

The 2018 Banks Memorial Lecture: “Please sir, I want to work with plants” – and look where that ended up!

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My start in horticulture was not auspicious when I made the above statement to the careers teacher at Grammar School, North London in 1960. His best suggestion was the Royal Navy as it was an outside occupation of great merit but that suggestion was lost on me at the tender age of 15. Yes, I enjoyed the outdoors but it was nature in all its forms that stimulated me and plants in particular. Encouraged by gardening parents after the Second World War, namely wheelbarrow rides to the local allotment, growing things fascinated me and that led to reading all about what I was seeing and how plants fitted into the world around me.

A remarkable stroke of fortune occurred just a month before I was due to leave school in July when the Royal Parks of London advertised for a new Horticultural Apprenticeship scheme, starting in August 1960. I immediately applied and eventually was selected and became the first apprentice in The Regent's Park, part of the old royal hunting estates in central London. I could not have been more excited but my parents brought me down to earth with how I was going to get there when we were 20 miles from the centre of London and work started at 7 am! A motorcycle was the answer and so started my big adventure with plants.

The Regent's Park

Regent's Park was a wonderful training place (Fig. 1A–D), full of magnificent old trees, huge lakes, the largest rose garden in London, and surrounded by the elegant Nash Terrace houses ringing the park boundary. It was old fashioned schooling amongst older men brought up in service on big estates, expert gardeners and plantsmen in different ways, plus an organised teaching programme at college one day a week. Many great characters were part of the scene and all contributed to my education as a young novice in all facets of life. School was never like this! I was determined to do well and started accumulating certificates and RHS exam passes. Five years passed very quickly before the next stage approached and with encouragement from senior peers I applied for and was accepted into the new three year Diploma Course at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in 1965.

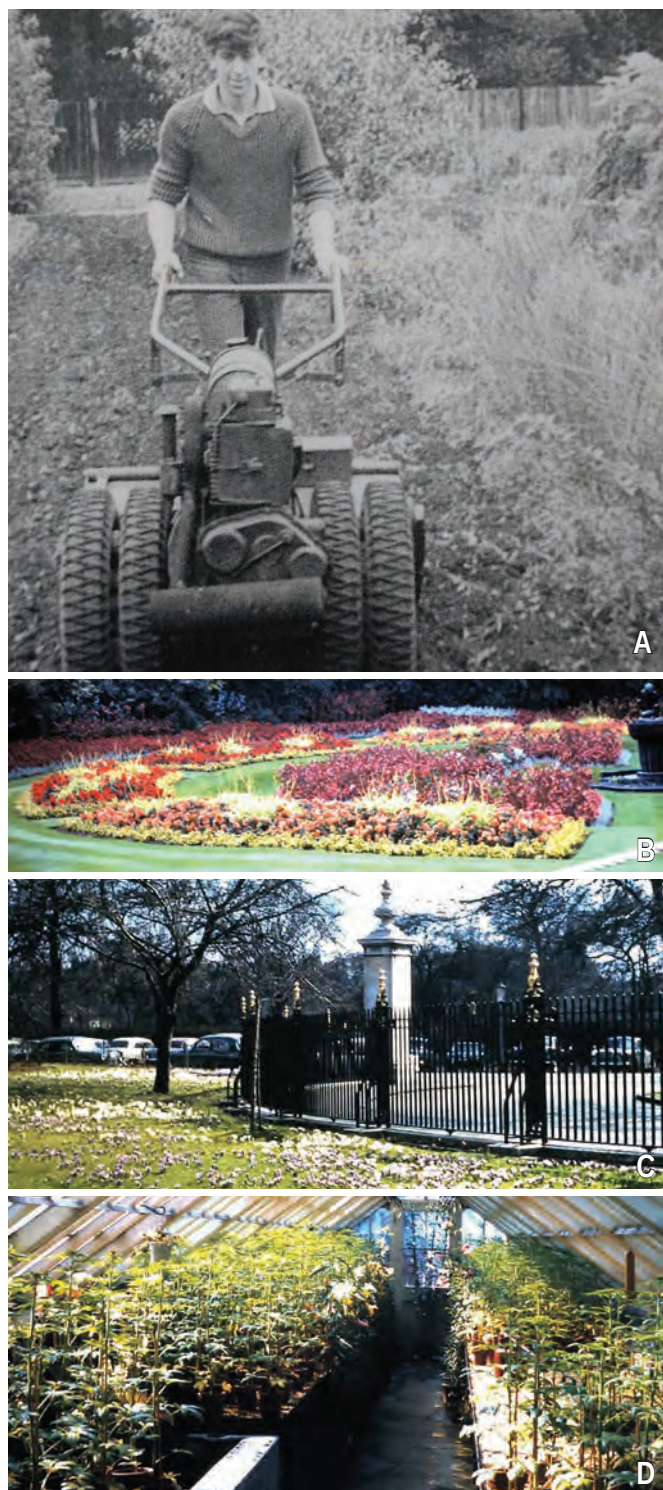


Fig. 1 The Regent's Park 1960–1965. **A**, as a young apprentice I was let loose on machinery in the nursery. **B**, the Begonia Garden. **C**, *Crocus* in flower by the main gate. **D**, one of the glasshouses where I tended plants.

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Kew

Kew is an institution with an incredible 300 year history of plant collecting, researching, naming and distributing economic plants to all parts of the world. It was like stepping back in time going from newish glasshouses to the historically famous Palm House and Temperate House from centuries earlier. Even questioning “why were certain things done this way?” brought the inevitable answer “because it has always been done that way!” But I loved Kew and all it had to offer in the way of plants and their stories from around the world (Fig. 2A–E). I was surprised that the majority of my fellow students were not plant focused, but instead concentrated on the sciences or systems that were going to be their future direction of employment.



Fig. 2 Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1965–1968. **A**, *Cupressus cashmeriana* growing within the Temperate House. **B**, spring bedding planted outside the conservatory. **C**, summer bedding planted outside the Palm House. **D**, wielding an axe to remove a tree stump to make way for the Queens Garden redevelopment. **E**, the Queens Garden, redeveloped from 1968.

Kew was divided into six main sections, Tropical Palm House, Tropical Orchid and Victoria Lily Houses, Temperate and Australian Houses, Herbaceous and Alpine, Arboretum, and Decorative. Students generally got to spend six months in each department which was quite stimulating, except when you spent the tropical section in summer and the arboretum in winter! Crown thinning of a very large plane tree on the boundary of Kew Road with double decker buses passing below you was not much fun and a steep learning curve.

If there was a favoured section that could help with future plans then consideration was given to working in that area, and I had the chance to be in charge of the New Zealand collection in the Temperate House. Not that it did me much good for my career to come because plants in clay pots on benches looked nothing like the real thing in the bush at Pukeiti!

