

## Associate of Honour

### Julian John Matthews



Julian Matthews is one of New Zealand's most distinguished and influential writers and photographers of plants and gardens. In recognition of his distinguished service to horticulture he has been elected an Associate of Honour of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture AHRH(NZ).

Julian was born in Wellington on 4th November 1951. He was the second of two boys, some eight years younger than his brother Lewis who, like their parents before them, also went on to lead distinguished careers in horticulture.

Julian's father James William "Jim" Matthews founded *New Zealand Gardener* magazine in September 1944, quite an achievement in wartime. A special act of Parliament was passed enabling the magazine to use the required paper on the basis that it would help the war effort through encouraging people to grow their own food as commercial harvests were required for the armed forces.

The family moved from Paraparaumu to Waikanae in 1953. Their new 3-acre property had a lovely old garden designed by pioneering landscape architect Alfred Buxton but it was so overgrown that the lights in the house had to remain on all day. Within a few years the trees had been thinned, leaving the good ones such as the avenues of Japanese flowering cherries.

At this time Jim Matthews was editor of *New Zealand Gardener* and his wife Barbara Winifred Matthews was assistant editor. The family also grew cut flowers such as roses and they were amongst the first to produce cut proteas. Sundays were particularly busy harvesting flowers, not Julian's favourite pastime as a youngster. The family also began growing a range of subtropical plants on their frost free property.

Jim Matthews had been a journalist, including a period (from 1934 to 1942) as editor of the *Dominion* newspaper and writer of a syndicated column entitled 'Garden with Matthews'. Julian remembers his father was fanatical about plants and very scientific in his approach. His *New Zealand Garden Dictionary* was a best seller during the 1950s and 1960s.

Julian recalls that his mother was a very good writer, a skill honed working as a journalist at the *Dominion* where she met Jim. She had been a keen gardener since her teenage years. Barbara Matthews later became an accomplished photographer, and Julian soon picked up the photography bug.

Julian's childhood memories include visits to the family home by many of the great characters of horticulture of the day. He would listen transfixed to their adventurous stories about plant hunting and the like. His father's old newspaper colleagues would also drop in for a chat, so it was an intriguing mix of horticulture and journalism. To this day Julian is fascinated by the great characters of gardening, an aspect he has written much about throughout his career.

The family ran a garden centre for two years when Julian was in his late teenage years. During this time, Julian started successfully selling by mail order seedlings of *Hosta sieboldiana*, at that time a difficult to obtain perennial. He gathered the seed from his parents' garden. The garden centre closed when his father's health declined.

Julian thought he too would become a journalist, but instead accepted a

job offer in Levin growing orchids. Although it proved to be a tough business he enjoyed the interesting characters he met. After three years he decided to branch out on his own, starting a small business landscaping and maintaining gardens. He shudders when he recalls the pebble gardens and concrete kerbs that were so fashionable at that time.

Julian decided that writing about plants might be a way of escaping the repetition of his business, and also enable him to travel the country whilst getting paid.

Following a few initial rejections, he began to have articles published in a range of magazines, including *New Zealand Gardener*. He became interested in early Pacific Island gardening methods and went to Rarotonga to research and photograph an article on the subject; this was later published in the Australian magazine *GEO*. The breakthrough, setting him on the path to becoming a full time horticultural journalist and photographer, came when he was contracted by the Automobile Association (AA) to write a book on trees. Published as *AA Trees in New Zealand*, it sold in huge numbers.

Julian found that he loved his new lifestyle, especially the travel around New Zealand. In 1983, on his way to visit the kauri forests in the far north, he met his future wife Liz at the replica of *The Bounty* in Whangarei. He invited the young Canadian journalist to visit him at their family home in Waikanae as she travelled down the country. To his surprise a few weeks later he received a phone call to say she was on her way.

Shortly afterwards the pair were in Wetaskiwin, Alberta, Canada, where they married in the garden of Liz's parents. Julian recalls borrowing a jacket from Liz's father for the wedding. "They wouldn't let Liz come back to New Zealand with me unless we got married, to which I happily agreed," he says. They went on to have three sons, Rob (born 1989), Ian (1992) and Doug (1994).

