

The introduction of garden centres to the Hutt Valley

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ABSTRACT: New Zealand gardening histories are frustratingly brief when discussing the shift in garden retailing in the post-war period. Often, only a mere sentence or paragraph considers the introduction of garden centres. Architectural historian Paul Walker provides an excellent example, writing "Drive-in suburban garden centres spread everywhere and displaced older modes of garden retailing – the central-city garden shops, local nurseries, and probably a good many of the bread-and-butter mail-order businesses have gone." He then moves on to another topic.

This paper looks at this shift in garden retailing through three of the earliest garden centres in the Hutt Valley: Zenith, Twiglands and Kents. Each business represents different developments in garden retailing: a nursery that converted into a garden centre, a purpose-built garden centre, and a garden centre with a café. These developments changed how people shopped for plants and garden supplies and evoked various responses from their neighbourhoods. Interestingly the question asked time and again was - do garden centres contribute to the public good? In addition to regular historic sources such as newspapers and advertisements, this talk uses unusual sources such as files from local councils, the Town and Country Planning Appeal Board, and the Shops and Office Tribunal.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the retailing of plants and garden supplies in Aotearoa New Zealand changed significantly. In the late 1940s, garden supplies were sold from small, inner-city garden shops or from nurseries on the fringes of urban areas. Sales were largely seasonal and customers generally took their purchases home by public transport or had them delivered. During the 1960s, inner city garden shops shifted to the suburbs and the suburbs came to the nurseries. Customers arrived by car more and more and retailers reduced seasonal sales. The concept of garden centres developed.

The change in garden retailing is aptly illustrated in Figure 1. The top image shows Pilcher's garden shop in Lower Hutt in 1957.

Figure 1: Top: Pilcher's garden shop, 1957 (Hutt City Libraries, Ref. 6954) Bottom: Twigland Garden Centre, 1970 (Twigland Garden Centre advertisement, Upper Hutt Leader (29 April 1970) p 17)

A retail assistant is digging out tomato seedlings for the customer to take home. Shelves with pesticides and herbicides line the wall and there's little natural light. The bottom image shows Twigland Garden Centre in 1970. Plants are in containers, ready for customers to self-serve. Shop assistants are on hand to help if needed, but customers can help themselves to the products. A display garden provides inspiration and the transparent roof lets in sunlight.



Despite representing a large change in garden retailing in Aotearoa, our garden histories have not examined garden centres in detail. Paul Walker briefly commented "Drive-in suburban garden centres spread everywhere and displaced older modes of garden retailing," such as mail-order nurseries and inner-city garden shops, before moving on.¹ Bee Dawson explored the shift in slightly more detail from her family's point of view. She notes garden centres democratised gardening, but also negatively impacted specialist nurseries and mail-order plant nurseries and caused a decline in "plantsmanship" and the variety of plants available.² Matt Morris agreed with Dawson, summarising,

Catering mainly to people interested in trouble-free and low-skilled gardening, the centres seldom offered much in the way of expert advice and likely contributed to the gradual erosion of horticultural skills in the general populace.³

Morris saw garden centres as a part of modernity, a move from production to

leisure.⁴

This paper is a first foray into how garden centres came about and the impact they had on our townscapes. Using the Hutt Valley as a case study, it will look at the older forms of garden retailing and the introduction of garden centres. It will illustrate that the development of garden centre retailing was sometimes piecemeal, gradual and not always complete.

For much of the twentieth century, the Hutt Valley's history was dominated by housing expansion. In 1901, Lower Hutt was largely rural, with a population of only 1,822; market gardens and small farms dotted the valley floor. By 1921, the population had quadrupled as transport to Wellington improved, the risk of flooding reduced and large estates were broken up.⁵ There were many market gardens and nurseries. From the 1930s to the 1950s, housing construction continued apace through public and private developments. Industry entered the valley, including the government railway workshops.⁶ Upper Hutt

developed later, but with a similar speed: from a rural town in 1945 it was a city with a population of more than 20,000 in 1965.⁷

