

# Geoff Davidson, Honorary Life Member, Auckland Botanical Society

Maureen Young and Ross Beever

Long time member Geoff Davidson was elected an Honorary Life Member of the Society at a Special General meeting, 1 July 2009. Members gathered at Carrington's Licensed Café, Unitec to enjoy a convivial dinner in good company. President Mike Wilcox organised the gathering and ably chaired the formal part of the meeting. Geoff's nomination was proposed by Maureen Young and seconded by Ross Beever. Maureen spoke in support of her nomination:

"It gives me great pleasure to propose Geoff Davidson for life membership of the Auckland Botanical Society. I'm not sure when Geoff first joined Bot Soc, but he seemed to be firmly established as an active member when I joined in 1984. I would personally and unilaterally give him this honour for the simple fact that I laugh more when I'm in the field with Geoff, than with any other person. However, there is so much more to Geoff than his wonderful sense of humour.

When one thinks about Geoff, two areas of enterprise come instantly to mind. One is his business, the amazing Oratia Native Plant Nursery, and out of this passion for growing and understanding native plants grew his involvement with the NZ Native Forests Restoration Trust.

Ross is going to speak more about the nursery, but I'll just mention a couple of points. Last year the nursery won the NZ Plant Protection Society's Weedwise Nursery Award. In 2007 Geoff himself was awarded the NZ Plant Conservation Network's lifetime achievement award – the network's highest honour.

People come to botany through many different pathways – as Geoff became a botanist through growing plants, he has an intimate knowledge of their habits and habitats that makes him a handy reference point for professional botanists.

The NZ Native Forests Restoration Trust grew out of the Native Forests Action Council and the tree-sitting protests in Pureora Forest. It was established in 1980, and Geoff was a trustee right from the beginning. With a vision to restore degraded and destroyed NZ indigenous habitats, the Trust has raised millions of dollars and bought and covenanted almost 6500 ha of land. While other people hold meetings, and write reports, plans, surveys, strategies and submissions, the Trust actually gets out there and makes a difference. While Geoff would probably deny that he does more than other Trustees, we all know what a mover and shaker he is. He has the ability to visualise schemes on a grand scale and he works tirelessly to see them achieved. Perhaps his greatest achievement to date has been to oversee the

purchasing of Motu Kaikoura, that island in Port Fitzroy Harbour that was so badly misused in the past. It will be exciting to watch the scars heal slowly and naturally with the removal of plant and animal pests, and it will be a great resource for educating youngsters.

Many of you will have visited Rangitoto Station where the kokako population is growing thanks to the efforts of the Trust. My own personal favourite of the Trust's reserves is the Professor McGregor Reserve, adjacent to Waipoua Forest. To see a restoration project that emulates nature so completely is a joy and delight. More recently Geoff has encouraged the Trust to take an interest in wetlands, the poor cousin of habitat types, and this has led to the purchase of the Mangarakau Wetland in NW Nelson, and closer to home the latest acquisition, the Marie Neverman Reserve on South Kaipara Head. It was a serendipitous coincidence that that Auckland rarity, the mistletoe, *Ileostylus micranthus*, was found on the day before the opening of this reserve.

Geoff never rests on his laurels, and currently has an extremely ambitious project in mind – the purchase of a 3400 ha property on Chatham Island. The rest of us visited the Chathams and revelled in the wonderful botany there, but Geoff sniffed out a farmed property with fabulous botanical values and once again his ability to dream big dreams came into play – how does he do it?

For all of Geoff's skill as a plantsman his view of restoration has changed over the years. I approve strongly of his currently expressed views (Davidson 2008) -

- Let nature be your guide. Observe adjacent bush areas and replicate habitats on similar terrain.
- It is more important to control pests than to introduce additional species: this applies to both plants and animals.
- Spread copious quantities of seeds from a wide range of species, rather than planting potted stock.
- Ensure your efforts are not wasted by meandering stock – fence them out.
- Ensure your efforts are not squandered by future generations. Gift the land to the Restoration Trust and/or covenant it with the QE II Trust.

We cannot bestow this honour on Geoff without mentioning his helpmate and wife, Bev. It isn't easy being married to a man with big ideas when there are always a multitude of mundane, boring everyday

tasks that somebody has to take care of. We salute you Bev.