In 1987 Julian accepted an offer to become the editor of *New Zealand Gardener*, some twenty years after his parents association with the magazine had come to an end. The magazine was tiny at this time, and as they did not yet have computers they compiled it manually. "I was truly thrown in at the deep end, but it turned into a wonderful experience," he says.

Within three months the magazine had new owners, Sunshine Investments, who Julian tactfully describes as "colourful". Times were tough; at one stage there were insufficient funds to buy stamps.

In early 1989 the magazine was purchased by Dermott Malley, a flamboyant entrepreneur with horticultural leanings and business acumen. Julian recalls flying to Auckland for his first meeting with Dermott, being collected at the airport in a Porsche and later taken to a fancy lunch in a Rolls Royce, feeling a little self conscious in his casual shirt among the high flying company.

In 1993 INL (Independent Newspapers Ltd) purchased *New Zealand Gardener*, in what was to become the first of their magazine stable. Julian informed the new owners he wanted the magazine to be full colour and they immediately agreed.

The magazine flourished, and circulation increased from 13,000 when Julian first became editor to 40,000 by the time INL purchased it. Circulation surged further when a television promotion featured on *Palmers Garden Show* (later to become *Maggie's Garden Show*). This included a competition with first prize being a trip to Chelsea Flower Show, and as part of this promotion there was a feature item on Julian, how he was running the magazine and about his home garden.

Within a few months of the television feature, *New Zealand Gardener's* circulation jumped to 60,000 then climbed steadily to 79,000, reflecting the huge interest in gardening at the time as well as the magazine's successful formula of being both entertaining and informative, with a willingness to gently push the boundaries.

When Julian started as editor the budget was very modest and he funded his travel expenses by writing a monthly gardening column for *North & South* magazine. As *New Zealand Gardener* became successful there were more funds available for him to travel within the country, seeking out interesting gardens and writing about them.

As the circulation continued to grow there were also opportunities for Julian to travel overseas. He travelled abroad for four consecutive years from 1994, his travels proving inspirational and enabling readers to experience some of the greatest international gardens and gardeners. His fondest memories include stories on Helen Dillon in Dublin, the colourful Anthony Paul, who grew up in Auckland and is now a top garden designer working in England and Switzerland, and amazing gardens and gardening characters in British Columbia, California, Connecticut and New York. He recalls with amusement how on the first trip, overflowing with enthusiasm, he drove straight from Heathrow Airport with photographer Gil Hanly to 'Great Dixter' in East Sussex to interview Christopher Lloyd. Christopher had other priorities however, putting Julian straight to work in the garden, a memory he cherishes as Lloyd remains one of his gardening heroes.

Julian continued to indulge his childhood passion for great New Zealand characters, tracking down and meeting with the likes of the famous florist Barry Ferguson in New York. Barry had progressed from a small flower shop in Christchurch to the highest echelons of New York society, with clients such as the Rockefellers, New York Zoo and Steven Spielberg. "I got to stay with Barry for three days, tagging along as he went about his hectic business, which made for a special story," says Julian.

The editor's role was a demanding one, especially during the initial years when Julian was writing the entire editorial section of the magazine as well as compiling and writing a lot of the stories. For years he seldom had a break.

In 1997 Pamela McGeorge was appointed assistant editor, taking a considerable load off Julian. In 1998 Julian resigned as editor, with Pamela taking over for a year.

In 1999 Julian returned as editor for one year before again resigning. He then concentrated on freelance garden writing and photography.

Today Julian remains one of *New Zealand Gardener's* main contributors with two regular monthly columns plus additional photography assignments. He still chases great Kiwi characters and features them in his writing.

He is still encountering new plants and showcasing innovative ways of using them. His one acre garden, part of the original property bought by his parents nearly sixty years ago, is open by appointment and regularly visited by overseas groups who are invariably enthusiastic and inspiring.

Julian believes gardening is fun and an adventure and he remains fascinated with the people who garden. This passion has driven him throughout his career. It has made him one of gardening's greatest communicators, and like his parents before him, his writings have significantly influenced gardens and gardeners in this country. In 1964 Julian's parents were made joint Associates of Honour of the RNZIH and in 2011 this honour is also most befitting for him.

#### **Books written or co-written by Julian Matthews**

AA trees in New Zealand (Lansdowne Press, 1983).

