

Award of Associate of Honour of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture (AHRIH)

Prof Helen May Leach



Helen Leach is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Otago, specialising in culinary anthropology and the domestication of food plants.

Helen has quickly risen through the faculty ranks in anthropology at the university, from Tutor (1966–1968), Teaching Fellow (1969–1971), Lecturer (1972–1979), Senior Lecturer (1979–1991), Associate Professor (1992–2001), full Professor (2002–2008), to her current status of Emeritus Professor (from 2008). She has also been Head of Department (1993–1997) and Acting Head of Department (2004).

During these academic responsibilities Helen has supervised the research of many Master's and Doctoral students. Helen's research interests include:

- domestication of food plants, cultivation and processing techniques in traditional societies
- evolution of human diet and culinary practices
- history of archaeology and anthropology in Oceania
- Polynesian stone technology and its development
- social history and anthropology of culinary practices and horticulture.

Helen is an accomplished author and co-author of 22 books, covering interesting aspects of cultivation and preparation of food plants, both ancient and contemporary. *1,000 Years of Gardening in New Zealand* (1984) and *The Pavlova Story* (2008) are among her best-known titles. Other books were co-authored with Helen's sisters, Mary Browne and Nancy Tichborne, such as the well-known *The Cook's Garden* (1980), *The New Zealand Bread Book* (1996), *The Cook's Salad Garden* (1997), and *The Cook's Herb Garden* (2001). These iconic books are imprinted on the collective psyche of gardeners and cooks throughout New Zealand.

As evidenced by these sisterly collaborations, Helen's family come from a lineage of gardeners and horticulturists. Helen and her family tended a large vegetable garden and her mother was sister to the three Watkins brothers who established prominent horticultural businesses based in New Plymouth.

From an early age, Helen was drawn to archaeology. When she was 15, Helen joined the newly formed Otago Anthropological Society.

In 1963 Helen enrolled at the University of Otago, majoring in Anthropology. She completed her BA in 1966 and gained a MA (with 1st Class Hons) in 1969. When starting her Master's thesis, Helen became interested in early European accounts of Māori subsistence and their use of wild food plants. This interest broadened to gardening and gathering traditions by cultures throughout the Pacific.

Part of her PhD studies involved a three-year excavation programme in Palliser Bay, Wairarapa, beginning in 1969 with her husband Foss.

The coastal sites they examined included extensive walled garden plots, where Helen and Foss established that construction work had been started by early Māori soon after the settlement of Aotearoa. Findings from these excavations were the topic of Helen's PhD thesis, submitted in 1976.

Upon realising that she knew more about traditional Polynesian gardening practices than those of her own European ancestors, Helen secured a Rhodes Visiting Fellowship and was based at St Hilda's College (Oxford, UK) from 1980 to 1981. There she studied the role of kitchen gardening in Aotearoa / New Zealand which provided the material for her acclaimed book *1,000 Years of Gardening in New Zealand* (1984).

These experiences set the scene for further research and books over the following decades.

Helen's professional affiliations and memberships span a range of organisations, including the Friends of the Dunedin Botanic Gardens, Garden History Society (Australia), New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women, New Zealand Rhodes Scholars Association, Otago Institute (RSNZ), Otago Settlers' Association, Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture (RNZIH), and the Royal Society of New Zealand (RSNZ, who elected her as a Fellow from 2004).

This citation only touches upon a long and distinguished career¹. Helen has attained the highest pinnacles of academic excellence while also becoming a household name through her award-winning and practical horticultural, gardening and cooking books. This is a rare combination of successes.

¹ Following this citation, Helen Leach provides a more comprehensive and personal account of her horticultural achievements in anthropology and garden history.

Helen Leach's achievements have been recognised in the Queen's Birthday Honours of 2018, when she was appointed an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM) for services to culinary anthropology.

In 2008, the RNZIH presented Helen Leach with an Award in Garden History. As evidenced here, for 2019 the National Executive consider Prof Helen May Leach to be a most worthy recipient of their highest award, an Associate of Honour of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture AHRIH(NZ).

Selected research grants:

- 1998: funding from the Otago Research Committee for research on 'The historical meaning of home' (Principal Investigator: Prof Barbara Brookes).
- 2000: Marsden Fund project 'The prehistoric significance of the bracken rhizome' (Principal Investigator: Dr Matthew McGlone).
- 2004: Marsden Fund project 'The development of New Zealand's culinary traditions'.

Publications:

- 22 books, including co-authorships
- 43 chapters in books
- 45 journal articles, peer-reviewed.

Other achievements:

- More than 22 conference presentations, 8 keynote addresses and 19 public addresses
- 6 PhD supervisions
- 22 MA supervisions
- 1 MSc supervision.

**Citation prepared by
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