

# The Native Plant Revolution

**Mark Dean,**

Managing Director, Naturally Native New Zealand Plants

Your Excellencies, Invited Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen, Friends.

During the last two decades much has changed in our country, in politics, the economy, Health & welfare, education; - you name it and it has undergone change. However an even greater revolution has occurred in the gardens, parks and landscapes of Aotearoa New Zealand. Significantly for us here today, the incredible changes that have occurred, during the past twenty years, have been in our attitude towards native plants and our knowledge of how to grow and use them successfully in our gardens and landscapes. I would like to review those changes as they have appeared to me.

NZ has a truly unique flora, which was recognized by the early botanists of the past. It is still drooled over by the likes of David Bellamy, on his regular visits to our country. However, it is only in recent years that we ordinary kiwis have learnt to value the special plant life of these extraordinary islands.

I would like to start by telling of a personal experience. Just over 25 years ago, when we first moved to Tauranga, my wife Esme & I bought a section and built our first home. As soon as the initial earthworks had carved out the basement, and before building was even under way, we visited a local nursery to buy some "Native Plants". We wanted to plant the bank that had been created by the excavations in keeping with the neighboring bush filled gully we overlooked.

To our dismay the selection available was minimal - I recall a pittosporum, kowhai, rimu, totara, one or two hebes, and a fivefinger.

This selection was typical of the time. In fact we also had to walk right down to the back of the nursery, for native plants were always 'Down the back' as if there was something contagious about them.

Whilst there was a limited selection of native plants available to the public to garden with, very little was done to differentiate them or to make them special in any way. To the public, hebes and many other natives were 'just another garden shrub' and often misnamed at that.

We didn't get to see those trees that we planted down our bank grow very big. We soon did what many people in Tauranga did at the time - We moved to our block of land - and it was here that within two years we established a small part time nursery that, by early 1979, we had the audacity to convert into a specialist Native Plant Nursery.

Since then, the attitude to native plants has changed

markedly especially in the past ten years. Several incidents typify the attitude to native plants at the time we started growing natives. Firstly as part of our 'market research' (Every business must do some market research before embarking on a new venture) we had a discussion with a local nurseryman, who was horrified at our idea of leaving a well paid profession to set up a nursery specialising in growing native plants. 'You will never make a living growing native plants - no one will want them!

Our local rural community was equally skeptical- 'I spent forty years chopping it off my farm. so you won't get me planting that!' was a comment we often heard amongst other equally disparaging remarks about gardening with scrub. I recall trying to convince a new bank manager that we weren't hippies, and this was a serious business and we did require an overdraft. This proved too difficult and it was easier to change banks.

Fortunately we took no notice of our market research and we set about establishing our native plant nursery.

Attitudes did change however. I would now like to review the major influences and agents of change that have taken place during the past two decades.

We must first recognise the work of the early proponents of native plants. People such as Cheeseman, Leonard Cockayne, Sir Truby King, Norman Potts in Opotiki, Michael Gudex in Hamilton, Sir Victor Davies of Duncan & Davies, to name just a few, and there were many others, who did wonderful work to establish reserves, spread knowledge and grow native plants. The Loder Cup, given by Gerald Loder has done much to give recognition to the work that these people have done. One must not forget the influence of the Royal Forest & Bird Society. They achieved a great deal. However, even by the mid 1970's the use of natives in our gardens and landscapes had not become widespread or popular. Those that were used were often not even acknowledged as being native.

During the late 70's & 80's there were a number of really enthusiastic advocates of native plants who contributed enormously to increase the popularity of natives and bring them to our gardens. Those who influenced us included Muriel Fisher who established a most significant garden in Birkenhead, growing natives from all over New Zealand. She opened it to public viewing and had plants for sale.

Graham Platt established one of our first specialist native plant nurseries in Albany and did an enormous amount to popularize natives with the gardeners of Auckland. Others such as Katie Reynolds of

Whangarei enthusiastically spread the word. I recall listening to her with absolute fascination recounting her story of sailing to the Hen & Chicken Islands and spending the night on the rocks to prove that geckos pollinated *Fuchsia procumbens*.

Laurie Metcalf also deserves recognition for his part in changing our attitudes by both demonstrating the effective use of our natives in the botanic gardens of Christchurch and Invercargill and also for the publication of the first really useful book on the propagation of our trees and shrubs. How I wish we had had it in the early stages of our nursery as we had to find out so much by trial and error.

