

Graeme Charles Platt

14 November 1941 – 1 October 2021

Graeme Platt was born in Massey, West Auckland and attended Birdwood Primary School in Massey and later Henderson High School. He was dyslexic, but this went undiagnosed, and he therefore found learning at schools difficult. Despite having just 18 months of secondary schooling, Graeme was recently honoured as a “Notable” of Henderson High School in recognition of his lifetime achievements.

Even as a youngster he had a keen interest in plants. He was also interested in inventions, once making a home-made bomb and ending up in hospital after nearly blowing his leg off. He became a scout and especially enjoyed visiting wild places such as the Waitakere Ranges. He was awarded the coveted Queen’s Scout Badge in 1959.

At the age of twenty he hitch-hiked overland with Noel Crump (a cousin of the well-known Barry Crump) to Britain via Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey. Their adventures included ending up in prison overnight in Yugoslavia. On reaching London he worked maintaining and developing gardens. Later travels took him to Gibraltar where he found work on a luxury yacht cruising the Mediterranean.

Graeme returned to New Zealand in 1965 via the Panama Canal and began working for the former New Zealand Forest Service planting trees in Riverhead Forest before moving to their Kumeu nursery to propagate *Pinus radiata* (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Graeme Platt, as a 23-year-old.

Graeme and his future wife Rosemary Carr met at a Youth Hostel Association (YHA) meeting in Auckland in February 1965. In August 1965, after Rosemary had left Auckland to visit her ill mother, Graeme was briefly sent to Sydney to represent the NZ Army. This was despite having had more detentions than most when training at Waiouru!

On his return from Australia, Graeme joined Noel Crump in a commercial fishing venture on the Hauraki Gulf. When Graeme realised there was insufficient income for two of them, he headed to the South Island to work in orchards in Central Otago. He then headed to Dunedin where he worked for Elna Sewing Machines for 18 months until Rosemary returned from Canada.

Graeme unexpectedly sold his car, then his half share in the Auckland fishing boat to buy an engagement ring for Rosemary. He then sent it ordinary post in an unsuitable envelope to Rosemary in Toronto who had no idea it was coming. When she ripped the envelope open the ring whizzed across the floor and under a cupboard. It was an original way of receiving an engagement ring, especially without a formal marriage proposal.

Rosemary could not wear the engagement ring until she had sufficient money to return to New Zealand. There was some doubt Graeme would even be there, as there was a likelihood he could be sent to the Vietnam War. She eventually arrived in Dunedin six days before their wedding on 28th April 1967 in the First Church of Otago (Fig. 2A–B).

When the couple returned to Auckland in August 1967 Graeme continued working for Elna Sewing Machines as manager of their Queen Street shop. Daily he wore a suit and tie, polished shoes, and sported short back and sides with no beard. While at Elna he designed a sewing machine with one of their mechanics which was considered well ahead of its time.



Fig. 2 Graeme and Rosemary Platt. **A**, recently married. **B**, more than 50 years later.

Graeme also worked for Farmers in Hobson Street, selling furniture. He even dressed up as a balloon vendor complete with stockings and costume in their Farmer’s Christmas Parade!

From there Graeme worked on a dairy and pig farm at Waimauku, before moving to New Zealand Breweries working on quality control in the laboratory where he remained for more than four years.

However, his lack of academic achievement due to his dyslexia proved a hindrance at New Zealand Breweries who struggled with their head chemist (Graeme) having never had a chemistry lesson in his life and not even having School Certificate. He ended up training people to be promoted above him, making it inevitable he would have to achieve something on his own.

When their daughters Sherryl-Lee and Julianne arrived, the couple started a plant nursery to enable Graeme to spend more time with his young family. While still working at NZ Breweries, Platt’s nursery began

with very basic amenities at the family home at 447 Glenfield Road. Smith's Soil would dump truckloads of potting mix on the front yard and Rosemary would wheelbarrow it to the old farmhouse shed, pushing her baby daughter Sherryl-Lee in a pram. Reject beer cans were used as pots, the tag end providing drainage, while the other end was open. They recycled countless beer cans for years until they rusted away. The old woodshed was turned into a "glasshouse" by replacing the roof with plastic. Seed boxes were made from reject timber acquired from the ABC Bottle Company.

Ultimately space on the Glenfield property began running out, partly because much of the land was being used for Graeme's sugarcane trials which were very successful, as later proven in the Dargaville area.

Graeme finally left NZ Breweries in 1974 and leased a 3-acre nursery site on State Highway 1 near Albany which they later purchased. Initially it was called Platt's NZ Trees, but it was generally referred to as Platt's native plant nursery. The intention was to sell wholesale only, but the resistance from garden centres to native plants in those days forced Graeme to reluctantly become a retailer selling directly to the public. In December 1974 he sold his very first plant, a kōwhai, for \$1.50 which was their total income for the year.

Initially some exotic trees were produced, but it was native plants that quickly proved to be most successful, and it was decided to sell these exclusively.

