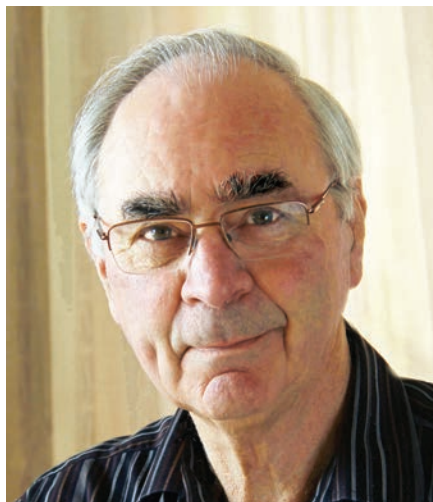


Award of Associate of Honour of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture (AHRIH)

William ('Bill') Henry Brett



Bill Brett AHRIH.

Bill Brett was born in Inglewood, Taranaki, and raised on a dairy farm by enthusiastic gardening parents a short distance from Pukeiti, famous for its rhododendrons. He was educated at Omata School and New Plymouth Boys High School.

Bill's varied career in horticulture began in 1955, when he joined Ivon Watkins Ltd as a trainee based at New Plymouth. In 1959 he took leave of absence for two years to attend Massey University to study for a Diploma of Agriculture. He then returned to Ivon Watkins-Dow, as it was then known, and joined the research team as a field technician for a year. Most of the work was with herbicides and finding alternatives to DDT for grass grub control.

A range of positions and relocations with Ivon Watkins-Dow followed. In 1961 Bill was appointed as technical advisory representative in the Bay of Plenty, a role which involved advising on solutions for a range of crops, especially citrus, kiwifruit, forestry and agriculture. In 1963 he transferred from Tauranga to the Auckland territory, where the range in horticulture was greater, involving the nursery industry, Pukekohe market gardens and west Auckland orchards, vineyards, and glasshouses.

In 1967, still based in Auckland, he was appointed North Island Technical Officer. This role involved

expanding product label information into technical advisory bulletins for a range of Ivon Watkins-Dow products, assisting regional technical advisory representatives and giving talks to horticultural and agricultural groups.

In 1969, after 14 years with the company, Bill resigned when it became fully owned by Dow and for four years grew cut flowers in leased glasshouses and was involved in landscaping. During that time, he also became a shareholder and director of Waitemata Garden Centre which opened four stores across Auckland until it was sold to the Palmers Garden Centre company in 1984.

Bill then joined the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) for two years (1973–1974), working in border biosecurity and training staff in plant pathology.

Another career move saw Bill appointed as manager of Parkdale Development Nursery, Auckland, a position he held for four years (1976–1979). This was the first 'big tree' nursery in New Zealand, established to grow large-size trees for the Gulf Harbour development on the Whangaparaoa Peninsula and other subdivisions around the North Island. In 1978 the demand for sections came to a standstill and the Gulf Harbour project stalled. During this time engineers and designers were let go, but the nursery continued as there was a ready market for the trees from four Auckland region councils.

Bill decided not to wait for resumption of the Gulf Harbour development and joined Yates in 1979 as Home Garden Technical Officer, responsible for all technical aspects of seeds, bulbs, fertilisers, pesticides and potting mix. This varied role included product development, pesticide registration, labelling, marketing, and training of sales representatives and garden centre staff. He also completed the re-write of the 60th edition of the iconic *Yates Garden Guide*, wrote the *Yates Garden Notes* which were syndicated to 40 newspapers, and fronted on

Saturday mornings for the gardening hour on Radio Pacific. Another role followed at Yates when, in 1984, he accepted the position of Manager Yates Home Garden Division. This involved responsibility for production, marketing and overall profitability of the home garden division.

In 1987, the investment company Equiticorp affected a hostile takeover of Yates Corporation, leaving all divisional managers, including Bill, without positions as the business was broken up and sold.

Later that year, he joined Botanix Garden Centres (at that time a group of 13 centres; nine in Auckland, three in Hamilton and one in Tauranga) as Special Projects Manager, responsible for project development and staff training. History repeated and, eighteen months into this role, Equiticorp purchased Botanix. Coincidentally, at that time, Mitre 10 approached Bill seeking help to establish a garden division.

So, in 1988, Bill joined Mitre 10 and was given a blank canvas to take this DIY group into gardening. Mitre 10's strategy of focussing on regularly purchased convenience plants and products and to be 'best in town' proved spectacularly successful. To build credibility, they stocked only superior garden-worthy plants and leading brand products and to support this, Bill personally carried out training of garden staff in all stores every year. A major success came in seedlings. Mainstream wholesale seedling growers refused to deal with Mitre 10. So Bill approached Willow Grange, a company producing cell transplants for the market garden and cut flower industry with the result that Mitre 10 was the first garden retailer in New Zealand to retail cell pack seedlings. In the six years Bill was at Mitre 10, sales increased from \$1m to more than \$50m, achieving a 20% market share.