My only claim to fame there was being asked to prune the large tītoki, *Alectryon excelsus*, up in the roof of the house and reachable only from the upstairs gallery. I had to reduce the top to just below the gallery railings by leaning across with a long pole saw. Not easy as the crown was dense and until you cut a few holes in it the branch structure was hidden. Everything crashed down to the ground below, thankfully roped off to the public and at the end of the day I had two large trailer sized piles. Whilst loading these I noticed a branch with clusters of fruit which looked most attractive and put these aside. When finished

I took the branch to the Assistant Curator and said that these were a nice surprise. He looked at them, jumped up and was off out of the building. I was later to find out this was the first recorded fruiting of the tree in the UK and the specimen was duly painted for *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (Fig. 3) and the story told – but no mention of me!



Fig. 3 *Alectryon excelsus* (titoki) painted by Margaret Stones for *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, May 1969, Vol. 178, Part 2, Tab. 542.

Somehow I found myself Chairman of the Students Council in my second and third year at Kew. This involved bringing ideas, problems and event planning before the Director, Sir George Taylor, which was rather daunting. But he listened and you got some wins and some losses and I managed to get a bit closer to the Curator of Kew, Dick Shaw, through these meetings. Both men were Scots but Mr Shaw was much younger and more progressive and he enjoyed the fact that students wanted to freshen up the place. We developed a good relationship which continued during my career at Pukeiti and after he had returned to RBG Edinburgh.

New Zealand

New Zealand beckoned in 1968 and at a Kew Diploma gathering I talked to Frank Knight, former Director of RHS Wisley Garden, who had recently returned from a visit there. He was full of praises for the country and wished he had made the trip when younger. Little did I know that Pukeiti had been partly responsible for his visit. On the 10th October my wife and I sailed from England and arrived in Auckland exactly one month later, on the 10th November 1968. Regent's Park friends were waiting to meet us and we stayed with them in Devonport until a flat was found. I had a position lined up with Auckland Parks, my Kew background working for me, looking after the Domain Tropical House. Life was good with jobs for both of us, great weather and much better pay rates. The first weekend I was on duty I spotted an advert for the Curatorship of the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust and asked my co-worker if he knew about the place. It turned out that he had just visited over Labour Weekend and was full of

praise for what he had seen. He said "Go for it!" so after discussing with my wife I made enquiries, thinking at the least it might get us a trip to New Plymouth, which with the mountain looked an amazing place.

We received information and an interview with a Pukeiti Board Member who lived in Auckland, more of a friendly chat with him and his wife than that at Kew where seven senior staff asked probing questions. It must have gone well as soon after we were asked to fly down for a viewing and in December 1968 we took the short flight south and were met by another Board Member. As he drove us slowly up the narrow metalled road, we wondered where on earth we were going. The drive through the bush was fascinating and I was immediately lost in the lushness of it all (Fig. 4). Arriving at Pukeiti Lodge we were greeted by Rob and Ina Hair, Curator and Hostess at the garden and after a welcome cup of tea we were off on a whirlwind tour.



Fig. 4 Carrington Road, the drive to Pukeiti, in the early days.

Rob, for all his 65 years, was as fit as fiddle and it took a while to get used to his fast pace – but we did and I endeavoured to both answer questions and make observations as we went. After a restful lunch in the Lodge we were off again, this time learning what life was like living at Pukeiti and the duties involved. At the end of an exhausting day we were delivered to a motel in New Plymouth with bus tickets for the morning service back to Auckland. In mid-January 1969 we were offered the position and after some soul-searching said "Yes" and moved down to Pukeiti in mid-February on our motorcycle. The rest of our belongings came by freight carrier, turning up about a week later. We chose to live in the newer staff house at the end of the garden which was empty, and we spent the first week or so buying second-hand furniture to make it our home. We were impressed that the Pukeiti name opened up all sorts of perks and donations to help us get started – amazing!

Pukeiti beginnings

When I actually started work as Curator (Fig. 5) I had a new staffer in the Lodge who with his wife were Custodians and he had no garden experience at all, plus another two part-timers, ex-farmers who had been there for many years, and Rob Hair continuing in a voluntary role to assist me. In the meantime many members of Pukeiti came up to see us and my wife was busy meeting with them as they were sussing us out. My first challenge was getting to grips with a septic tank, something I had never seen before and much amusement was shown by my part-timers waiting for me to come unstuck – so to speak. The laugh was on them when I discovered, after much digging, that the tank was empty because the floor had separated from the tank itself and had been like that for some time! A new tank was ordered and they had instructions from me to dig out a bigger hole to accommodate it. It was an omen for how things were going to be and as newbies we became accepted, accents and all. It was then that I learned that the position of Curator attracted 25 applications of which five were interviewed – but it was my Kew Diploma that settled the decision.



Fig. 5 Curator at work, Pukeiti, 1971.

My role at Pukeiti was to bring some professional practice, particularly with managing the rhododendron collection and increasing its integrity on a world-wide basis. For me it was coming to grips with this totally alien environment and learning how it worked and what the components were that made it special. I asked for two years to live, breath and learn about Pukeiti before making any forward recommendations for the future and this was accepted. As a Charitable Trust with a nationwide Board of 12 members and a local Executive Committee of 16 members it felt like I had 28 bosses at times but gradually it settled down as we learned to gel with each other.

At the end of the two years we had to make the decision that would affect us for the rest of our lives, as we originally had come out for a two-year working holiday, and family needed to know what we planned for the future. I floated the idea of us going back on a six week break to see family and make a tour of major rhododendron collections in the UK, establishing contacts for the future. This was agreed to and we, along with our baby daughter, were able to see family again, explain our future at Pukeiti, and arrange for what we had in storage to be shipped out to New Zealand. I made contact with more than 25 key garden owners and managers. The difference this time was not just the Kew connection, but as Curator of Pukeiti, a garden that was already being talked about in the UK, particularly after Frank Knight returned from his tour. From these contacts the first of many plant introductions were made into the Pukeiti quarantine house and over time these have become popular as good garden plants.

These include *Rhododendron maddenii* Gigha Form, *R. calostrotum* 'Gigha' and Wisley hybrid rhododendrons 'Billy Budd', 'Beefeater' (Fig. 6) and 'New Comet' (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6 *Rhododendron* 'Beefeater'.



Fig. 7 *Rhododendron* 'New Comet'.

New Zealand Rhododendron Association

I learned, if anything, that making good contacts wherever you go is a key to building working relationships and these have led to sharing information, seed swapping, plant sharing and being prepared to tell your experiences to societies and organisations around the world. If Pukeiti was going to be number one then I had to absorb being involved with everyone else in the game. The starting point for me was the New Zealand Rhododendron Association (NZRA), the national society. I became a member, was elected to their Council in 1974, and set up the NZ Rhododendron Register under RHS oversight in 1975. Conference attendance enabled me to go around the country sorting out the New Zealand hybrids in cultivation and have them registered by their owners to achieve a strong starting point. An Award of Distinction was introduced in 1983 for plants that had stood the test of time and a panel convened by me annually met to review plants nominated. Rhododendrons 'Charisma' (Award of Distinction 1984; Fig. 8), 'College Pink' (Award of Distinction 1984; Fig. 9), 'Falcon's Gold' (Fig. 10), 'Illum Cream' (Award of Distinction 1983), 'Irene Bain' (Award of Distinction), 'Ivan D. Wood' (Fig. 11), 'Lemon Lodge' (Award of Distinction 1983; Fig. 12), 'Rubicon' (Award of Distinction 1984; Fig. 13), and 'Spiced Honey' (Fig. 14) are some of the originals that were honoured and many of these are sold in other parts of the world.