Perhaps the most significant single influence on the attitudes towards native plants was the emergence of publications with colour photographs. This happened during the late 1970's and 80's. Suddenly every one could now identify our native trees and shrubs. The quality colour reproductions of native plants, their leaves, flowers and forms, in books written by Professor J. T. Salmon, Audrey Eagle, Muriel Fisher, and Barbara Mathews brought native plants to life. Even I, who while at school had struggled to identify a kauri from a kahikatea using only line drawings, could now easily tell one from another and give it its correct name. The influence of modern publishing techniques and colour photographs did a lot to aid identification and take the mystery out of native plants.

Interestingly, books were way ahead of magazines. It was to be a long time before our popular gardening magazines and newspapers published articles and photos of natives on a regular basis.

Some events also significantly influenced our attitudes. In the early 1980's the government of the day was faced with growing unemployment and so took a leaf out of Australia, and copied a successful scheme there, setting up the 'Beautiful New Zealand Scheme'. A scheme which I feel was quite significant in changing attitudes towards native plants.

We can in hindsight be critical of this scheme. Beautiful New Zealand was a disaster in some respects - it didn't create very many jobs, was poorly funded from the outset, and was modified, then abandoned far too quickly for it to make very much impact. Its legacy today is usually seen as a mess of scrubby trees alongside our highways. Planting that does little to give native plants a good name.

However it was remarkably successful in another respect. It drew attention to native plants. Its effect started landscape architects, designers, and even engineers taking natives seriously on a wider scale. It also gave our business a great boost at the time, giving us the impetus for more growth. We bravely added to the nursery by purchasing the property next door in order to expand our operation. This was at a time when kiwifruit prices had forced land values to an all time high and interest rates were starting to rise.

We also saw a new group of native plant specialists set up nurseries at this time to meet the growing demand, so we weren't alone. We became aware of Talisman Nurseries, Oratia Native Plants and Antons Nursery. In the latter part of the 1980's competition didn't seem to matter - the biggest problem each year was running out of plants which always occurred each spring. Always when the more forward thinking garden centres wanted plants to increase their range. And so more plants were produced for the next year.

The concept of revegetation took a leap forward in the mid 80's with the publication of the *Revegetation Manual* by Boyden Evans, published by the Queen Elizabeth II Trust. This was a significant publication as it brought to the public new concepts and a realization that native plants could be planted out in the open and they actually grew reasonably quickly.

The interest in revegetation had grown out of work to repair environmental damage caused by the building of the dams on the Waikato River by the Lands & Survey Department during the 1960's. They had established a nursery at Taupo, specifically to grow plants for this work, which subsequently became the main Department of Conservation nursery. Now as Taupo Native Plants it has continued to specialise in growing natives for revegetation. It was only during the late 1980's that some forward thinking councils started to carry out occasional revegetation projects. Interestingly revegetation has remained largely an activity carried out by local government and there still remains the potential to extend it to the private sector.

When we exhibited at Mystery Creek in 1989, trying to encourage farmers to plant natives and revegetate those small unusable corners, we were received with looks of puzzlement and what one could describe as the dry sarcastic comments that only farmers can utter. These farmers who accidentally happened to wander into our stand kicked the plants on display in a manner more suited to a car sales yard. An abrupt change occurred shortly after this, as two years later the reception was very different. What a turnaround by 1996, at our third attempt at Mystery Creek this attitude had completely changed.

1990 saw two events that influenced the changes in attitude towards native plants.

First there was the 'Natives in the 90's' conference in 1990, a significant event in the 1990 sesquicentennial celebrations. This conference grew out of a conversation between Bob Edwards, the editor of Commercial Horticulture magazine, and myself. Bob felt it was time a major conference was held to draw attention to native plants generally, and to bring together all those who were interested in, or working in the area. The Bay of Plenty Polytechnic organised the event at its new horticulture facility in Tauranga. Interest exceeded expectations with over 120 delegates from all over the country including several from Australia. Interestingly

those attending were from all imaginable sectors of interest in native plants: - the scientific community, nursery industry, landscapers, Maori, Educational Institutions, Local and regional councils, private gardeners, farmers, Forest & Bird, and the media.

It was at this event that the issues that are with us today first emerged. The WAI 262 claim had its origins at this conference, Ecosourcing and exporting were discussed. Papers were presented that brought the work of botanists to the attention of the nursery industry and gardeners, Ethnobotany emerged as an area of considerable importance. New cultivars of native plants were displayed. New concepts for marketing plants, then being used by Woodlyn nurseries in Australia were presented. These were to have a major influence on garden centre marketing in the coming years. It was the start of a decade of even greater awareness and appreciation of our flora.