Within the evolving Hutt Valley landscape, garden retailing changed and adapted. In the 1940s and 1950s, two types of garden retailers operated: nurseries and garden shops (sometimes called seedsmen). Nurseries grew a range of plants from bulbs and bedding plants to trees and shrubs. Smaller plants were grown in wooden trays; larger plants were grown in the ground and dug up and sold in winter. Trading was very seasonal. Although nurseries advertised that people were welcome to visit, it is more likely that most of the sales were via mail orders, local delivery or via retailers such as garden shops. In the 1940s, Lower Hutt had at least five nurseries and Upper Hutt one.⁸ The Lower Hutt nurseries were each surrounded by a mix of fields or nurseries and housing development, while the land surrounding the Upper Hutt nursery was still largely rural.⁹ As

south" np.

⁷ Maclean "Wellington places: Upper Hutt Valley" np.

⁸ Lower Hutt nurseries: Waugh Ltd, Whichers Ltd, Wheatley's Nurseries, Epuni Nurseries and CF Pilcher & Sons Ltd. Upper Hutt nursery: Kent Nurseries.

⁹ Observations of "Historic Aerials" np.

¹ Walker "Towards the Modern Garden" p 170.

² Dawson *A History of Gardening in New Zealand* pp 269-272, 281.

³ Morris *Common Ground* pp 165-166.

⁴ Morris *Common Ground* pp 165-166.

⁵ Miller *Once Upon a Village* pp 111, 115

⁶ Maclean "Wellington places: Hutt Valley: central and west" np; Maclean "Wellington places: Hutt Valley:

the suburbs expanded and surrounded the nurseries, some chose to subdivide and capitalise on their land.¹⁰

Less is currently known about garden shops, as they seemed to have advertised less, probably because they relied on foot traffic. (An example is illustrated in Figure 1). Lower Hutt and Upper Hutt had at least two garden shops each;¹¹ more will probably be uncovered with more research. Generally speaking, they were small shops, usually on a main street, that sold seeds, seedlings and garden supplies such as tools, fertilisers and pesticides (as seen in Figure 1). Apart from seedlings in trays, live plants would have been sold during autumn and winter, bare-rooted or wrapped in hessian. In addition, department and hardware stores also sold gardening supplies. The effect more housing had on garden stores is currently not known.

¹⁰ T Waugh Ltd subdivided half its land in 1965 and the rest in the 1960s; Wheatleys Nurseries subdivided sometime in the 1960s.

¹¹ Lower Hutt gardens shops: Sharpes Grain & Seeds Ltd and Midway Garden and Floral Supplies. Upper Hutt garden shops: Wales Garden Supplies and Upper Hutt Produce. Interestingly, there appears to be a pattern in the Wellington and Hutt regions of families owning a nursery, a garden shop and sometimes a florist, an area ripe for more historic research.

In the 1960s, even more homes were built in the Hutt Valley, as housing filled in the green spaces on the valley floor and suburbs crept up into the side valleys and western hills. More houses, almost all with gardens, created more customers. Other societal changes also impacted garden retailing: increased disposable income; greater range of leisure activities to distract from high-maintenance gardening; less perceived need to produce vegetables at home; and increasing car ownership. These led to a customer base that was interested in spending money to reduce work in the garden, while improving its appearance – and had a car to make it happen.

At the same time, the nursery industry underwent significant technological change. The most notable was containerisation, the move from growing shrubs and trees in the ground and bedding and vegetable seedlings in trays, to growing plants in containers. Worthy of an article itself, containerisation allowed the shift from nursery to garden centre – customers could easily take plants home with them, plants could be sold year-round, packed more efficiently into a space, and moved more easily between sites.¹² Other

¹² They did then produce further challenges (an ideal

technological improvements included automatic watering systems (reducing labour costs and ensuring it could be done outside of customer hours) and printing (for water-proof information labels).

Between these two spheres of change was the ideas of self service and a retail experience. Garden centres developed alongside supermarkets in New Zealand and were informed by the same trends from overseas and adapted to the same societal changes. There is so much overlap that in 1969, Tom Ah Chee, founder and managing director of Foodtown, presented at a nurserymen's conference on "display methods and self-service procedures."¹³ With all these different developments contributing to the shift in garden retailing, it is obvious that garden centres were not invented as a fully formed concept. Older businesses could incorporate changes when desired, adapting to a changing market, new technologies and new concepts in retailing.