Fig. 8 *Rhododendron* 'Charisma'.



Fig. 12 *Rhododendron* 'Lemon Lodge'.



Fig. 9 *Rhododendron* 'College Pink'.



Fig. 13 *Rhododendron* 'Rubicon'.



Fig. 10 *Rhododendron* 'Falcon's Gold'.



Fig. 14 *Rhododendron* 'Spiced Honey'.

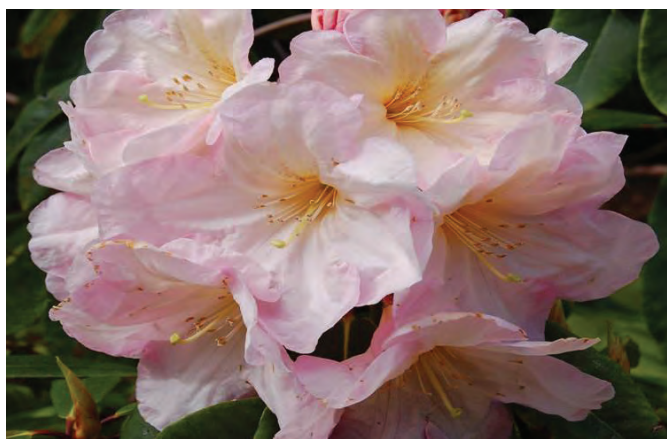


Fig. 11 *Rhododendron* 'Ivan D. Wood'.

The NZRA have been active in distributing seedlings of species and hybrids for many years and some very important rhododendrons were introduced to the trade, some of which still appear today in garden centres. The hybrid cross *Rhododendron macabeum* × *R. 'Unique'* has yielded 'Jeanne Church', 'Yellow Moon', 'Beauty of Ben Moi' and 'Spiced Honey', all excellent for larger gardens. A seed collection from Taiwan from John Patrick resulted in about ten species of rhododendrons being introduced, many not seen in New Zealand before such as *R. morii* (Fig. 15A–B), *R. oldhamii*, and *R. pachysanthum* (Fig. 16), well suited to our milder climate and still thriving at Pukeiti.



Fig. 15 *Rhododendron morii*, a species native to Taiwan. **A**, Accession RV9808. **B**, Accession RV9809.



Fig. 16 *Rhododendron pachysanthum*, a species native to Taiwan.

Membership of the American, Australian and British *Rhododendron* societies was important and built up a group of contacts that was beneficial for information and later visits. This in turn led to the sharing of this association of like-minded people through tours with Pukeiti members to many parts of the world. For me, the first of these was in 1981 visiting the west coast of the USA, British Columbia and the UK. The key was the American *Rhododendron* Society annual convention in San Francisco where we were able to meet and mix with the major American enthusiasts and listen to excellent presentations before heading up the western coastline. Seeing the redwood forests, fine gardens in the Seattle-Portland areas and Vancouver, then flying on to the south of England with its great gardens and up the coast of western Scotland all made for a special tour.

Papua New Guinea and vireyas

In 1983 a chance meeting at Pukeiti with John Womersley, Director of Forests in Papua New Guinea, led to an invite to join him and a group of Australian *Vireya* *Rhododendron* enthusiasts in August to collect them in the wild. This was a huge opportunity to obtain new species from known locations to add to the collection I had started in 1976 in the Stanley Smith Display House at Pukeiti. This was named after an Australian man who made his money selling war surplus machinery and eventually moved to the Bahamas. He was a passionate tropical plantsman and had contacts with Sir George Taylor at Kew which led to him setting up the Stanley Smith Horticultural Trust with Sir George as Chairman. Sadly Mr Smith died soon after visiting Pukeiti in 1967 but I was able to tap into his Trust Fund to build the house in his name, the first of its kind in New Zealand (Fig. 17A–B). The tour to PNG was a great success and introduced me to people who knew more about vireyas than I did and they would end up being contacts for years to come. All up about 50 species of vireyas and other genera were brought back and successfully quarantined at Pukeiti (e.g., Fig. 18A–C). Importantly, I had seen the conditions they grow in first-hand to be able to replicate with some assurance. Having an airy glasshouse ensured we did not get saturated soil conditions in the coldest months of the year rather than the cold effect itself.

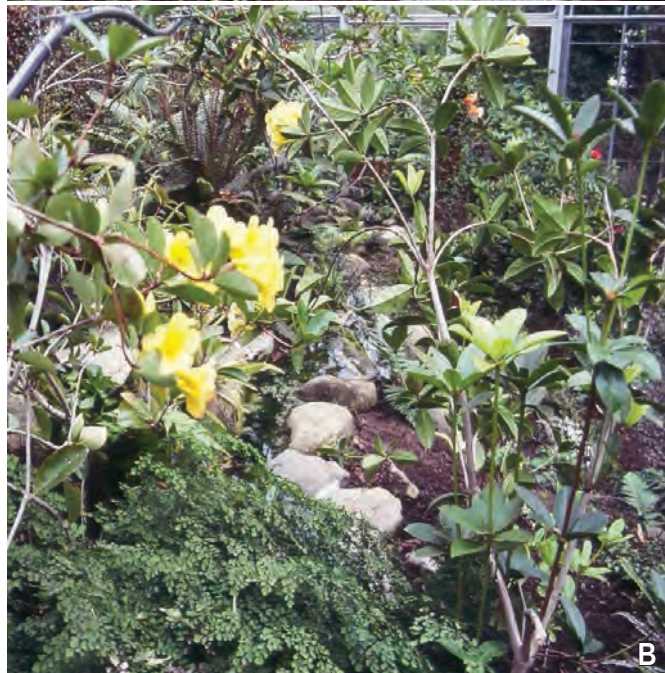


Fig. 17 The Stanley Smith Display House of *Vireya* *rhododendrons* at Pukeiti. **A**, recently planted in 1977. **B**, the same house, with well-established plants six years later.