The competition arising from Mitre 10's interests decreased market share for traditional stand-

alone garden centres and their supply chains, and Bill was aware that the garden industry, growers and retailers, were often not good business managers. This prompted him, in 1995, to establish a consulting and training business, Brett & Associates, and to make it successful he anticipated the need to include Australia along with New Zealand. Australia proved to be a lucrative market for his services, and he gained many clients there in the first year. New Zealand proved much more difficult as many garden centre owners could not forgive him for making Mitre 10 so strong. Australians were also more willing to pay consultants to help improve their business, while New Zealand garden centre owners had more of a do-it-yourself attitude and were less likely to hire consultants.

Bill's services were most in demand during the quieter winter months for garden centres, from April to August, so in an attempt to even out the workload and maintain cash flow, he visited the UK and Ireland seeking opportunities there. To pave the way, he sent letters to several garden centres he knew, resulting in his first three-day consultation. Around the same time, Bill met the chairman of the Irish Garden Centre Association while he was visiting New Zealand and he arranged for Bill to address members in Ireland at their annual meeting. As a result, Bill gained five more clients. Over the next three years that number grew through word-of-mouth to 35, resulting in visits to Ireland twice a year for twelve years, until Bill retired. Ireland produced 50% of the company's consulting income, but the most satisfying outcome for Bill was the huge improvements made at Irish garden centres.

Most of the consulting work involved store layout, merchandising, retailing skills, marketing, and financial management, rather than horticulture *per se*, but his horticultural background and knowledge certainly helped with credibility. Bill gained a few garden centre clients in the UK but generally they preferred to use UK consultants – of which there were many.

Until 2006, New Zealand remained the country where Bill had least work. However, this started to change in

2004 when he gained a new client in Havelock North, following the owners' attendance at a management workshop Bill ran in Palmerston North. They implemented everything Bill recommended with spectacular results. These owners, Gillian Thrum and Phil Carson, were so enthused that they set up a group to network the ideas Bill provided and had Bill work with them all, resulting in the Garden Independents Network (GIN Group). This group of thirteen leading independent garden centres still operates today, continuing to achieve growth ahead of industry standards.

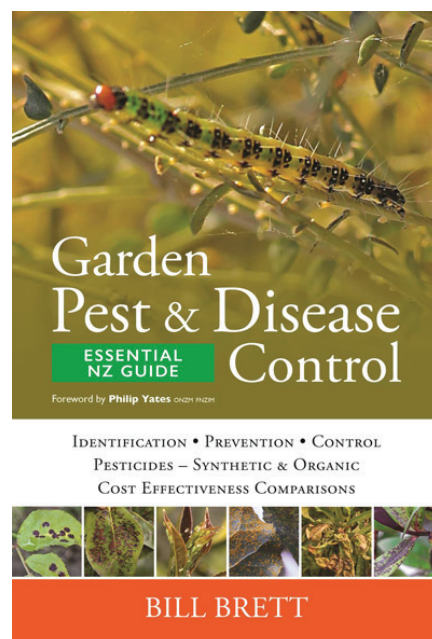
Throughout his career, Bill has been involved in other industry activities. He was a partner in a large kiwifruit orchard in Pukekawa in the Waikato with some colleagues from Yates, purchasing the land in 1982, developing the orchard and selling it 22 years later.

He was a member of the Horticultural Trades Association / Nursery & Garden Industry Association (now New Zealand Plant Producers Inc) from 1968 to 2010 and served on the board (1990–2001) and was president (1999–2000).

Bill retired as a consultant in 2010 but, to ensure the client base continued to be served, he set up a company with two other shareholders/directors. Garden Retail Success Ltd is that company and Bill remains a shareholder and director, along with Joy Lamb and Lance Bills, who between them do the New Zealand consulting. The company also has a husband and wife team based in Brisbane and a part-time consultant in the UK.

In retirement Bill has remained active. He continues to contribute to Garden Retail Success Ltd and their clients by preparing articles and information for websites and in-store brochures. Much of this relates to the edible garden, which is of special interest to Bill who has always been a keen gardener and is self-sufficient in vegetables for most of the year.

Drawing from his wealth of experience, in 2016 he published *Garden Pest & Disease Control*, a book that comprehensively covers a wide range of New Zealand garden problems and how to solve them.



He continues to run evening garden classes for Waimea College in Richmond and is a regular speaker at garden clubs, Probus and U3A (University of the Third Age, an international movement) in the Nelson and Wellington areas.

Bill says he finds horticulture to be an exceptionally good industry to work in and has made many friends over the years. He considers that one never stops learning and wishes to acknowledge those who have influenced his outlook, thinking and knowledge, in particular J. Stewart (his form teacher at New Plymouth Boys High School, who went on to coach the All Blacks), Dan Watkins (former CEO of Ivon Watkins-Dow), Dr George Mason (research manager of Ivon Watkins-Dow and managing director of Zelam Ltd), Jack Moates (general manager Yates Corporation), Dr Keith Hammett (plant breeder and president of the RNZIH) and Neil Sutton (general manager, Mitre 10 New Zealand).

The Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture Associate of Honour is awarded to "Persons who have rendered distinguished service to horticulture". William Henry Brett has made many achievements, especially in fostering successful business practices in horticulture and is accordingly a most worthy recipient of the highest award conferred by the RNZIH.

**Citation prepared by
Murray Dawson**