Three case studies illustrate the developments outlined above. Wales Garden Supplies was

growing medium, regular watering, and pest and disease control), but these were overcome.

¹³ "Nurserymen's Seminar for November" p 8.

an older-style nursery plus garden shop that tried to incorporate garden centre innovation and then transition completely but were unsuccessful. Zenith's Garden Centre was an inner-city garden shop that moved to the suburbs and gradually implemented garden centre innovations. Twiglands Garden Centre opened as a fully formed garden centre. Each business had to fit into the landscape of the Hutt and did so with varying degrees of success.

Wales Garden Supplies

Wales Garden Supplies opened in 1954, with a garden shop in the main shopping area of Upper Hutt and a nursery in Wallaceville. The owner, Roy Wale, had come to the gardening business late in life in his mid-forties and had previously worked as a clerk and a manager.¹⁴ The details of how the business was established are still being ascertained, but what is known is that Roy and his wife Tessa moved in with his parents, George and Florence, in the early 1950s. George and Florence had lived in the house since around 1920 and were avid gardeners, as shown by

¹⁴ Electoral rolls: Wellington North (1938); Wellington East (1943); Waitomo (1946); Heretaunga (1954). Note: although the owner's name was "Wale," the garden centre name never appears with an apostrophe.

Florence's multiple wins at horticultural shows.¹⁵ Although I have not yet found evidence of Roy being involved in horticulture before the nursery opened, his invitations to speak at local gardening groups implies a knowledge built up over several years. I suspect that it was a family affair, like many nurseries at the time.

The nursery operated from the family home at 22 MacLean Street, Wallaceville, opposite the railway station. When it opened in the 1950s, the surrounding suburb was mostly composed of houses on large sections. The nursery was small compared to its Lower Hutt counterparts, at about 1,700 m². In the early 1950s, a glasshouse was erected in the backyard. Photographs from the mid-1960s show several aspects of older-style garden retailing still in place. A large glasshouse ran along the back boundary, with a lane or driveway separating it from the neighbouring property. On the section next door was the nursery area – there are no formed paths and plants are growing in the ground, where they would have grown until being dug up in winter and wrapped in sacking (see Figure 2)

¹⁵ "A Bright Display" p 31; "Flower Show at Upper Hutt" p 9.

Sacking is draped along the walls. The plants include a mix of fruit trees and decorative shrubs and trees. There was no off-street parking, although the grass verge was wide enough for cars to park on and aerial photos show that people did.

Aspects of new developments in garden retailing can also be seen. Part of the nursery is clearly for customers, with concrete paths and wooden edging on the displays. A small potting shed probably acted as a sales area. Many plants are in containers, including tins and what appears to be plastic. (As early as May 1955, Wales mentions in an advertisement that potted trees and shrubs are now available.)¹⁶ A certain level of self-service is implied by the large plant labels with photos and information.

From advertisements in the local newspaper, we can glean a little about the garden shop, located in Pine Avenue. It offered a full range of plants, including bedding plants, decorative trees and shrubs, fruit trees, seed potatoes, hedging, vegetables, cover crops, lawn seed, and bulbs.¹⁷ In addition, it stocked

¹⁶ "[Wales Garden Supplies advertisement]" *Upper Hutt Leader* (12 May 1955) p 2.

¹⁷ Various WGS advertisements: (27 May 1954) p 2; (26

pet supplies, as did many garden shops at the time.¹⁸ There is at least one mention of a display of blooms (chrysanthemums), which would have drawn foot traffic into the shop.¹⁹ Advertising emphasised seasonal planting.²⁰ The shop appeared to be a hub for gardeners – gardening and horticultural societies often had entry forms for their competitions available from Wales.²¹ A photograph of a garden shop from Lower Hutt in 1959 shows tomato seedlings in a wooden tray (to be dug out for customers) and neat shelves of pest control and weedkiller.²² It can be assumed Wales offered similar products, but these necessities did not warrant advertisement.