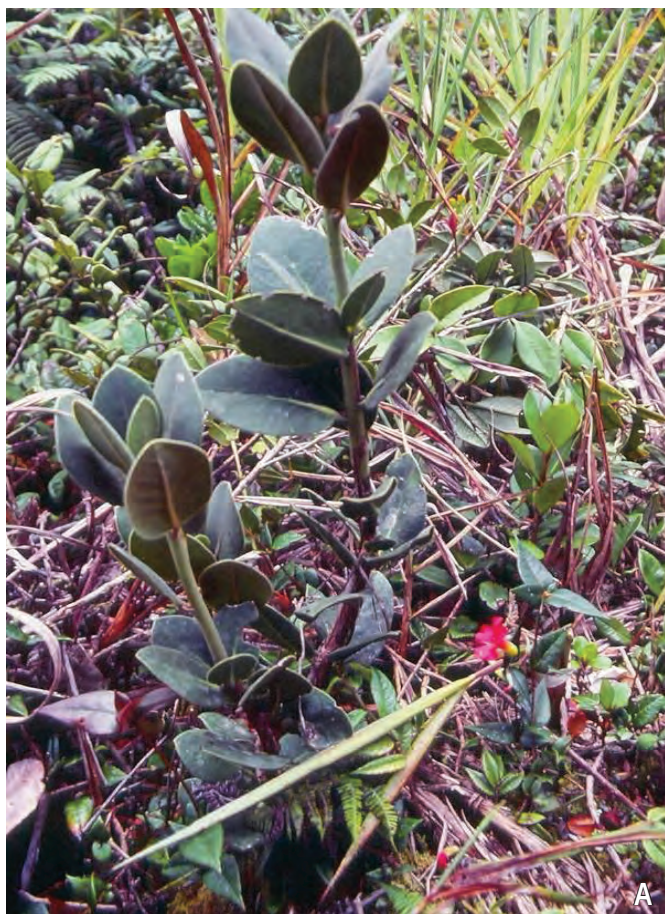


Fig. 18 Papua New Guinea Vireya rhododendrons. **A**, *R. christi* (small plant in flower) and *R. superbum* (taller plant) growing together on a mossy log, Mt Miap, PNG, 1983. **B**, *R. christi* flowering on a log in PNG. **C**, *R. superbum* first flowering at Pukeiti in 2002, 19 years later.

I followed this trip up with another in 1986, with a Pukeiti tour to PNG which included New Zealanders, an Australian and three Americans. This proved to be even more successful from the collecting aspect and for meeting with Canon Norman Cruttwell, the cleric turned botanist who was running a Vireya and orchid sanctuary in the Highlands of PNG. For many years he was the voice from PNG and still collecting and documenting into his 80's and we kept in touch until he left PNG. In return, Pukeiti hosted Cruttwell's PNG deputy for five months to give him more experience at managing collections in a public garden. Many new introductions were made but perhaps the two most unusual were the alpine *R. saxifragoides* (Fig. 19A–B) and the creeping *R. rubineiflorum* which were unknown in cultivation at that time. The *R. saxifragoides* × *R. 'Hot Tropic'* (Fig. 20) hybrids 'Saxon Glow' (Fig. 21) and 'Saxon Blush' were a result of this collection and an example of the late Os Blumhardt's hybridisation vision.



Fig. 19 *Rhododendron saxifragoides*, an alpine species native to the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. **A**, collected from the wild in PNG. **B**, introduced and cultivated at Pukeiti.



Fig. 20 *Rhododendron* 'Hot Tropic'.

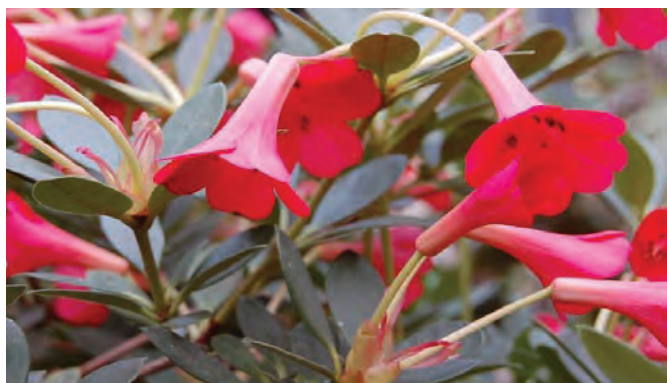


Fig. 21 The worlds most produced hybrid Vireya, *Rhododendron* 'Saxon Glow'.

We were asked on many occasions to put on a display of rhododendrons and other Pukeiti plants for horticultural shows and we tried to say yes most times. Much earlier in 1978 I collaborated with John Bond at Savill Garden, Windsor, to send over a display of large leaf rhododendron flowers for a RHS London show. It had never been tried before and we did not know if it would work, but by forward planning – i.e., phytosanitary inspection, treatment, airline timetables and then John being able to collect at the Heathrow end – he had the flowers on display, slightly tired looking but a huge surprise for the show visitors. John Bond was just one colleague who helped us out over the years and this was an ongoing relationship culminating in a regular series of guest speakers on tours of New Zealand with the NZRA. In the meantime Pukeiti exhibited at the earliest Ellerslie Flower Shows (Fig. 22) and went on to win a Gold Medal with Eastwoodhill in 2000 at new Ellerslie, combining the work of Douglas Cook in establishing both gardens (Fig. 23). An earlier show garden built for the first Taranaki Rhododendron Festival in New Plymouth in 1993 (Fig. 24) was the beginning of an association which I chaired for nine years and was involved with for 29 years.



Fig. 22 Promotional display of Pukeiti rhododendrons, Garden Week show, Ellerslie, 1984.



Fig. 23 An Ellerslie joint Gold Medal winning display by Pukeiti and Eastwoodhill, 2000.



Fig. 24 Pukeiti display at the first Taranaki Rhododendron Festival, New Plymouth, 1993.

Coinciding with this move to showcase Taranaki to a wider audience The Gatehouse was opened in 1987, welcoming visitors to a new Pukeiti with display rooms, souvenir sales and a café. At this time I was approached by a local botanical artist Susan Worthington, asking if I might be interested in her doing some work painting special Pukeiti plants – and so began a long association that continues today. Susan produced a wonderful portfolio of the large leaf rhododendrons in the garden and this work led to her being invited to provide select paintings for the *Highgrove Florilegium* for Prince Charles.

1988 was a busy period with establishing a new extension to the Vireya House (Fig. 25) using a natural timber frame with a simple rigid plastic roof and no sides for good airflow, effectively turning it into a bush garden under cover with four times the planting space, which we filled inside two years (Fig. 26). I also attended the Australian International Rhododendron Convention in Melbourne and gave a paper on growing 'Vireyas in a Cool Climate'. At the Convention I was appointed Vice-President of the International Rhododendron Union which was an attempt to bring the leading growers and scientists together to co-ordinate rhododendron research and cultural development.



Fig. 25 Vireya Display House extension, Pukeiti, 1989.



Fig. 26 Completed extension filled with plants, 1993, named the Beverley McConnell Vireya House.