The range of native plants sold by garden centres at the time did not impress Graeme. Many were seedlings collected from forests that often failed when planted in gardens, reinforcing the widely held misconception that native plants were difficult to grow. Much other native nursery stock was comprised of an assortment of variegated clones that he considered "deviant mutations".

One of his many innovations was developing alternative potting mixes, initially trying waste products such as sawdust and then pine bark. Many in the industry were sceptical that these would work or that peat would

ever be replaced, but today of course bark is a major ingredient of modern potting mixes and underpins a sizable industry. The bark-based alternatives got a boost when a bad year for peat harvesting meant the industry had to consider alternatives.

As with many of his ventures many academics and industry people initially regarded Graeme's ideas as outlandish, only for them to be later adopted as mainstream.

Starting a commercial native plant nursery was another of his innovations that provoked derision from sceptics. It had not been done on such a scale before, and at the time native plants were not held in high regard. Platt's native plant nursery gradually changed these attitudes by providing well grown native plants carefully selected from the best available genetic stock, backed up by expert advice on selection and how to plant.

Graeme understood that the great variation existing within most species provides the opportunity to select elite individuals with superior aesthetic and performance attributes. To obtain the best genetic material for his customers he scoured the country from north to south, including offshore islands, for more than twenty years, some years making four or more plant hunting trips. He realised that plants growing in harsh conditions such as coastal cliffs were generally the most successful in cultivation, whereas selections from sheltered forests performed poorly in gardens.

Unsurprisingly then, many introductions from the windswept Chatham Islands became outstanding garden plants. He was the first to make the Chatham Islands nīkau available in good numbers to the public after noting it was more handsome and robust than mainland forms. Graeme also introduced the groundcover *Coprosma propinqua* var. *martinii* 'Taiko' (Fig. 3) from the Chatham Islands.

These regular plant hunting trips also enabled collection of fresh fleshy native seeds as Graeme had realised 'wet' seeds such as *Coprosma* and rimu do not germinate once they have dried out.



Fig. 3 *Coprosma propinqua* var. *martinii* 'Taiko', selected by Graeme Platt from the Chatham Islands. Photo: Jack Hobbs.

Graeme never considered himself to be a plant breeder, but he did raise *Phormium* 'Platt's Black' and a *Fuchsia excorticata* × *procumbens* hybrid. He was a strong advocate of using the best genetic material as parent stock, and several of Graeme's introductions were utilised in plant breeding programmes at Auckland Botanic Gardens such as in the *Leptospermum* breeding programme. His selections *L. scoparium* var. *incanum* 'Sherryl-Lee' and 'Julianne' contributed true pink flower colour and silver-tinged foliage to several hybrids, such as *L. scoparium* 'Wiri Sandra'. And Graeme's *L. scoparium* 'Karekare' was a parent of the white flowered *L. scoparium* 'Wiri Susan'.

In 1983 the family shifted into the old cottage located on the nursery site so they could purchase the 13 acres in Kyle Road, Albany, where they built the family home and Graeme planted his personal arboretum. Living in the cottage was supposed to be for just two years, but due to Graeme's health issues it extended to twelve years.

Platt's Native Plant Nursery finally closed its gates in 1995 after twenty-one years of operation.

Graeme held many theories on a diversity of subjects including one he entitled 'The six-stage sequential order of forest succession/progression' based on his personal observation of the ecology of native plants. He spoke on this topic at the Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture (RNZIH) Banks Memorial Lecture in 2001. Graeme believed this theory will ultimately be his greatest contribution.

In 1993 Graeme founded the New Zealand Botanical Research Institute to continue his research into the economic potential of trees. He planted more than 1000 trees

on his Albany property to assess for forestry purposes. In 1994 he received an Anzac Fellowship grant to study *Eucalyptus* trees in Western Australia and assess their potential as economic resources in New Zealand.

Graeme had a great passion for the Araucariaceae family, regarding them as “the most magnificent family of trees to have graced planet earth” (Fig. 4A–B). This interest included a fascination with kauri (*Agathis australis*), and he worked closely with Jenny Aitken (formerly of the Forest Research Institute, now Scion) after they met in 1981 to obtain genetically superior kauri germplasm for forestry purposes. They collected from many key spots in the North Island with willing support from DOC staff and local iwi. Jenny (pers. comm.) remembers Graeme attempting to climb anything, like “a monkey up a tree”. This culminated in an episode of TVNZ’s Country Calendar in 1992, featuring Graeme collecting kauri cones while suspended from a helicopter. It attracted considerable attention including a film crew from Japan to capture a repeat of his aerial cone collecting antics.

Graeme was passionate about research and worked with Jenny and Glenda Catalano on the reproductive biology of kauri, culminating in the publication of four scientific papers on kauri cone fertilisation and seed set led by Professor John Owens, University of Victoria, Canada.

More recently (2019–2021) Graeme and Jenny had been collaborating on commercialising somatic embryogenesis, endophytes, and on kauri dieback.