Zenith's Garden Centre

Zenith's originally opened in Manners Street, Wellington in 1930, as "Zenith's Seeds" under the ownership of Ted Ting. In 1951, he sold the company to his son-in-law William (Bill)

May 1955) p 4; (2 June 1955) p 4; (14 June 1956) p 1; (21 June 1956) p 7; (14 March 1957) p 1

¹⁸ "[WGS advertisement]" (26 May 1955) p 4

¹⁹ "[WGS advertisement]" (13 May 1954) p 1

²⁰ "[WGS advertisement]" (20 May 1954) p 2

²¹ Various WGS advertisements: (9 September 1954) p 7; (16 September 1954) p 1; (10 February 1955) p 1; (21 April 1955) p 3; (15 September 1955) p 3.

²² Pilcher's nurserymen 1957, Hutt City Libraries, Ref. 6954

Chun, who split the shop in two, with seeds and garden supplies on one side and fruit and vegetables on the other.²³ By 1956, Bill had opened a garden shop in Lower Hutt, his brother had opened an independent branch in Christchurch and Ted Ting operated the Zenith's nursery in Ōtaki.²⁴

In the 1960s, Bill purchased 92 Epuni Street, a 6000m² section with a two-storey house and covered in native bush. Family recollections are that Bill purchased the property in 1963 and used it for hardening off plants. Eventually he started selling plants from the old washhouse and the garden centre developed from there.²⁵ In letters to the Hutt City Council it appears Bill purchased the property at the end of 1966 and started setting up the nursery then.²⁶ Both versions could have truth in them, and more research is needed to pin down the exact details.

What is known is that Bill was aware of the developments in garden retailing. He knew Stan Palmer, founder of Palmers Garden

²³ Chun "The Zenith" np.

²⁴ "Zenith announce big news for home gardeners" p 4; Chun "The Zenith" np.

²⁵ "In Loving Memory of Bill Chun 16 April 2009" np.

²⁶ WE Chun to Town Clerk, 8 August 1967.

Centre, and had visited him and his garden centre in Auckland. Bill had also travelled to the United States and seen developments there. Although he thought there was only a 50% chance of a garden centre succeeding in the Wellington region, he decided to give it a try.²⁷ Bill knew that he was going to offer something new and different; before he purchased the land, he checked with the Hutt City Council (HCC) that a garden centre would be allowed.²⁸ The council, thinking it was just another nursery and Hutt City still had those, gave the go ahead. The City Engineer said no further approval was needed for the nursery gardens, as this was a "predominant use in Residential A Zones," and in a later letter said some sales from the nursery gardens would be allowed as long as it was ancillary to the main use as gardens. A covered area was approved on the understanding that it was for the sale of living plants.²⁹ Bill hired nurseryman James Wright as manager and they set up the property as a garden centre. The native bush was cleared and a parking area gravelled. The old two storey house on the property remained and

²⁷ Chun. Pers. Comm.

²⁸ WE Chun to Town Clerk, 8 August 1967.

²⁹ Town Clerk to Managing Director, Zenith Seeds Limited, 3 August 1967.

was used for storage and the washhouse as shop area.

The first indication in the council records that this endeavour may be different from a nursery is a letter from Dorothy Cubbon, who lived across the road from Zenith's. Dated May 1967, the letter objected to the commercial use of a residential property. Dorothy wrote "by no stretch of the imagination can this "Garden Centre," as it is called, be termed a market garden as plants are not raised on the site." Sales included hundreds of shrubs and plants in containers, gardening tools and supplies and decorative items. Dorothy concludes "the "Garden Centre" is purely and simply a retail shop open for business 5 days a week including Saturday."³⁰ She followed up with a second letter a couple of months later.³¹

In August, the City Engineer informed Zenith's that they must "restrict your sales to living nursery stock only" and that all additional items be removed from sale within

³⁰ CF Cubbon to Town Clerk, 8 May 1967. Note – although the letter is signed CF Cubbon, it is obvious from later letters that Charles' wife Dorothy is the main letter writer.

³¹ CF Cubbon to Town Clerk, 20 June 1967.