The cyclone decade at Pukeiti

For all the wrong reasons Pukeiti was in the national news in the 1980s when Cyclone Bernie struck in 1982 (Fig. 27A–B) followed by Cyclone Bola in 1988 (Fig. 28A–B). Both were devastating, the first because it was out of the blue and Pukeiti was an isolated pocket of damage whilst Bola was far worse in its widespread damage. Both took a toll on morale and the time that was needed to clear away the thousands of trees and shrubs that were felled. However, as always, there was a positive in that Pukeiti members and the local community rallied around and helped shorten the recovery. It also gave us time to reassess how we gardened at Pukeiti and we replanted to protect from the easterly gales that cause the damage. The old single specimen plantings in grass were gradually converted to bed systems where plantings were denser with companion plantings and lower maintenance. Ten years later there was little sign of the cyclone events, such is the healing power of the rainforest environment.



Fig. 27 Cyclone Bernie damage at Pukeiti. **A**, damage to the hybrid block following the cyclone in 1982. **B**, damage cleared and new beds planted to replace some of the grassed areas, 1986.

As a direct result of the cyclones and the loss of several large *Pinus radiata* blocks that were to be future funding boosts, a radical decision was made to replant the smaller block with more than 1,000 rimu as a forest block, believed to be a first in the country. In addition, rimu plantings around all the track margins became a priority as a Pukeiti member sponsored project, particularly effective whilst the bush itself was so open after all the battering (Fig. 29A–B). It is heartening to see these now, many over 5 metres tall.



Fig. 28 Cyclone Bola damage at Pukeiti. **A**, severe damage to the canopy and gardens, 1988. **B**, the shelter is still thin, but the new beds are developing following replanting, 1992.



Fig. 29 50th Jubilee rimu plantings in the Cook Block, Pukeiti. **A**, the late John Goodwin (left) attending the blessing of the plantings by local iwi. **B**, Graham Smith of Pukeiti (left) and Fred Whitney, USA President of the American Rhododendron Society (right) doing their bit for close relations.

The 1990s moving forward

The 1990s were notable for an increased expansion of Pukeiti tours which became a focal point for membership and further contacts with fellow professionals. I led tours to Tasmania, the UK, Holland, and Canada, and after my first trip to Yunnan, China, collecting species seed, I organised two more for members in 1998 and 1999 (Fig. 30A–F). This established a close working relationship with Professor Guan Kaiyun, Director of the Kunming Botanical Garden, which continues today. One development from this was that we sponsored his daughter Mei to come to New Plymouth to attend a tourism management school for a number of years, achieving a degree and then New Zealand citizenship.

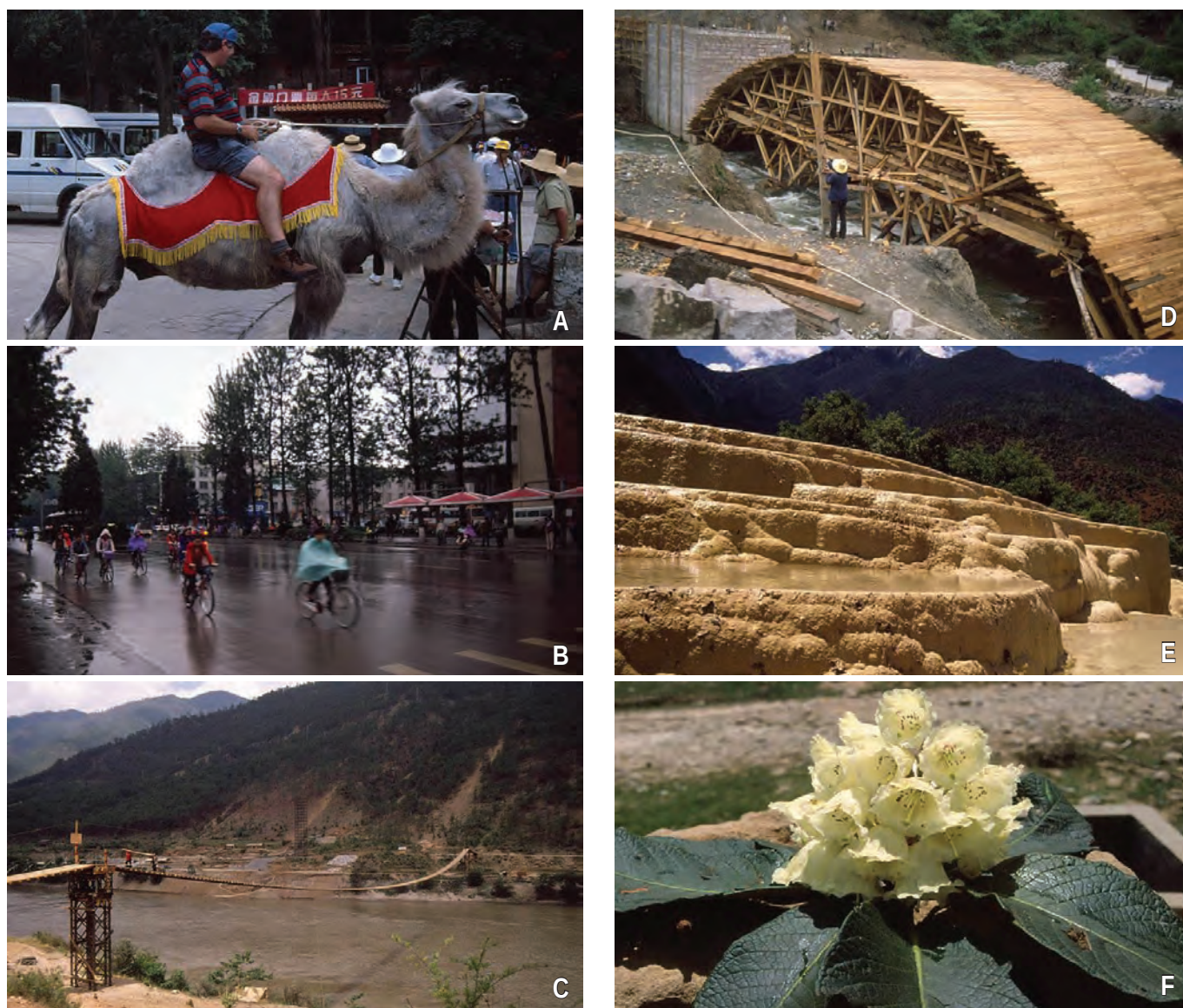


Fig. 30 Yunnan, China, in the 1990s. **A**, a younger Jack Hobbs astride a camel. **B**, a Kunming street scene showing a dominance of bicycles rather than cars that have taken over today. **C**, our first sighting of the Yangtze River. **D**, hand building a stone arch bridge using traditional methods. **E**, the White-Water (Baishuitai) Terraces. **F**, *Rhododendron sinofalconeri*, a species introduced into cultivation in the mid-1990s.

I was appointed Director of Pukeiti in 1995, recognising that the management of Pukeiti had become more complex and needed full time paid staff to run everything in-house, reporting to the Board several times a year. It meant that my role was less focussed on the day-to-day running of the garden but recognised that we had well established staff to continue that part of the operation. Funding regulations for a Charitable Trust required increasingly complex and restrained practices with legal ramifications and took up a considerable amount of my time. Pukeiti had wisely established a Trust Fund in the 1970s, separately managed from the garden, and income from this was to prove vital for its survival at times.