I would like to finish with the words of Sir Peter Blake that are used by the Motu Kaikoura Trust:

"Having a vision is not enough. Change comes through realising the vision and turning it into a reality".

I propose that Geoff Davidson be nominated as an Honorary Life Member of the Auckland Botanical Society."

Ross then spoke a seconder:

"Maureen has described Geoff's contributions as botanist and conservationist – his field exploits. I wish to talk briefly about Geoff as botanist and plantsman. That is his exploits in growing plants. Geoff once reminisced that he won second prize for a sand posy at the Cheeseman Memorial Native Flower Show in 1954. Of course the Cheeseman Show was an important date in the Bot. Soc. calendar in its early years driven by our founder the late Lucy Cranwell, who was at that time botanist at the Museum.

He admits his growing interests remained dormant for some 20 years while he travelled the world and got on with life generally. However, in the late 70s his interests in native plants were rekindled and he started his own native plant nursery. While it started as a hobby, the Oratia Native Plant Nursery is now the pre-eminent supplier of specialist native plants in the country – as evidenced by his supplying the bulk of the specimen trees for Te Papa's 'Bush City'.

As we know Geoff is a person of vision – when he started Oratia, attempts to restore native plant communities were pretty limited. However today, as we are well aware there are many initiatives and much community and local and national government support.

The nursery plays a role in supporting such initiatives – although it is a competitive world out there for supply of large numbers of what I might call 'boring' plants – the karamus and variegated pittosporums so loved of 'landscape architects'. For the more discerning customer, Geoff and the Oratia team will also offer a diverse range of eco-sourced plants suitable for any project.

Indeed the fame of the nursery lies in the diversity of 'interesting' natives it grows and supplies. I suspect many members will have visited the 'botanical garden' at Oratia over the years – if not, I'd recommend you do so now. Geoff and his team have assembled a diverse mix of species, many unfamiliar to any but the specialist. These include a suite of wetland plants, many never grown in cultivation before.

In doing so, Geoff again shows his vision – he recognised early that wetlands are under significant threat, and decided that one contribution to conserving them is to grow the plants. I suspect he did so partly to make them better known – and thus help people cherish natural wetlands, and partly to help to enhance the diversity of restored wetlands, and partly just because he likes them and the challenge of growing them.

Amongst his target species are a number of mosses – including one *Polytrichum juniperinum* a cosmopolitan species. Perhaps drawing on his experience with sand posey's Geoff found it would grow well in sand trays and could be used as a table focal piece. Elsewhere in the world it is sometimes called by the somewhat contrived name of 'Juniper Hair Moss' from 'polytrichum' = many hairs and 'juniperinum' = like juniper. However, the Oratia team decided this was not very memorable and have named it 'Fondle-moss' reflecting the innate tendency of visitors to stroke growing clumps of this species. Some may remember Geoff brought a tray of this species for the lectern at the Rangitoto book launch. Jessica [Beever, bryologist] admits she was delighted to be able to hide her notes behind it.

I referred to the Oratia botanical garden. One aspect of botanical gardens is their role in botanical research and I'd like to diverge briefly to the plant *Pennantia baylisiana*.

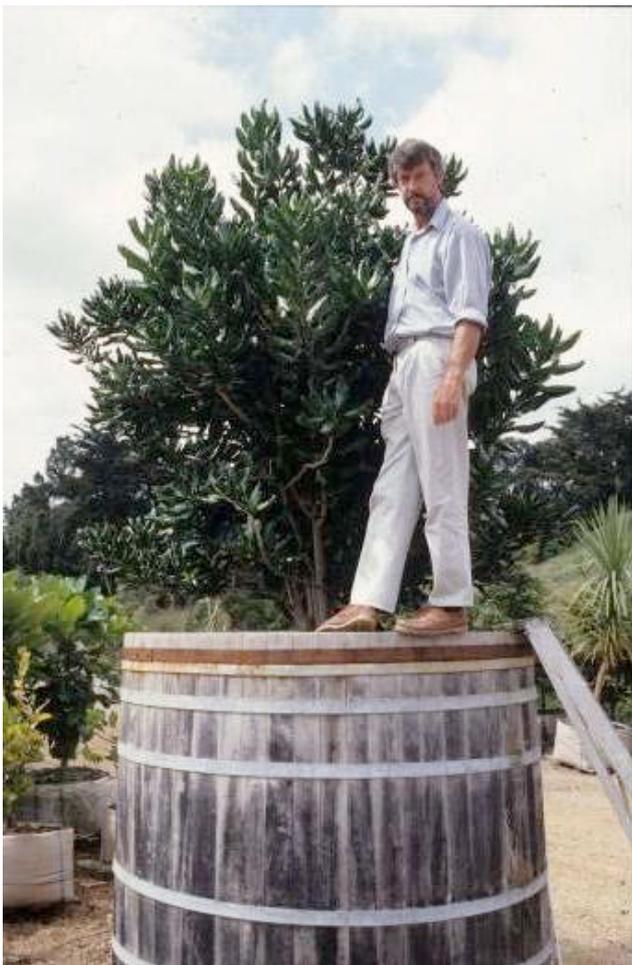
As many of you will know, this plant was reduced to a single individual when it was discovered in 1945 on the Great Island of the Three Kings by the late Professor Geoff Baylis of Otago University. And to add to the problem, this plant was – and still is – a lone female.