Creative home landscaping in New Zealand (Lansdowne Press, 1984).

The New Zealander's garden (with Gordon Collier, Lansdowne Press, 1985).

The New Zealand garden book (Lansdowne Press, 1986, revised 1992).

New Zealand native plants for your garden (Penguin, 1987).

Favourite native plants for the New Zealand garden (Penguin, 1993).

New Zealand town and country gardens (with Gil Hanly, David Bateman, 1993).

New Zealand city garden style (with Gil Hanly & Lynda Hallinan, David Bateman, 2000).

Pots: bright Ideas for the modern New Zealand container garden (with Janine Arents, Random House, 2000).

Creative ideas for New Zealand gardens (with Diana Anthony & Gil Hanly, David Bateman, 2002).

The kitchen gardener (Woodslane, 2007).

Foliage for the contemporary New Zealand garden (Random House, 2007).

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Jack Hobbs**

## Associate of Honour

### John Robert Massy Wills



John Wills at the award ceremony.  
Photo: Gil Hanly.

Just off the road on the Napier-Taupo highway is the 30 acre (12 ha) Trelinnoe Park – a remarkable collection of woody plant species set to take advantage of a dramatic landscape. A testament to John, and also to his wife Fiona, Trelinnoe Park has become a nationally recognised garden and amongst the pioneers of garden tourism in New Zealand.

John's love of plants extended from his youngest days. A school project on native plants won him a prize as a 3rd former. This brought on derisive snorting by the headmaster who scoffed that if a 3rd former had won it, then it wasn't much of a prize. Little was he to know that John would develop one of the finest private woodland gardens in the country acknowledged by the New Zealand Gardens Trust as a Garden of National Significance.

In 1956 John and his brother Brian purchased 2800 acres (1134 ha) of previously burnt-over and scrub-covered land to farm for "business and pleasure". Starting from the mid

1960s John created a memorable garden which by the 1980s was complete with accommodation and café. It has an extensive collection of *Magnolia* and *Acer* species and cultivars interwoven with a magnificent woodland style garden. These were grown in what is generally recognised as a hostile environment for these species but John's understanding of the land and his keen farmer's observation noted that the site was unusually frost free. The rolling landforms and shelter from the northwest helped protect the plantings and create the garden as it is today.

John has acquired a deep knowledge of plants during his development of the garden and has brought to it an innate sense of design. John describes botany as humbling, saying "the more you begin to know the more you realise how little you know". Species from sources as diverse as Brazil, Mexico and the Himalayas can be found throughout the garden. John has always enjoyed the creative opportunities that working with plants and the landscape offers, turning a keen eye to the staged development of his garden. As a member of the New Zealand Wool Board he had the opportunity to travel and amongst his fondest recollections is Bodnant Garden in North Wales which he credits as having the most influence on his own garden design.

Another of John's plant passions has been rhododendrons. He recalls visiting both the Chinese and Indian sides of the Himalayas and seeing hundreds of acres of rhododendrons in bloom through the mountains. His love of rhododendrons resulted in his chairing of the New Zealand Rhododendron Association in its earliest days and he is a life member

of the association. Today, he continues his rhododendron connection as a Trustee of Heritage Park in Manawatu which has been established to ensure that heirloom rhododendrons are not lost to cultivation in this country.

Along with his membership of the New Zealand Wool Board his business associations have included being a board member of the Eastern and Central Trust Bank, Regional President of Federated Farmers and chairman of Farmers Mutual Insurance Group. John modestly notes that "you have to come out of the back blocks every now and then to see what is going on!" The farm itself is an industry model for sustainability as the family fences off the ravines and gorges leaving them to revert to native bush and focuses on the production areas of the farm. Thousands of trees have also been planted to help protect the land.

In developing his garden John spoke of working with the land and using its natural forms to create sweeping borders and paths. Gordon Collier commented:

"John has amassed a noteworthy collection of woody plants – in area probably the largest private collection in New Zealand and second only to Gwavas in importance. Though a comparatively young collection, John's understanding of the climate, soil and topography at Trelinnoe has enabled him to establish plants not usually seen on a cold temperate site and furthermore to grow them on to near maturity in a remarkably short period of time."

John Wills believes that gardens are part and parcel of humanity and ingrained in the civilisation of