50th Jubilee of Pukeiti

The year 2000 saw planning for the 50th Jubilee of Pukeiti in 2001 as a milestone and the project that marked the occasion was a new conservatory (Fig. 31A–B). Designed to bring all the Vireya houses together as one large complex, funding was sourced from a number of contacts and the result was a fine, high-roofed building with a courtyard in the middle and bush surrounds. Opened in November 2001 it allowed us to show the full extent of the Vireya rhododendron collection, started in 1975 and now second only in the world to the RBG Edinburgh.

I was able to visit Edinburgh the following year for the Rhodo02 International Conference and gave a paper 'Growing Rhododendrons at Pukeiti, New Zealand' and I acknowledged the close association Pukeiti had with RBGE and in particular Dr George Argent, the world's leading Vireya botanist and a close friend.



Fig. 31 The new Vireya Conservatory at Pukeiti. **A**, newly completed in 2001. **B**, plantings in 2002.

In 2003 I visited the Seattle region and spoke to the Olympia Chapter of the ARS comparing the west coast USA and Pukeiti climates and how we manage our collections. I visited the Meerkerk Rhododendron Gardens on Whidbey Island (Fig. 32) and saw a plant of *Rhododendron protistum* 'Pukeiti' (Fig. 33) growing in the Douglas fir forest. It was a good feeling to know that we shared plants like this around for all to enjoy and preserve. Driving down to San Francisco, we chanced upon the Darlingtonia Reserve beside Oregon Coast Highway 101, and marvelled at thousands of amazing pitcher plants (*Darlingtonia californica*, the cobra lily, Fig. 34) growing just metres off the highway. The road trip ended with another gathering of enthusiasts in San Francisco for a *Vireya* talk amongst friends.



Fig. 32 Meerkerk Rhododendron Gardens, Washington, USA.



Fig. 33 *Rhododendron protistum* 'Pukeiti'.



Fig. 34 *Darlingtonia californica* (the cobra lily), Darlingtonia Reserve, Oregon, USA.

Hawaii and Tasmania

I was invited to address the International *Vireya* Conference in Hawaii in 2006 and talked about 'Growing Rhododendrons in a Rain Forest', something that we both shared even if the climates were different (Fig. 35A–B). I repeated this in Burnie, Tasmania, later that year at the Pacific Conference. Tasmania and in particular the Emu Valley Rhododendron Garden (Fig. 36A–D) have been special places for me and I have been privileged to work with them over many years. They are very much in the Pukeiti mould in the way they set up the garden on private land and worked it originally with volunteers. I was able to supply them with the Pukeiti Management Blueprint from our early days and advised on pitfalls and promotions to avoid. This eventually led to a commission to overview all aspects of their operation and I was able to visit the local Burnie Council to ascertain their level of support and also the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens, Hobart, regarding a memorandum of understanding. My observations were well received by many of the Emu Valley Society and not at all by others, which I had expected, but it was interesting to note that many of my recommendations were followed up in the year or two after. I still enjoy keeping in touch with this 'Little Pukeiti' because we share so much and we are all part of a global family that has to be nurtured.



Fig. 35 'Mitch' Mitchell's *Vireya* garden, Volcano, Hawaii, at 1,200 m asl, 2006. A, Graham Smith (left) with 'Mitch' Mitchell (right). B, view of garden.



Fig. 36 Emu Valley Rhododendron Garden, Tasmania. **A**, early plantings. **B**, species plantings on hillside. **C**, vireyas planted under blackwoods (*Acacia melanoxylon*). **D**, Japanese Garden.

Records at Pukeiti

All through my time at Pukeiti I emphasised the importance of getting the collection named accurately and recorded for posterity. The original plantings were listed in a planting book and under the late John Goodwin's eye they had a register made and then hand painted labels were placed in front of each group of plants. Behind the scenes Pukeiti members volunteered to make these from rimu offcuts or galvanized sheet metal for larger ones. That some labels survived nearly 50 years gives credit to the craftsmanship involved. However it was obvious that better records were needed and I started off with a card index system with every rhododendron coming into the garden being given a code accession number and that followed the plant through to final positioning with cards being updated. That was the theory, but as often happens it was never quite up-to-date.

A Gravograph labelling machine was purchased and engraved sheets of Formica were used to make hanging labels, complete with accession numbers and it often became a 'wet-day' job – Pukeiti has a few of those! Technology started to move quickly and we tried to keep up with what would assist us in the recording methods. Eventually I migrated to BG-Base, a botanical database management system. In 2008 my 'after Director' mission was to transfer all the rhododendron records into this system. I did this as a sponsored contract to Pukeiti and it took me two years to complete and then hand over to the new staff. Little did I know then what was going to unfold at Pukeiti and set it on a completely new pathway for the future with its new custodians, Taranaki Regional Council.

Later tours

Before retirement I was busy organising another special Pukeiti tour, this time a grand European garden experience in 2007. This started in northern Italy around Lakes Como (Fig. 37) and Maggiore (Fig. 38) and the magnificent chateaux of the region. Nice and Menton on the French Riviera was followed by Paris and Monet's garden in Giverny (Fig. 39), then a tour of northern gardens of the UK included Alnwick Castle, Inverewe (Fig. 40A–C), Gigha, Crarae and Edinburgh. Finally back to Cornwall and the Eden Project garden, Tresco on the Scilly Isles (Fig. 41A–C), and a finale at the Chelsea Flower Show. I thought this was to be my swansong tour but that changed again.



Fig. 37 Pruning *Cupressus sempervirens* atop a very tall ladder beside Lake Como, Italy, 2007.

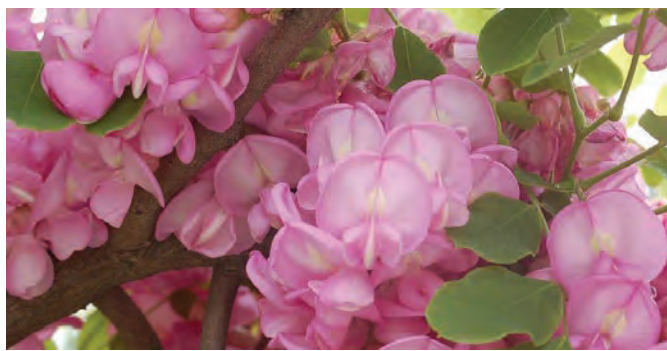


Fig. 38 *Robinia hispida* planted at the Giardini Botanici Villa Taranto, Lake Maggiore, Italy, 2007.



Fig. 39 Monet's garden, Giverny, France, 2007.



