

Obituaries

Trevor Caddy Davies 30 January 1928 – 2 July 2009



Photo courtesy of Jack Hobbs.

I am honoured to make a tribute to Trevor as we reflect on his life and celebrate the way he has influenced so many of us.

I was a 17 year-old when I first met Trevor, bent on getting an apprenticeship with Duncan and Davies which was renowned as the best place in New Zealand for training in the business of nurseries and horticulture. I was suddenly immersed in a nursery with a comprehensive range of plants, an enormously skilled, knowledgeable and committed staff, and the opportunity to learn from this veritable Pandora's Box of horticultural knowledge.

Trevor in his inimitable way both encouraged and challenged me in a way that I have been ever thankful as my career in horticulture evolved.

Over the last two years I have been researching the history of Duncan and Davies nursery and, in doing so, have had a series of discussions with Trevor and many of his colleagues, providing me with a picture of a remarkable man and an industry leader in his field.

Like all his siblings, Trevor was brought up in the centre of the family business with much of the nursery as his playground, along with many compulsory family tasks like punching catalogues and stringing plant labels. Family outings inevitably included visits to sites where plant material would be collected.

Despite initially being determined to study as a mechanical engineer, Trevor decided to study horticulture and was one of the second intake of Diploma in Horticulture students at Massey College, a class of eight men and 20 women. Graduating in 1946 he had by

then formed life-long friendships, none greater than his association with Murray Richards. The 'Class of 46' became a close-knit group with regular gatherings for more than 40 years.

On graduating Trevor was collected by his father, the late Sir Victor Caddy Davies (known as 'V.C.')

 and immediately taken on a plant gathering trip in the Kaikouras. Collecting native plants was a constant and regular activity and with his father's comprehensive knowledge of where to find what, Trevor soon became equally familiar with the best sites and collected extensively in the South Island, knowing every key valley and able to stop at specific trees that were good seedling sources.

Jim Rumbal described this beginning to me, saying "When Trevor started he was overshadowed by V.C. as a plantsman, but he became an expert in his own right through sheer drive and determination". In an interview with *Commercial Horticulture* magazine Trevor said "My guide is to know every plant I handle" and "The person who has influenced me most is my father. His greatest attributes were his plant knowledge and selling ability".

When Trevor joined the firm in 1946 he was required to learn the nursery business. He stated that when he returned to Taranaki after graduating he started out in the field and learned every operation in the nursery, from hand weeding to inter-row tractor cultivation. He budded and grafted like everyone else.

In 1954 he was appointed manager of mail order and gained a huge amount of knowledge when he had to answer 20,000 mail order queries a year as well as having the task of compiling the catalogue, in which every detail had to be correct and the catalogue had to be the best there was.

In 1956 he was appointed wholesale manager, a role that included a New Zealand tour with his father, to become familiar with his customers.

His appointment in 1957 as managing director saw Trevor bloom as he set about modernising the nursery and bringing about the changes he saw as necessary to create a modern-day enterprise. From 1959, along with a strong team of people like George Smith,

Cyril Watson, Ray Lander, Norm Bowen, Betty Powell and his own brother Neville, he was able to effect profound changes and ultimately set the standard for nursery practice in New Zealand.

The introduction of mist propagation, still in its infancy in those days, brought about enormous changes and, in league with George Smith, many trials were undertaken to find ways to increase production. "There must be a way" was his approach to each new propagation challenge.

Perhaps the biggest change of all was his determination to create weed free nursery beds in the great acreage of field blocks where weeding was a perpetual challenge. His mantra was, "As a matter of policy there should be no weeds in a well managed nursery". Field staff needed much convincing of this process and, when a crop was affected by one of the limited range of chemicals available in those early days, some traditional staff would find reason to say "I told you so". But Trevor had a clear goal and took the position that some losses were acceptable when perfecting the methodology was of the utmost importance.

His interest in things mechanical saw the introduction of machines to replace traditional manual wrenching, particularly of deciduous trees. I well remember the introduction of the model he fashioned, driven from the power take-off of the tractor and pulled along the rows by twin winch-drums made from some part of a Morris Eight car. After improvements, this was to serve for many years with Clive Wallis as the operator.

From 1965 onwards Trevor became extensively involved with development of the export business and in doing so made contacts with industry giants around the globe. In these missions his skills at organisation and effective use of time came to the fore. Armed with a detailed itinerary and specific notes about who he was meeting when and why, all typed meticulously on small pocketbook pages by Nancy Watson, he would travel for up to six weeks at a time seeking new markets and building the reputation on which the success of exports so depended.

The Trade Promotions Council Export Award in 1975, when 75% of New Zealand plant exports came from

Duncan and Davies nursery, was a richly deserved recognition of the success of the nursery in export development.