The second event was a personal one - I recall a rather depressing visit to the bank manager, the country was in the depths of the recession. We came away vowing to start promoting natives with all our might - it was our only hope. Our plan was two fold - As the council and landscape markets were at an all time low we decided to build our sales to garden centres. We aimed to start by persuading garden centres to display native plants, preferably up at the front of the garden centre and secondly to start educating our customers - the gardening public. Unable to afford expensive advertising, we used pamphlets, articles and at every opportunity we could, gave talks to garden clubs, service groups, schools, and most importantly at in store promotional days in garden centres.

Many myths had become associated with native plants, hindering or preventing gardeners planting or using them. One only needed to spend a few minutes talking to a gardener and they all came pouring out - They grew too slowly, they are too big, they won't transplant easily, have no colour, didn't like to be trimmed or pruned and didn't need fertiliser.

Our aim was, and still is, to educate our customers to dispel these myths - explode them as I had once seen John Cleese doing on one of his educational videos exploding the myths associated with parenting. Debunking the myths surrounding native plants became an important part of the early marketing strategy at Naturally Native.

Persuading the garden centres to display natives prominently was more difficult. My job in our business was being the Sales Rep. It was really enjoyable when you called on a friendly, sympathetic garden centre where management and staff were keen on natives. It could be a thankless task at other times. I still cringe at the reception I often got from some garden centres, especially in Auckland for some reason, where the usually arrogant young male manager who was not at all interested in native plants, would say, "They don't

sell here!" (Strangely the previous manager who had invariably moved on last month was able to sell hundreds).

Eventually we presented a concept to Palmer's management and persuaded them to allow us to set up a display stand in their newly opened branch in Tauranga. We displayed the plants. By providing their head office with monthly sales figures we soon demonstrated that well displayed native plants sold as readily as any other plant. In fact so well that they were soon requesting similar displays in all their stores and other garden centres were wanting to become part of the system.

This was accompanied by a new phenomena 'New Native Plants'. In the early 1990's some 'new' natives became available - Our first 'new' plant was *Weinmannia* 'Kiwi Red'. It was a chance seedling with bright red foliage that appeared in a tray of kamahi seedlings. After nearly ten years to bulk up sufficient numbers it was ready for commercial release. Kiwi Red was one of the first native plants to be granted Plant Variety Rights (PVR) and was heavily promoted by the Green World group.

The release of Jack Hobbs' Wiri series hebes in early 1991 gave us the opportunity to promote hebes and marked the start of a great surge of public interest in this, New Zealand's largest genus. Others such as *Metrosideros* 'Carousel' and *Cordyline* 'Albertii' from Duncan & Davies set the interest in 'new' natives really rolling.

Some key members of the nursery industry have been influential in the rapid changes we have seen in the interest in native plants in the past decade. In considering changes in attitude, mention needs to be made of the enthusiastic efforts of people such as Terry Hatch (Joy Plants), Roger McGibbon (Natural Logic), Geoff Davidson (Oratia Native Plants), Felix Jury, Alister Turnbull, Joe Cartman and Julian Mathews. All have contributed more than their fair share to the native plant cause.

Where are we at now, at the end of 1999 and facing a new millennium? A decade from the natives in the 90's' conference.

At the last count in the Nursery Register there appear to be over 300 nurseries that lay claim to growing native plants. Ten years previously we could have counted the number of nurseries considering it significant to advertise the fact that they grew natives, on the fingers of one hand. It is difficult to place a value on plant production in New Zealand as we lack the necessary statistics. A conservative guestimate was made recently and placed the total value of native plant production at the farm gate at just over \$25 million. It could be as high as \$35 million.

Our company now operates in a highly competitive market where price is a constant factor. Efficiency is

paramount and quality & service must always be the best, if we are to survive.

Garden centres now stock a wide range of natives in clearly marked areas and usually in a relatively prominent place. Natives are regularly promoted. Only last week I saw advertisements and mailers with photos of native species - Chatham Island for-get-me-not has almost attained commodity status. Next year and we just might see the chains offering them at cut prices. I can safely say that, a wide range of our native plants, are now readily available to our gardeners and landscapers.

Change is forever with us as we see the large chains; Warehouse, Hardware House, K Mart and supermarkets starting to move into gardening lines. They see value in stocking a basic range of native plants. Natives now no longer belong to the realm of the specialist.

'*Natives in the garden*' appeared in a real estate advertisement in our paper last Saturday; they are now considered important enough by the public to have become a selling point.

Last year I visited the Ellerslie Flower Show at its magnificent new location in the Manurewa Botanic Gardens. The thing that really stood out for me was the incredible switch to native plant material. Not just in one or two displays but in almost every display. In fact it was difficult to find an outdoor garden with only exotic plant material.