Fig. 40 Inverewe Garden, NW Scotland, 2007. **A**, beach gardens just above the shoreline. **B**, New Zealand border with a mass planting of thriving clematis. **C**, Alan Jellyman with a 30-year-old *Rhododendron protistum*, the first known flowering of this species in the UK.



Fig. 41 Tresco Abbey Garden, Isles of Scilly, UK, 2007. **A**, shelterbelt protecting the garden from the Atlantic Ocean. **B**, Neptune Steps flanked by Phoenix palms. **C**, succulents and geraniums, Olive Terrace.

In 2010 Professor Guan Kaiyun organised an International Rhododendron Festival in Wuhan, South East China (Fig. 42A–B), and he wanted Pukeiti represented to give as much credit as possible. This was based in Macheng, a small city north east of Wuhan in a mountainous area noted for incredible displays of the native *Rhododendron*

simsii. Unfortunately the Gods were not told about this and the flowering season was two weeks late (Fig. 43). Although we missed out on the display the conference was a great success and I was able to present a paper on the 'Chinese Rhododendron Species at Pukeiti' which went down very well, striking a note of pride among the locals. To give a genuine flavour to the conference I was listed as the UK representative which seemed to please the organisers, much to the amusement of my fellow travellers! The rest of the tour took in the Three Gorges Dam (Fig. 44) and the countryside around it, back to western Yunnan near the Burmese border and then all the way back to Shanghai for a huge International Expo beside the Yangtze River.



Fig. 42A–B Opening ceremony of the International Rhododendron Festival, Macheng, China, 2010.



Fig. 43 *Rhododendron simsii*, Guifeng Shan, Macheng, China, 2010.



Fig. 44 Extensive landscaping associated with the Three Gorges Dam project, China, 2010.

Whilst the rest of the tour party went home my wife and I were treated to a private visit to a mountain area north of Kunming which Guan thought we should see. Guan organised an SUV vehicle with driver and a staff botanist to guide us. Jiaozishan turned out to be breathtakingly beautiful and unlike anything I had seen before (Fig. 45A–C) and worth a later visit. The hurried two days turned out to be more eventful than we expected when the car rolled on a tight bend after rain and landed on its roof. We were unhurt thankfully but now with no vehicle. Nobody stops in China at accidents for fear that they will be accused of causing it so it took some time before we were able to get a lift into the nearest town and back to Kunming four hours late. The next morning, due to fly out of China, we were warmly received by an Australian garden group staying in the hotel who had heard about our problems. Many of the party we knew so it was another of those moments that was meant to happen.

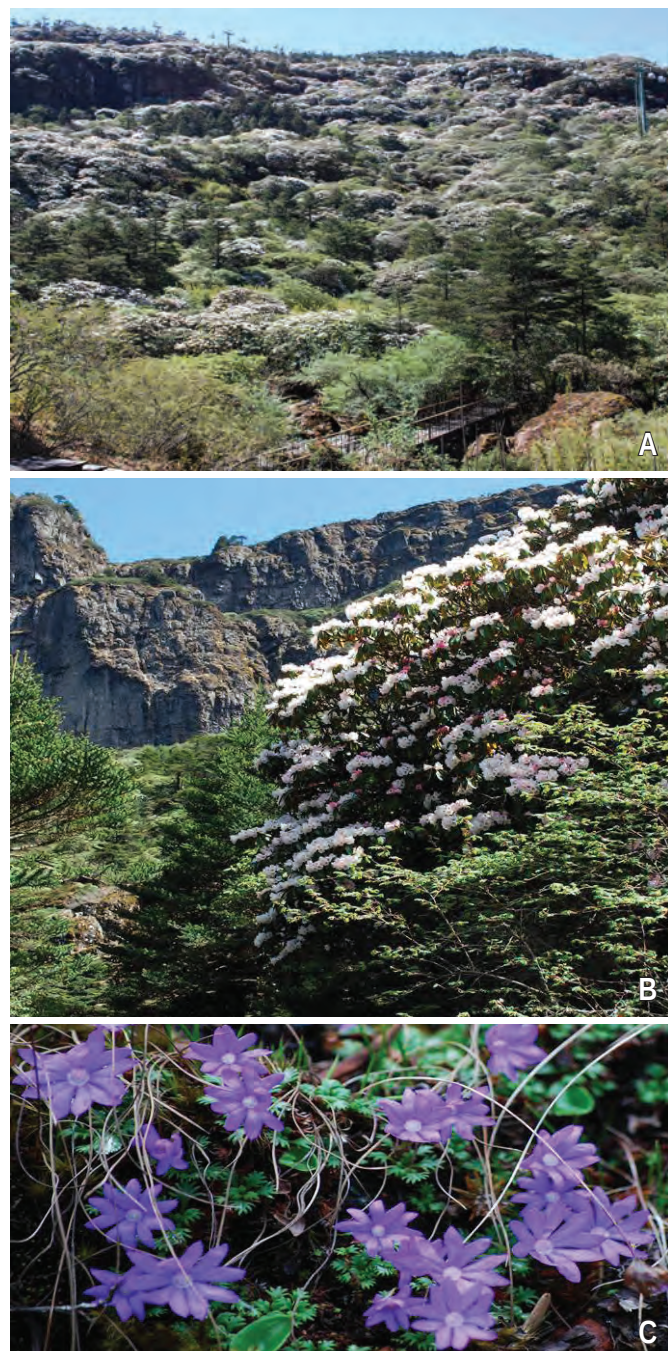


Fig. 45 Jiaozishan, NE Yunnan, China, 2010. **A**, rhododendron landscape below gondolas, 3,500 m asl. **B**, *Rhododendron bureavii*, 3,800 m asl. **C**, *Primula nanobella*, 3,850 m asl.

As a result of this last tour, one more beckoned – an amalgam of the very best places to visit botanically in Yunnan, back into the mountains. 2012 was for me a retrospective tour taking in some of the earliest sites visited and now, 18 years later and retired, very different in many respects. Chinese tourism has increased hugely and many of the pristine sites we saw earlier are now commercialised in a big way. One has to respect the right of the Chinese people to enjoy their own country but the mind-set for most is in comfort and with haste. Why walk when a gondola can take you up a mountain and have shops in the meadow when you get there? Thankfully we could also take advantage if we wanted to and speeding up over the trees is another way of experiencing something special and you could guarantee that the locals will not venture far off the main track. This was a trip for plant lovers (Fig. 46A–C) and I think we saw more rhododendron species this time than on any other tour. Jiaozishan was included at the end and was the probably the highlight for our party. This involved a gondola ride to 4,000 m and then walking in the primula meadows high up on an escarpment which is a ski resort in winter (Fig. 47). I took a photo of Guan Kaiyun leaning on a railing above a vast valley 4,200 m below and his big smile told me he was happy and that was so important for me as a colleague and friend (Fig. 48).



Fig. 46 China, 2012. **A**, botanists at work. **B**, *Thermopsis barbata*, a legume found at high altitudes in China. **C**, George Mason making friends with the local 'girls'.