It would be fair to say, this is a threatened plant. Indeed, it has even featured in the Guinness Book of Records where the citation includes "a tree found in 1945 ... only exists as a female and cannot fruit". It was subsequently propagated albeit with some difficulty by taking cuttings and a few were established on the mainland, including one at the Mt Albert Research Centre.

I became interested in this cutting plant in the 1980s and treated the female inflorescences with hormone leading to production of viable seeds and managed to germinate a handful. It was possible that one or more of these might prove to be a male – and faced with deciding where to plant them to allow them to grow to maturity and flower, I offered some to Geoff. Geoff accepted and 'the rest is history'.

He nursed two plants to maturity and they produced what appeared to be female flowers BUT one of the plants produced lots of viable fruit. AND they proved to be true *P. baylisiana* – not as we feared hybrids

with *P. corymbosa*. As Geoff commented this plant did not know whether she was Arthur or Martha. Nevertheless Martha (Fig. 1) continues to bear fruit. In his generosity, Geoff decided that he would not sell the plants for profit, but sell the plants for a modest sum and give the proceeds towards conservation and botanical organisations dear to his heart. Bot Soc benefited significantly from his largess. There are still unanswered questions about Martha, but today there are hundreds if not thousands of *P. baylisiana* plants growing in cultivation and it is no longer in the Guinness Book of Records. Geoff cherishes the dream to re-establish some of Martha's progeny back on the Three Kings – and his dreams have a habit of coming to fruition.



**Fig 1. Geoff and Martha in a barrel, Oratia Native Plant Nursery. Photo: REB, 25 Sept 2007.**

Geoff has been an active member of Bot Soc over the years – a great person to have on field trips especially when the going gets tough – as in our memorable abortive trip to Cuvier Island.

To finish, I would like to focus on one of his regular contributions to Bot Soc – that is bringing real plants into the lecture room. Interesting native plants arrive at our meetings for us all to share and give to the trading table. Furthermore, a highlight of most of our prestigious Lucy Cranwell lectures are the native plant displays which he and his team bring to raise the tone

of the venue. This is no mean task – bringing along numerous large potted plants with his trusty Land Rover or Land Cruiser and trailer – and man-handling or I should say plant-handling them into position. And then taking them away again at the end of the meeting.

In summary, as Maureen has outlined, Geoff is an outstanding contributor to New Zealand conservation especially through his role with the Native Forests Restoration Trust. He has contributed to New Zealand botany and making native plants better known to the general public especially through his plant growing enterprises. We in Bot Soc salute him for these efforts.



**Fig 2. Geoff and Ewen Cameron botanising on Maré (New Caledonia). Photo: REB, 10 Dec 2003.**

And turning to Bot Soc in particular, Geoff is a stalwart field trip (Fig. 2 & 3) and meeting supporter over many years, and has helped us to get to know native plants through his generosity in sharing his knowledge and his plants with us. It is thus a pleasure for me to second the motion that Geoff be elected an Honorary Life Member of our Society."

The motion was then passed with acclamation. In recognition of the evening, Mike presented Geoff with a certificate and a copy of "Natural History of Conifers" by Aljos Farjon. Those interested in reading more of Geoff's interests in plants will enjoy his

recently published autobiographical account (Davidson 2008).



