056842>.



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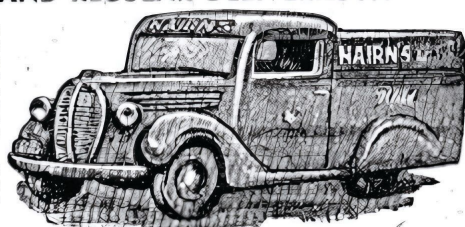
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Fig. 15 Press, Volume XCV, Issue 28208, 21 February 1957, Page 9.

Humm was assisted at the nursery by his own two sons, his daughter, and several highly trained and long serving employees. He was also a leading authority on horticulture in his time and involved closely in many national and regional organisations.

Nairn's nursery grew to be one of the most important nurseries in the country. Operations appear to have ceased in the late 1960s when land it occupied was bought for new motorway developments. Nairn Street in Spreydon (formerly Edenbridge Street), off Lincoln Road, was named in 1948 in honour of David Nairn and the iconic nursery he founded.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Murray Dawson and Andrew Maloy from the RNZIH for their editorial suggestions and expertise on appropriate botanical naming, and to Sue Molloy at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens for her assistance with some additional research.

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