14 days.³² The letter was "a very great shock" to Bill and his exasperation came through in his reply. He explained that businesses like his were common throughout New Zealand and that Wellington was the last city to have one. Such businesses could not be located in commercially zoned areas, as it was far too expensive. He reported the favourable opinions of neighbours, local horticulturalists and visitors from as far away as Australia. He argued point-by-point against removing the garden sundries and also pointed out that the local dairies, butchers and fruit shop can operate as commercial premises.³³ Bill's letter was followed by one from his lawyer, which reiterated Bill's main points particularly that it was normal for nurseries to now sell garden sundries. Further evidence of this was the Shops and Office Tribunal that had recently sat in Lower Hutt and added the items to the exemption list of things that could be sold on Saturdays.³⁴

In the end, the Town Clerk advised Zenith's to apply for a specified departure from the

³² Town Clerk to Managing Director, Zenith Seeds Limited, 3 August 1967.

³³ WE Chun to Town Clerk, 8 August 1967.

³⁴ Gault, Mitchell and Wilson to Town Clerk, 10 August 1967.

district scheme.³⁵ Under the Town and Country Planning Act 1953, every local authority had to produce a district scheme that zoned together compatible land uses and introduced various consent types if a property wanted to undertake a different land use.³⁶ Under the HCC district scheme, nurseries and market gardens were permitted - possibly because there were several remaining on the valley floor when the district scheme was created. There was, however, no definition for "nursery" - so much so that when the Town Clerk asked the Town Solicitor about the matter, the solicitor had to look it up in the dictionary. He concluded Zenith's was not a nursery.³⁷

HCC records only two neighbours in opposition to the specified departure, while one neighbour supported it.³⁸ Forty-six members of the Garden Circle of the Hutt Valley Horticultural Society signed a petition in support of the application, saying they

³⁵ City Solicitor to Town Clerk, 5 September 1967.

³⁶ Miller *The Unsung Profession*, p 23

³⁷ City Solicitor to Town Clerk, 25 August 1967.

³⁸ EJ Turner to Town Clerk, 11 October 1967; Minutes from Town Planning Committee Special Meeting, 21 November 1967; Petition by Garden Circle of the Hutt Valley Horticultural Society.

"appreciate the services provided by Mr Wright, Nurseryman, Epuni Street and support him in his application to continue to provide them."³³ The specified departure was granted and the garden centre operated under it until it closed in 2005. Over its history, Zenith's continued to incorporate new technologies and sales techniques, including the ubiquitous garden centre cafe.³⁹

Twigland Garden Centre

On 4 March 1970, Upper Hutt's local newspaper featured on its front page a large sketch of a new garden centre. The Twigland Garden Centre was, the article proudly proclaimed:

a new concept in horticultural retailing which finds a similar parallel in the modern supermarket of today when compared with the old traditional corner grocer. Rapidly fading from the garden scene is the well-known seedsman standing behind a sold old wooden counter backed by rows and rows of seed drawers boldly marked with the name or variety of seed contained therein. Most of these seedsmen occupied cramped and dark shops particularly unsuited for the selling of nursery stock. Twigland will be a pleasant new experience of Upper Hutt – a spacious, well designed, garden centre incorporating many up-to-the-minute ideas from overseas.⁴⁰

³⁹ Chun "The Zenith" np.

⁴⁰ "New Amenity in the Area" (4 March 1970) p 1.

Situated on Fergusson Drive, Twiglands was on one of the Upper Hutt's main thoroughfares and there was sealed carparking for numerous cars. All of the shopping area was undercover, with an outdoor area with open sides topped with a roof partly made of clear corrugated plastic. The advertisement for the opening specials shows the plants sales area laid out in an attractive manner, with a small bridge over a pond, all the better to inspire homeowners (see Figure 1).⁴¹

By February 1971, the manager of Twiglands, Brian Cooper, claimed that 3,000 customers came to the business every Saturday.⁴² This constituted 50% of the weekly turnover.⁴³ Twigland still operates today, although it has moved to Glenside. Despite still operating and its long history, less is known about Twiglands than the other two case studies. I am hoping to remedy this with oral histories. One question I'd like to answer is how the capital to set up the garden centre was raised.

⁴¹ "[Twigland Garden Centre advertisement]" (22 April 1970) p 21.

⁴² Minutes from Special Meeting of Upper Hutt City Council, 8 February 1971.

