

Obituaries

Desmond ('Des') Douglas Riach Kew Dip, NDH (Hons), FRIH 25 Dec 1930 – 22 Feb 2021



Des Riach started his career in horticulture in 1947 as an apprentice in the Linwood Nursery of the Christchurch City Council Parks and Reserves Department. During the weekends Des worked for Wilsons Nursery. He stayed at Christchurch City Council for two years then moved to Duncan & Davies Nursery in New Plymouth for six months working under John ('Jack') Goodwin¹.

In 1951, when the Christchurch City Council assumed responsibility for Christchurch Botanic Gardens and Hagley Park from the Domains Board, Des transferred back to Christchurch and worked in the Botanic Gardens.

Morris Barnett, Director of Parks and Reserves, encouraged Des to go to Kew Gardens in England for further study and experience. Coming from New Zealand, Des first had to have a one-year orientation in a UK nursery before attending Kew. Des worked for Russell's Nursery under 'Old Man Russell' who was a demanding perfectionist, known for developing the strain of Russell lupins which all had to be propagated by cuttings. Later in life, back in New Zealand, Des used to get upset when people referred to the masses

of seedling lupins here as 'Russell lupins', exclaiming "They are just wild seedlings!".

'Old Man Russell' also had his staff produce rhubarb for Christmas desserts – a difficult and exacting process to 'force' rhubarb in midwinter.

In early 1953, Des went to Kew and initially worked in the main conservatory which had suffered war damage, meaning it was compulsory for staff to wear hard hats inside and outside. One large job there was 'Fog Washing', washing the outside of the glass to remove smog build up. The usual period of training in the conservatory was six months but Des stayed there for 12 months, followed by working a further six months in the rock garden.

Each day the staff had to be ready for work at 8 am and worked in iron-rimmed wooden clogs which Des loved so much that he used them for nursery work throughout his life because they were warm and comfortable.

While at Kew, Des met Eric Curtis who later became Director of Glasgow Botanic Gardens and they went on holiday to Vienna by train through the Russian Zone with all the blinds down due to the Cold War. He also became friends with well-known horticulturists Brian Till and Jim Appleby.

Des took over the lodging of John Taylor (who went on to become a chairman of the RNZIH), and stayed there for two years. Phil Jew, later Director of Regional Parks, Auckland, was also at Kew at this time.

During his studies for the Kew Diploma Des wrote his research paper on New Zealand kōwhai, *Sophora*, and also studied the Easter Island kōwhai, *S. toromiro*.

From Kew, Des embarked on an epic walking tour, using the youth hostels of England and Scotland, walking from Land's End in Cornwall to John o' Groats in Northern Scotland.

Back in New Zealand, in 1955, Des was appointed propagator at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens, much to his disappointment as he had been promised a more senior role. However, the good news was he met Jennie Maxwell there who was later to become his wife.

Shortly afterwards, Des accepted a position with Wellington City Council and worked with Eddie Hutt (Director) and Ian Galloway who was in charge of the Wellington Botanic Gardens. While Eddie Hutt was away on an overseas tour, Ian and Des developed a number of projects. They extended Tulip Sunday to Tulip Week, started the Lady Norwood Rose Garden and planted the ring of pōhutukawa around the edge of the harbour to Rongotai Airport. Des found Wellington most interesting as they had to produce three of everything, especially bedding plants, to cope with the salt-laden sea winds that buffeted the city and killed many of the plants.

In 1958, Des was appointed Superintendent of Parks and Reserves for Masterton Borough Council and he and Jennie were married that year. After three months there Des was offered a role as Assistant Director at Palmerston North and, later, a role at Otari Plant Museum in Wellington, but decided to stay at Masterton as he had made a commitment to the role there. At the time Masterton was recovering from a large earthquake in August 1942 with many businesses vacating buildings for repairs. There was little money to run the department and Des had to be quite hands-on as well as working closely with other local authorities.

¹ See John William Goodwin's obituary in the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, 2006, Vol. 9(1): 22–24.

He was also involved in coordinating and planning with the engineer of the Golden Shears Stadium which opened in 1960.

Des was his own man and interested in all forms of horticulture with plants being the important thing to him. He completed his National Diploma in Horticulture with a thesis on 'Small bulbs for the Rock Garden'. He was interested in the Lunar Calendar and had success with rooting cuttings following this system.

In 1962, Des bought the Tomes Road Nursery in Christchurch which specialised in perennials and rock garden plants, from Ross Wilson. The Wahine storm in 1968 caused considerable damage to the nursery and other land he owned resulting in the loss of much nursery stock. During the next few winters Des pruned apple and pear trees on local orchards in Harewood to top-up his income.

In 1974, a further round of bad weather caused more damage and stock losses. During that year he was appointed Superintendent of Grounds for the North Canterbury Hospital Board and he sold the nursery to his wife Jennie to avoid any conflict of interest. With a sizeable budget and about 75 staff, Des managed all the grounds and vegetable production for the North Canterbury Hospital Board including: Christchurch, Burwood, Princess Margaret, Sunnyside, Rangiora, Kaikoura, Hanmer Springs, Leeston, Akaroa and the Chatham Islands,

and a large vegetable production unit in Marshlands. Des employed young people and worked with the Probation Board offering suitable prisoners pre-release work experience. Des really loved the job and continued in this role until his retirement in September 1990. After his retirement he was appointed as a horticultural tutor at Paparoa Prison until the funding dried up.

During his time with the nursery and the hospitals Des was always involved in the horticultural community.

He was a member of the NZ Alpine Garden Society, the Canterbury Horticultural Society, the Christchurch Beautifying Society, and the Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture (RNZIH).

Des joined the RNZIH in the first year of his apprenticeship, a remarkable 74 years ago. He made many contributions, including:

- Chair of the Canterbury Branch of the RNZIH
- Organised a RNZIH Canterbury Conference
- Took over from John Taylor as Moderator of RNZIH Exams
- Oversaw the dismantling of the RNZIH Exams system when the Government introduced Industry Training Organisations and removed the examination role for the Institute.

He also undertook:

- Talks to many groups in and around Christchurch on many horticultural topics

- Garden judging in Christchurch and Ashburton
- Organising and helping with Alpine Garden Shows and displays at the big flower shows
- Active member of the Canterbury Horticultural Society
- Helped set up Friends of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens Constitution
- Encouraged young apprentices to write articles in horticultural publications
- And much more which he continued until 2013.

A major hobby for Des was orchids, all sorts of orchids collected from many different sources. He took over a comprehensive collection from a friend who lived across the road. He also had a collection of hardy orchids such as *Dactylorhiza*, pleiones, and New Zealand native orchids.

In his retirement he helped landscape Mt Thomas Homestead which is owned by one of his sons. He also set up a new garden in Rangiora with his wife Jennie.

Des is survived by his wife Jennie and three children Ian, Hamish and Andrew, and their families.

Website (accessed June 2022)

Wikipedia: George Russell (horticulturist): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Russell_\(horticulturist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Russell_(horticulturist))

**Obituary prepared by
Jennie Riach and Alan Jolliffe**