Today the landscape industry uses native plants extensively, and we see award-winning gardens featured in magazine articles and on television containing really creative plantings of natives. The magazines now have regular articles and features on native plants. Quite a considerable change in just a few short years.

During the last five years we have seen Maori becoming increasingly involved in this area. At least one major iwi is involved in the nursery industry and many have small nurseries usually associated with training and employment schemes. A recent trend has seen Maori students researching a variety of aspects of native plants. We see continuing education courses being held both on and off the Marae on Te Rongoa (Herbal medicine). Ethnobotany has become available to the public.

We have come a long way in the past two decades but we have a long way yet to go. We have got to ask ourselves where to from here? For that is the underlying purpose of this conference.

The future has a number of interesting challenges for those of us dedicated to furthering the cause of native plants. Firstly we must address treaty issues especially those raised by the Wai 262 claim. This will require a process of discussion and education and require us to be patient, but I feel we must not let this prevent the

development of the use of native plants for amenity purposes.

My dream is to see the gardens and landscapes of this country reflecting the essence of our unique flora and not being just a poor copy of Europe, North America or Japan. A landscape where visitors can marvel in the quality and variety of our plants and gardens that we New Zealanders can be proud of. Lets see the gardens of New Zealand be our unique gardens. We certainly have a good basis to start with our very special plant material.

There remains however issues still to be debated such as the effects of plant selection and amenity horticulture on biodiversity. Eco sourcing needs to be debated and defined.

Secondly I am convinced that we all need to learn more about how to use native plants more effectively in our gardens and landscapes. There are countless examples of native plants looking ragged and past it. This has the effect of putting people off native plants. If we are not careful the interest in natives will fade and in the future they will say 'how quaint they were in the 90's using all that native material in the landscapes'.

We need to progress from here and with careful experimentation and observation learn to use our plant material in ways and in a manner that brings out the qualities of our plants and produces sustainable gardens requiring little maintenance to match our time driven lifestyles. We also need to learn more about our plants.

At one of the seminars that Naturally Native ran recently for landscapers, we heard a presentation from Gavin Lister of Isthmus group about the new landscaping in downtown Mt Maunganui. Mature phoenix palms had been used to establish height in the new car park come village square area. Asked in question time why natives had not been used Gavin replied that we know how to move large Phoenix palms but we are unsure about moving large natives. This is a lesson for all. We need to learn much more about how to grow, and handle our natives. This is just one example of how research can be applied to native plants in the future.

The potential for research into both growing our natives better and using them better is considerable. Naturally Native has been involved in spinifex research for the last three years. This small project has already produced significant results. There are challenges for our research establishments and opportunities for individuals and companies.

Our plant breeders have been given the opportunity to develop, with the introduction of Biosecurity legislation limiting the introduction of species from overseas. We need more cultivars, not only for export but also for our own garden industry, to keep the consumers



interested and enthusiastically planting native plants. Making the gardens and landscapes of our country unique.

We must keep the innovation and interest in NZ natives going in the retail garden scene. New and different ways of marketing our plants to gardeners must continue to be developed. It is no good resting on last year's successes or even this year's. I regularly say to people visiting our company 'Its easy to grow a native plant - anyone can, but its really difficult to sell it'.

There are unbounded challenges in all aspects of the native plant industry. I don't believe that we are doing justice to the export potential of our plants. Overseas our plant material is sought after, but our plant export industry is not performing as well as it could. To date we seem to have been stuck in the mould of exporting small plants. There must be better ways to take advantage of our excellent growing conditions.

Recently my attention was drawn to three overseas trends. There is a development of interest in the use of natural remedies. There are some products already available such as manuka oil and natural soaps. Some iwi are already working to develop an industry based on native plant material. There is much more potential

for the natural remedy market to grow.

There is a worldwide trend to appreciating the natural heritage of the planet. Why then are we continuing to fell stands of bush? when we can start developing their truly sustainable attributes into high value tourism.

There is a worldwide trend to recognise the rights of indigenous people and with it the fauna & flora and we are fortunate to have the treaty process already in place that is addressing this in New Zealand.

In my past I studied education at Waikato University. I recall that all the educational theorists that we studied considered the changing of attitudes to be one of the most difficult educational tasks. However we have seen in the past 10 - 15 years a remarkable change in attitude by our nation towards its native flora. The change has been brought about by the enthusiasm of those dedicated to native plants. To those who want to see our unique native flora in our gardens and landscapes.

To keep up the momentum of this considerable change will be most difficult. It will certainly be a challenge. As with the native in the 90's this conference will set the scene for the next ten years of the Native Plant Story and continue to build the interest in our very special and unique plants.