Graeme made numerous overseas trips to study Araucariaceae including many visits to Australia, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Fiji, Norfolk Island, Chile, and Brazil. Most of the trees planted in the Gondwana Arboretum at Auckland Botanic Gardens are from germplasm collected and generously donated by Graeme. He also donated Araucariaceae trees to other public and private gardens around the country and planted them extensively on his Albany property.



Fig. 4 *Araucaria* species. **A**, *A. angustifolia*, native to southern Brazil. **B**, *A. bidwillii* and *A. cunninghamii*, species native to Eastern Australia. Gondwana Arboretum, Auckland Botanic Gardens. Photos: Jack Hobbs.

Graeme was a long-time member of the International Plant Propagators’ Society New Zealand Region (IPPS NZ), having joined in 1979. In 1994 he was presented with the inaugural IPPS Award of Merit to recognise his contribution to sharing knowledge. He published wide-ranging articles sharing his knowledge and ideas in *Commercial Horticulture* and other magazines and journals. He was often interviewed on controversial and topical subjects featured in NZ newspapers.

The Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture presented Graeme with their Plant Raisers’ Award in 2011. In response to receiving the award Graeme wrote “I feel enormously privileged to have been able to spend the greater part of my life passionately involved with the scrutiny, selection, and introduction of plants into cultivation, with a special emphasis on New Zealand natives”. The award specified three of his introductions, *Coprosma* ‘Taiko’, *Leptospermum* ‘Sherryl-Lee’ and *Metrosideros* ‘Mistral’ as representative of his numerous introductions.

He had a special love of pōhutukawa (*Metrosideros excelsa*) which he regarded as being in the top echelon of the world’s flowering trees (Fig. 5). His best-known introduction is *M. excelsa* ‘Vibrance’, but he made many other fine selections including *M. excelsa* ‘Titirangi’ (Fig. 6A–B), *M. excelsa* ‘Plus Four’ and *M. excelsa* ‘Te Kaha’. Another outstanding introduction was the hybrid *Metrosideros* ‘Mistral’ (*M. excelsa* × *robusta*).



Fig. 5 Graeme Platt holding a range of variously coloured pōhutukawa flowers. Photo: Jack Hobbs.



Fig. 6 *Metrosideros excelsa* ‘Titirangi’, selected by Graeme Platt near Titirangi Golf Course in Auckland. **A**, close-up of flowers. **B**, trees in full flower. Photos: Jack Hobbs.

Other well-known introductions include *Coprosma* 'Hawera', *C. x kirkii* 'Goldstream', a large and dark green leaved form of *Pittosporum cornifolium* from the Poor Knights, and a pair of colourful tōtara in *Podocarpus totara* 'Albany Gold' and the blue foliaged *P. totara* 'Matapouri Blue'.

While running his nursery Graeme developed "Treetop", the most comprehensive trace mineral fertiliser available at that time. His research into this fertiliser formula was the foundation of his "Platt's Biospectrum 26" which he developed to cure his own health. Graeme became very ill in 1981 with an undiagnosed ailment with multiple changeable symptoms. Previously omnipresent in his nursery, his absence was so noticeable it led to comment on talkback radio that he had died.

After going to more than twenty doctors and twice being hospitalised it became apparent his condition was not understood. Much later he was diagnosed with the little understood myalgic encephalomyelitis or chronic fatigue syndrome, ME/CFS.

Graeme decided to use his knowledge of soils, plants and fertilisers, plus his laboratory training at NZ Breweries, to cure himself.

"Treetop" had a blood and bone base, which was not fit for human consumption, so Graeme used seawater as a base. He postulated that as seawater has the same pH as our bloodstream any minerals that dissolved well in seawater would do likewise in people. Seawater contains traces of numerous minerals, but Graeme concentrated on those most deficient in our diets. Selecting clean seawater was the biggest challenge, the rest was just applied chemistry based on the mineral needs of healthy soils.

After eight years of misery, it took Graeme about three months of treatment before he reappeared in the nursery, and around 18 months before all his obvious symptoms had disappeared. When customers saw his resurrection, many asked if they could use his mineral supplement. Over the next 30 years it contributed to positive health outcomes for thousands of people around the country and overseas, despite never being advertised.

Graeme's health was also a factor in the closing of Platt's Nursery, but that did not deter his passion. For the rest of his life he voluntarily contributed his expertise and plant material without financial consideration. Graeme felt that one of the most satisfying things

that he did was to go into the prisons and teach the inmates how to grow plants.

In later years, Graeme described himself as an ecologist, a fitting description given his passion for nature and concern for environmental and climate issues. He was particularly proud that his property was carbon neutral.

To the end he remained vintage Graeme Platt, going out how he lived and even dispensing plant information over the phone when in intensive care. There will only ever be one Graeme Platt!

References

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**Obituary compiled by
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Metrosideros excelsa 'Vibrance'