Trevor told the story about the Japanese agent who, having seen *Rhododendron* 'President Roosevelt' in a Melbourne garden, ordered 30,000 plants. Cuttings were obtained and three years later the consignment was sent by Pan Am Airways to Japan only to be refused on account of the soil being infected with snails eggs. In fact it was Osmocote, not snails eggs, and, rather than have to face the shipment being returned, Trevor and the Japanese speaking Pan Am Agent spent three days in negotiations. Trevor was told to say nothing and the entire negotiation was conducted in Japanese. There must have been some persuasive talking that enabled the Japanese customers not to lose face over the mistake and to consummate the sale.

During these trips Trevor was ever on the lookout for improvements in nursery technology and, with his vast plant knowledge, was able to establish a strong rapport with customers and to identify new plants with potential for New Zealand. During his American excursions he saw the scale of garden centres there and in many ways became the leader in what is now the familiar garden centre system here, with the building of the modern plant centre in Manukau City in 1968.

From a eulogy compiled by Alan Jellyman. Trevor joined the RNZIH in 1979, was awarded a Fellow in 1989 and served for many years on the committee of the Auckland branch.

Without the benefits of modern communications the extensive travel demanded by the growing export drive took its toll on Trevor's health and this was to lead ultimately to his retirement from the firm.

But there was another accomplishment during his tenure that stands out and this was the decision to move away from New Plymouth and centre the nursery near Waitara. The opportunity to establish a new very large nursery on a greenfields site must be very rare in any nursery person's career. Teaming up with Neville, Cyril Watson, George Smith and Bob Gardiner the new nursery was established. In this project Trevor's vast overseas experience was enormously important.

Within the nursery industry Trevor was, like his father, an active leader. His service to the Horticultural Trades Association was extensive and he served a term as its President. He also served on the Horticultural and Gardening Apprenticeship Committee for many years, again following in his father's footsteps. Another national role he played was as one of the negotiating team for the Nurserymen and Gardeners Industrial Awards.

From my discussions with colleagues I have come to realise just what a remarkable contribution Trevor has

made to the horticulture industry and in my view, his overall knowledge and contribution as an industry leader has not been properly acknowledged.

But how do some of his peers rate him?

George Rainey, who Trevor described as "not a man to mince words", once stated, "Trevor is the guy with the most nursery knowledge I have ever met".

Trevor's great colleague and close friend, the late George Smith, described Trevor as ethical, always listened, was able to have a disagreement, and loyal to his staff.

Jim Rumbal says Trevor was always strict but fair and if he believed in someone he would back them up. He always acknowledged you and this went a long way with staff.

In a letter to Trevor his great San Francisco Bay friend, Ed Carman, wrote "Thank you for your friendship all these years. It has been my good fortune to have the help of a leading plantsman of our time".

Trevor Caddy Davies is one of the unsung heroes of the New Zealand nursery industry and, like his father, left an indelible mark through his industry, knowledge and leadership. Trevor, rest in peace. Your legacy lives on.

Alastair MacGregor Turnbull 1 October 1929 – 10 April 2009



Alastair Turnbull in his display garden. Photo courtesy of Julian Matthews, *NZ Gardener*.

The sudden passing of Alastair Turnbull of Talisman Nurseries on 10 April 2009 in his 80th year was a sad one for family, friends and the industry he loved.

Alastair was not only a well-respected plantsman but as one nurseryman put it, he was one of that "generation of nurserymen who have become icons of the industry, whom we greatly respect and to whom we owe much."

Alastair worked for Laurie Bell of Bell Roses before starting his own native plant nursery in 1973 in Whenuapai,

Auckland. In about 1986 Alastair and Margaret moved their nursery to Otaki, Kapiti Coast.

Some of the stock grown at Talisman Nurseries is seldom available elsewhere in the nursery trade and has been a valuable resource for a wide range of customers – including conservation managers, researchers, native plant landscapers and New Zealand plant lovers.

Talisman Nurseries grow more than 1000 different types of native plants. These are sourced from throughout New Zealand and its offshore islands, and many are rare or unusual species and cultivars. Their nursery grows more than 170 endangered or threatened plants. The nursery grounds also include an extensive arboretum that is a tribute to Alastair's great love of trees.

Alastair was one of the prominent native plant enthusiasts featured in a recent issue of the *New Zealand Gardener* (August 2008, p. 46–57). This feature concluded, "For native plant connoisseurs – especially those with

a taste for the arty-looking, tangled divaricating species, Alastair's nursery is a treat. It reflects his lifelong passion – some might even say obsession – for native plants."

Alastair Turnbull has been a member of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture since 1988, and Lawrie Metcalf informs us that Alastair has submitted 40 native cultivars for registration with the RNZIH, including a *Hebe* cultivar 'Geoff Turnbull' named after his son, *H.* 'Magalie' named after his daughter-in-law, and *H.* 'Thomas' after his grandson.

Margaret continues to run the nursery which the couple had put on the market early in 2009. Alastair leaves behind Margaret, their children Jennifer, Geoffrey and daughter-in-law Magalie and several grandchildren.

Based in part from an obituary published by Kerry Johnstone in *Commercial Horticulture*, June/July 2009, p. 7.