

A HANDFUL OF HEBES

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Hebe traversii is a widely known and widely distributed shrub native to Canterbury and Marlborough. Although almost a riparian plant in the wild, growing in gullies and at streamside, it is perfectly hardy to winter frosts in all lowland parts of New Zealand and is one of the minority of New Zealand hebes hardy in most parts of Britain. However, because it tends to be a shy flowerer and to grow into an ungainly bush, it has never been as popular in gardens as some other hebes. Wild plants of the species in Central and South Canterbury are remarkably uniform and there does not seem to be much room for improvement by selection from them. Further north there is some variation and sharp-eyed botanists may well be able to pick out superior forms. I have been growing for years a clone which shows considerable promise.

It comes from the far north of Canterbury. In May 1981, during a field trip with Brian Molloy, of the Botany Division, DSIR, to look at populations of Pachystegia I collected cuttings from a plant of Hebe traversii growing on a bank near the Mason River. The bush had a different look, and I thought it might have horticultural potential.

Subsequently I distributed rooted cuttings to various sources in New Zealand, including the Christchurch Botanic Gardens and the University of Canterbury, and kept one to grow on in my own garden at Hororata, where it is now a dome-shaped shrub about 90 cm tall. The leaves are longer and broader than those of forms of the species from further south in Canterbury, and the white flowers are in dense, erect spikes carried clear of the foliage at the ends of the branches.

Although a characteristic of many forms of this species is lax, open branching, the Mason River plant is close branched and has a dense, compact habit. Its flowering period in late midsummer lasts only about two weeks, but during this fortnight it is one of the most attractive flowering shrubs. The specimen in my garden has shown itself well able to tolerate dry conditions in summer, and also has survived, unharmed, immersion for several days in flood-water up to 50 cm deep. It has grown equally well and is, if any-

thing, more floriferous in the garden of Mr F.D.Richards at Windwhistle where the altitude is 367m and the annual rainfall much higher than at Hororata. Its hardiness is not in doubt. In my garden, which is in a frost pocket, it has shown no sign of injury in screen temperatures as low as -11.5°C .

Another of 'my' plants is Hebe 'Jasper', which has been on sale in some garden centres in the last year. This originated in a batch of seedlings raised at the Forest Research Institute's experimental nursery at Rangiora when plant stocks were being grown for revegetation studies in the Craigieburn Forest Park, in central Canterbury.

One bed of seedlings was labelled 'Hebe odora' and according to a scientist on the institute's staff the records showed that these plants were raised from seed collected at Craigieburn. It was not recorded whether the seed came from wild plants or from nursery-raised specimens planted in earlier revegetation experiments. If it were the former, the parent was most likely the unnamed species, closely related to H. odora, which grows in the central and southern 'front' ranges of Canterbury, where 'true' H. odora is absent.

As the remaining seedlings were surplus to FRI requirements, I was offered a chance to select a plant for my own use, and I took one which had smaller leaves than the others and a low, almost cushion-like habit of growth. It has retained this cushion habit in my garden and after six years is no more than 30cm high and 40cm across. The branching is very dense and the new stems, produced in clusters each year, are only a few centimetres long. The striking features of this hebe are its cushion form and its winter colouring. In late autumn the light purplish-red flush on the young stems deepens and a yellowish-cream band develops on the leaf margins. I called it 'Jaspar' because these colours, red and cream, are found in the fragments of jaspar rock in the Hororata River.

Whether Hebe 'Jaspar' will reproduce these winter colours in a variety of gardens conditions remains to be seen. It has already done so in one Southland garden. Even without its winter colouring it is a very attractive little evergreen bush. The original plant, still growing in my garden, has not flowered.

A cool aspect in strong light, but sheltered from the most intense sunlight, suits this shrub, which is not too big to be grown in a medium sized rock garden. Good drainage is essential. As is the case with many hebes, it likes a dry atmosphere and an abundant moisture supply at the roots during the growing season. 'Jaspar' is subject to die-back in warm, humid conditions or when temperatures are high and the soil is very dry. I have found it difficult to propagate because cuttings taken in the normal way usually dampoff, but a Southland nursery to which I supplied propagation material has no difficulty with it. I believe that at least one English nurseryman is now propagating this plant, and I hope he is using the name I gave it.

Plenty of scope exists for further selections from the wild of plants as good as, or better than, these. One such plant is a remarkable form of Hebe odora which was collected on the West Coast by Ross Wilson, formerly of Christchurch now of Southbridge. This is a small, bun-shaped bush with glossy, light emerald green leaves and very dense, compact growth. Ross named it 'Greenstone'. After six years, my specimen is only 40cm across and about 10cm high, and has leaves in proportion to its size.

The plant was collected on the western side of the Paparoa Range, growing in loose rock rubble and debris. It is considered to be a microform of H. odora, which in its typical form is a shrub about 1.5m high. Other small forms of this species have been collected from the same general area and from further north on the West Coast (a mid-Canterbury nursery has offered one collected from near Westport) but none is as compact or as attractive as 'Greenstone'.

By no means the least attractive aspect of New Zealand hebes is their toughness and resilience. Anyone who has doubts about this may consider the case of my blue-flowered plant of H. salicifolia. A peculiarity, or is it, of this species is that while plants from the major portion of its range in Canterbury and North Otago invariably have white flowers, pinkish forms are found occasionally at the northern end of the range. I saw one near the Mason River which was a delightful clear pink, but was unable to take cuttings because the plant was out of reach on a steep bank. At the south-

eastern end of the range of this hebe, forms with blue flowers occur. In January 1985 during a cycle tour with my son, I stopped to collect cuttings from a blue flowered plant alongside an old track just off the main road in the Catlins area of south-eastern Otago. Wrapped in a plastic bag, the cuttings spent all most a week stowed in a pannier while we completed our tour. On our return home I put the bag of cuttings in the refrigerator, intending to deal with them the following day. Alas, I forgot to do so and it was another 10 days before I remembered them. It says a lot for the tenacity of the species that six cuttings were still in plantable condition, and three of them actually rooted and grew! One of these was given to the Christchurch Botanic Gardens and the other two were planted in my garden, where one subsequently died but the survivor is growing very well. The wild plant from which the cuttings were taken had flowers as close to a true blue as I have seen in this species. If my plant reproduces this colour when it flowers next summer I intend to call it 'Catlins Blue'.

