

Ellen Patricia (Pat) Stuart AHRIH 28 September 1927 – 9 September 2021

Pat Stuart began her horticultural career at the Christchurch City Council Reserves Department nursery in 1944. Her first work was in the propagating section. Pat had an intense interest in plants that endured throughout her life. She enrolled for the Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture's six-year diploma course and gained the National Diploma in Horticulture with Honours. Having passed her matriculation exam, she also took Botany Stage 1 at the University of Canterbury.

To gain commercial experience for one year, Pat transferred to Harrison's Nursery in Palmerston North, then returned to the Christchurch Botanic Gardens in 1947. Besides receiving a sound training in general horticulture, especially mastering the skills of propagation, Pat became an accomplished floral artist and undertook the floral work for Christchurch City Council. This involved much of the floral decorations required for the Royal Visit in January 1954, and subsequent vice-regal visits to the city. She became a member of the Floral Art Society of New Zealand and gained a Teacher's Certificate and a Judging Certificate. Pat was a past president of the Southern Area of the Floral Art Society and a past president of the Eastern-Southland Floral Art Club.

Pat met her husband-to-be Keith when she was head propagator and he moved his apprenticeship (along with twin brother Ross) from the Dunedin Botanic Gardens to the Christchurch Botanic Gardens in the late 1940s. Pat and Keith married at St Peter's Anglican Church in Christchurch on 18 October 1952.

They lived in Clinton for a while where Keith had set up a nursery. They then moved to manage the family farm at Waipahi, where Pat wrote her thesis and became the second woman in New Zealand to gain her National Diploma in Horticulture. It was also at Waipahi that they raised

their three children (son Lynn, and daughters Jane and Kate) and built up a substantial wholesale nursery business.

Their business flourished. Rare and noteworthy trees, shrubs, alpine and herbaceous plants, including natives, were collected and propagated. Pat specialised in hellebores. One of the first interesting seedlings to be selected and named by her was the clear white-flowered *Helleborus niger* 'White Magic' (Fig. 1A–B). Pat's breeding of hybrid hellebores was carried out over many years, leading to the outstanding cultivar, *Helleborus* 'Moonshine', which is popular among florists. Both cultivars are still available in New Zealand and other countries.¹

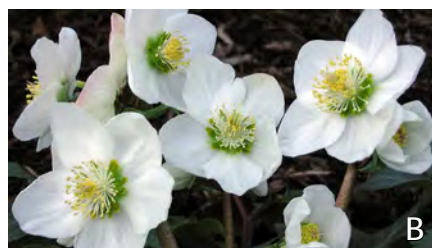


Fig. 1 *Helleborus niger* 'White Magic'.
A, Pat Stuart standing behind the selection she raised. Photo supplied by the family.
B, close-up of flowers.
Photo: Jane Wrigglesworth.

Following his marriage, their son Lynn took over the farm at Waipahi and Pat and Keith moved to their property in Wanaka in 1984. A lot of hard work was involved digging drainage channels before the new house could be built and the garden developed.

They felt that they were too young to retire, and so a floral studio arose. Run by Pat with up to eight other staff, it was a great success. Back then there were no other florists in the region, so they were kept busy servicing weddings and funerals from as far afield as Franz Josef through to Tekapo. Pat and Keith also established a new production nursery, growing plants for their own garden and for sale. Pat continued to work with hellebores, bringing back the first doubles to be seen in New Zealand for daughter Kate's nursery, and selling thousands of a blue poppy, *Meconopsis* 'Lingholm', grown on from seed brought back from Scotland.

Pat was a regular guest speaker throughout Southland at many organisations interested in gardening. Her dedication to horticulture, and willingness to assist and guide others, led to her being becoming an Associate of Honour of the RNZIH from 1999.

After about 10 years, Pat and Keith sold the lease on the floral studio but continued to run their nursery until they reluctantly closed it in 2014.

Pat and Keith Stuart's love of plants and the desire for a beautiful garden continued. This saw their Wanaka garden, on an uneven, rough, swampy piece of land, become a show place for visitors from throughout the world. Stuart's Garden (Fig. 2A–B) has been featured on television, and in magazines, including *New Zealand House and Garden*, *The New Zealand Gardener*, *Commercial Horticulture* and newspaper features.

¹ This keen interest in hellebores has been passed on; Pat and Keith's daughter Kate Telford runs the specialist hellebore nursery Clifton Homestead Nursery in Balclutha, with her husband Ken, and they still sell many of her mother's cultivars. Kate's work and commitment to hellebores over many years was recognised by the RNZIH in 2015, when she received the Plant Raisers' Award.

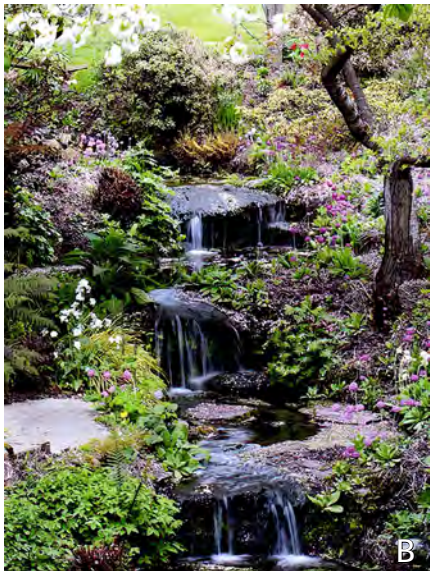


Fig. 2 Stuart's Garden. **A**, garden and house. **B**, Bullock Creek.

The garden was listed as a 5-Star garden with the NZ Gardens Trust from 2009 to 2018. The NZGT description read:

"Stuarts' garden is on one acre of ground which was originally a peat bog. A feature of the garden is the swiftly flowing Bullock Creek which is host to a number of tame trout. The creek edge has been planted with hostas, Japanese and Siberian irises, ferns, *Peltiphyllum* and rogersias. Viewing decks are placed at vantage points along the creeks. The original section

contained a number of springs which have been diverted into creeks which flow into the main stream. Rhododendrons flourish in the habitat and are at their best in early November.

Hellebores, primulas, meconopsis, fritillarias, paeonies and trilliums provide an interesting display in spring, followed by deciduous azaleas and ornamental flowering trees. These latter species provide great autumn colour in March and April. There are woodland walks leading up to a secluded area with a gazebo and a tunnel house with tomatoes in season, special alpines and other treasures planted in troughs outside. Behind a 100 year old cottage, is a potager backed by climbing roses.

Beside the cottage is a blue and white border of old-fashioned flowers which complement the blue and white exterior. Another potager shaped like the sun's rays, nestles in front. A rock garden leads down to a shade house which contains connoisseur plants. Well grown plants propagated from the garden are available from the nursery, a short distance away."

After 66 years of marriage and a shared love of horticulture, Keith passed away on 26 December 2018 at 90 years of age. Both Keith and Pat (Fig. 3) will be dearly missed by their extended family (including 14 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren), their local community in Wanaka, and numerous horticultural friends from throughout New Zealand and the world.



Fig. 3 Keith and Pat Stuart, 2017.

References

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**Obituary prepared by
Murray Dawson and Ken Telford**