Fig. 47 Alpine moorland, Jiaozishan, NE China, 4,150 m asl, 2012.



Fig. 48 Prof. Guan Kaiyun, Jiaozishan, NE China, 4,200 m asl, 2012.

Recent changes at Pukeiti

Two years after I retired the Taranaki Regional Council took over management of Pukeiti and the Pukeiti Trust became a partner in the future development. In many ways it was a relief for me, ensuring a healthy future but sad that the Trust after 60 years would not be in charge. The partnership has generally worked well with TRC being able to finance the big projects needed to move forward and Pukeiti members still able to contribute in numerous ways. My colleagues and I seem to have settled into advisory roles which suits us well and I enjoy being involved with the new staff regime. Being able to assist them to fulfil the wider Pukeiti dream is invigorating. It has also given me time for other projects and one of these was the publication in 2015 of a specialist book *Big-leaf rhododendrons: Growing the giants of the genus*, co-authored with Glyn Church and Pat Greenfield (Fig. 49). It took more than three years to get it into print but I am proud of what we achieved and it was well received by the international rhododendron community. I had already co-operated with Pat Greenfield on the story of Pukeiti book in 1997 titled *Pukeiti: New Zealand's finest rhododendron garden* and this was also very popular with members and a great tribute to Pat's photographic skills (Fig. 50).

Some New Zealand plant introductions made by Pukeiti



Asteranthera ovata, a Chilean species introduced from Savill Garden, UK.



Dimorphanthera kempteriana, introduced from Papua New Guinea.



Rhododendron 'White Waves'.



Dactylorhiza elata, introduced from the western Mediterranean region.



Hydrangea paniculata 'Kyushu'.



Rodgersia pinnata 'Rosea'.



Dimorphanthera amoena, introduced from Papua New Guinea.



Luzuriaga radicans, introduced from Chile.



Tecomanthe montana, introduced from Papua New Guinea.

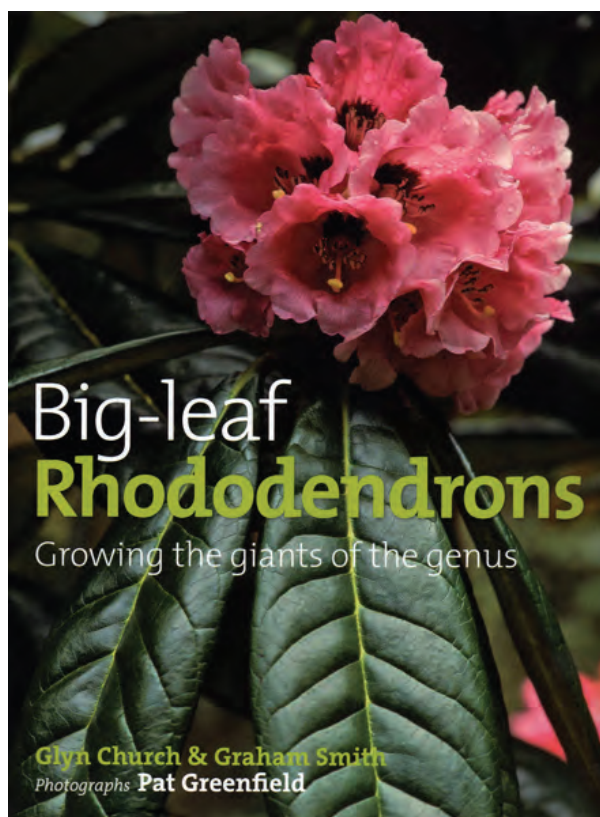


Fig. 49 Cover of *Big-leaf rhododendrons* by Glyn Church, Graham Smith and Pat Greenfield.



Fig. 50 Cover of *Pukeiti* by Pat Greenfield.

Gwavas Station

The latest chapter in this journey is working with the Hudson family of Gwavas Station in Hawke's Bay and their incredible woodland garden. A visit by Alan Jellyman and I in 2012 made us realise, with the owners now in their 80's and a new generation having to come to terms with managing this priceless heritage, that perhaps we might help by cataloguing the collection. Michael Hudson, a Founder Member of Pukeiti, was able to help as he was still fit and his memory of plants remains extraordinary. Our proposal was accepted and although we had no idea of what lay ahead or how long it would take, we knew it was going to be a lot of fun. I set up an Excel spreadsheet to manage the process and we began a regular pattern of 2–4 day visits every 2–3 months. We started with working out a series of plots that covered the

nine hectare site, originally planted with shelter trees in the 1860s. It took two years to gather the information with more than 4,000 separate entries, and each was verified by the notes Michael was able to give us and my research to provide a suitable description for future identification. Almost everything was labelled and if not Michael could provide a name. Much of the unique collection has been grown from seed from various botanic gardens, private collectors, including their son Tom Hudson, or sourced from throughout New Zealand over more than 70 years.

Having produced a register of the plant collection and getting it into a print version for the family we were then able to work with the daughter and son-in-law as to how they might use the information, which was also transferred to an electronic version that they could update when needed. It soon became obvious that another factor had come into play, that of labelling. Michael had used aluminium Hartley labels most of his life and they were still in good condition but frequent overwriting was a problem. So the next stage was a new label system using the template that had been adopted for Pukeiti, embossed aluminium labels. Because of the Pukeiti connection and the sharing of plant material between the gardens we were able to contract label production from Pukeiti, with me providing a computer label list at regular intervals. So it was back to the regular visits to place each batch of labels, check for any changes, additions and deletions, etc. This remains a work in progress until later this year (2018) when the project should be completed.

This project has led to the conclusion that there are many original estates in New Zealand that hold good heritage plant collections and whilst they may not match the botanical depth of Gwavas, they are repositories of plants that are no longer in commerce. Local knowledge is the key to the possibilities of tapping into this resource for conserving the material and propagation for future replanting.

Currently I am also working with Dr Marion McKay from Massey University on the New Zealand involvement with the International Red Data List for Rhododendron Species. On the international stage it is interesting to see where Pukeiti is situated. The stats tell us second in the world for vireyas and third for overall species – both results are very satisfying.

Final thoughts

Throughout my working life I have strived to learn as much as I could about the plants I have come in contact with and the people that are part of the story. They have built up the knowledge that I have – and still can remember – and I cherish them all. As time has gone by it has become more important to give back to the community, the places and people, and hopefully encourage them to enjoy and learn about the plants and natural world around us.

Horticulture is a great career if you have that interest and I will say to any young person who shows they do, go for it, because you never know where it might lead and who might be there to assist you. If you are fortunate enough you might end up on the other side of the globe doing something you never knew existed, but you have to make that first step for yourself.

Some plants grown at Gwavas



Acer fabri.



Dipelta (Linnaea) yunnanensis.



Magnolia cathcartii.



Rhododendron falconeri subsp. *eximium*.



Camellia impressinervis.



Illicium simonsii.



Paeonia 'Boris'.



Styrax fabri.

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