**Fig. 3. Geoff Davidson and Cathy Jones at Mangarakau Wetland, NW Nelson. Photo: Mike Wilcox, 9 Jan 2006.**

It would be remiss not to add as a postscript to this account Geoff's role in discovery of *Parahebe* "Bamboozle", recently formally named as *Veronica jovenaloides*. Prior to its discovery, few would have thought that a distinctive species of native *Veronica* was still to be discovered within an hour's drive of Auckland city. Geoff and Sharen Graham first noticed the plant in the Ernest Morgan Reserve at Waimauku in November 2007, and Geoff took a small cutting for

growing on. He collected it thinking it might be *Jovellana repens*, although this plant is not known from the Auckland region. On seeing the plant, Peter de Lange suggested it was a *Veronica* or *Parahebe*, an identification confirmed when it flowered. Consultation with Phil Garnock-Jones, an expert on the New Zealand species of *Hebe* and related genera such as *Parahebe*, led to recognition that this was not a recent immigrant but an undescribed native species! Bot Soc became involved in searches to discover further plants at the reserve, but it proved elusive (NZPCN News, 29 June 2008, and 28 Sept 2009). Currently it is only known from a single site, close to the original discovery. Phil and Peter proceeded to study the plant in detail and describe it formally as *Veronica jovenaloides*, a member of the *parahebe* clade (Davidson et al. 2009). Geoff's footprint is clearly visible in this discovery: he was instrumental in helping get the Ernest Morgan Reserve reserved in perpetuity; he discovered the first plant in the field and recognised it as 'odd'; he decided to take a portion to 'grow on'; he alerted colleagues to it being unusual; he flowered the plant at Oratia allowing formal study; he assisted in the field work determining its status as 'Nationally Critical'; he assisted in its formal description and he has distributed plants to Bot. Soc. members and others interested in growing it on.

#### References

Davidson, G.R. 2008: Geoff Davidson. Pp 30-35, in: "Living with Natives: New Zealanders talk about their love of native plants" edited by Ian Spellerberg & Michele Frey, published by Canterbury University Press.

Davidson, G.R., de Lange, P.J., Garnock-Jones, P.J. 2009: Two additional indigenous species of *Veronica* (Plantaginaceae) from northern New Zealand: *V. jovenaloides*, a new and highly endangered species, and *V. plebeia* R.Br. *New Zealand Journal of Botany* 47: 271-279.

## Field Trip Report: Ernest Morgan Bush Reserve, Riverhead

**Geoff Davidson and Kristy Hall**

Participants: Dave Allen, Tricia Aspin, Enid Asquith, Paul Asquith, Harry Beacham, Colleen Brewer, Warren Brewer, Barb Bycroft, Wes Bycroft, Ewen Cameron, Lisa Clapperton, Helen Cogle, Nelson Crosby, Brian Cumber, Bev Davidson, Geoff Davidson, Margaret Duncan, Dan Godoy, Leslie Haines, Kristy Hall, Fran Hintz, Marcel Horvath, Sara Howarth, Richard Hursthouse, Peter Hutton, Sandra Jones, Helen Lyons, Christine Major, Alana Mullin, Caroline Murdoch, Suzi Phillips, Helen Preston Jones, Juliet Richmond, Marty & Maggie Taylor, Alison Wesley, Barry Wilson, Vivienne Wilson, Kieran Whelan, Maureen Young.

#### Report

On 21 June 2008 a large group of 40 ABS (Auckland Botanical Society) members and guests gathered in

the car park of West Brook Winery faced with the challenge of relocating a small herbaceous plant. First collected by Sharen Graham and Geoff Davidson in November 2007 it had since proved elusive.

Twenty-six years ago Geoff Davidson was asked by Ernesta Williams if he could save her 21 ha of forest at Riverhead (Fig. 1), north of Auckland. Being a trustee of the NZ Native Forests Restoration Trust (NZNFRT) Geoff felt sure the Trust could do something. Ernesta had inherited the property jointly with her sister, Amy Norton, from their father, Ernest Morgan. His family had bought the property in 1890 after it had been heavily logged by James Maxwell who had the timber sawn at Blake's Sawmill at Riverhead. Ernest was protective of it as a block of bush and his daughters likewise looked after it all