⁴³ Minutes from Special Meeting of Upper Hutt City Council, 8 February 1971.

Managing director and shareholder Brian Cooper might be related to the large Coopers seed business family, although Cooper is a very common name. There was a large advertisement for Coopers seeds on the first advertisement for Twiglands, but this may be a coincidence.⁴⁴

The opening of Twiglands may have prompted Wales Garden Supplies to incorporate more garden centre innovations. Two months after Twiglands opened, Wales starting advertising their changes. Comparing the photos from the mid-1960s with those in the advertisement, we can see Wales Garden Supplies had changed considerably and the nursery been remodelled. The company is marketed as "The Established Firm with a New Look," which can certainly be seen in the accompanying photograph. All of plants are now in containers, including pint bags (PBs).⁴⁵ Comparing it to the 1960s photographs shows New Zealand flax was previously grown in the ground and is now in PBs. In addition to plants, there are also more decorative items featured, including plants, garden figurines and bird baths, and the essential landscaping

⁴⁴ "[Twiglands Garden Centre advertisement]" (8 April 1970) p 17.

⁴⁵ WGS advertisement (17 June 1970) p 7.



Figure 2: Top: The nursery of Wales Garden Supplies in the mid-1960s. (Roy Wale's nursery, 22 McLean Street, P1-6218-8608) Bottom: The same nursery in 1970. ("[Wales Garden Supplies advertisement]" (17 June 1970) p 7)

resource of the time: pebbles (pebble gardens were very popular). The advertisement encourages customers to visit, although there is a delivery service available. The copy states "The majority of plants in our nursery we grow ourselves therefore we are not just retailers but experienced Nurserymen who can help you with your garden problems."⁴⁶ Wales had clearly seen the developments that were taking place elsewhere and incorporated them into their business.

In 1971, Wales took another step, when Roy's son Gregory made plans to combine with Kent Nurseries. Kent Nurseries was run by Harry Kent and his mother Hazel and it appears Hazel had operated the nursery since the 1930s.⁴⁷ On 24 March 1971, a newspaper article announced that a new garden centre, under the name Kent Garden Supplies, would be built on the Kent Nurseries property on Fergusson Drive and combine the two businesses. The first stage would be the establishment of basic facilities; the second stage a building with a mezzanine-floor coffee and tea shop which could also be used for demonstrations and meetings, and as a social

⁴⁶ WGS advertisement (17 June 1970) p 7.

⁴⁷ "[Zenith Garden Seeds advertisement]" p 1.

amenity for the district. The garden centre had received approval to operate in a Residential A zone earlier in the month, but was now subject to an appeal at the Town and Country Planning Appeal Board.⁴⁸

The new garden centre was clearly set up in competition with Twiglands; the application stated that Twiglands was "too small to meet the needs of the area."⁴⁹ In reply, Twiglands appealed the specified departure to the Town and Country Planning Appeal Board. This time, four of the neighbours objected.⁵⁰ It appears that after the hearings, the applicants were given tasks to action, but didn't and the garden centre never went ahead. Harry continued to operate a nursery and later a market garden on the site until the 2010s. During this time, he had multiple problems with the council about his land, its use and valuation.⁵¹ It appears Roy Wale retired not long after the failed venture and I'm still researching the fate of Gregory Wale.⁵²

Conclusion and further research

Even a cursory glance shown in this paper shows there is more to the story of garden centres than shown in our garden histories. More research needs to be done on the businesses featured here and other garden retailers. Additionally, I want to look into the technical side of the shift to garden centres (including the so far illusive introduction of pint bags to New Zealand) and how this information was disseminated via industry groups. Overseas literature on garden centres still eludes me, and I am hoping someone has studied supermarkets in more detail to provide a comparison industry.

⁴⁸ "Proposed New Garden Centre" p 9.

⁴⁹ "Council Approves Garden Centre" p 9.

⁵⁰ Upper Hutt City Council submission to the Town and Country Planning Appeal Board, 31 March 1971.

⁵¹ Catalogue entry "Former Kent garden centre"; "Harry Kent" np.

⁵² Electoral roll: Heretaunga (1978).

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