

The Fostering of “All-Round Gardens”: Suburban Horticultural Societies in Wellington, 1910–40

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Abstract

Between 1910 and 1940, horticultural societies flourished in Wellington’s suburbs. This case study looks at the reasons for their establishment, profiles their membership, outlines the scope and growth of their operations, and examines the causes of their eventual demise. The importance of gender, class, and race in the societies’ membership is explored and the societies’ contribution to the development of a suburban gardening culture in New Zealand considered.

Introduction

Only two of New Zealand’s horticultural societies have had a substantive history published. Louise Shaw’s *Southern Gardening* covers the history of the Dunedin Horticultural Society’s first 150 years from 1851 to 2001.¹ *Wilderness to Garden City* by Colin Amodeo is a history of the Canterbury Horticultural Society during the same years.² The early years of Wellington’s Horticultural Society are described in a chapter in Winsome Shepherd’s *Wellington’s Heritage: Plants, Gardens and Landscape* but this monograph only covers the Society’s history until 1870; its subsequent history has not been published.³

Other gardening histories of New Zealand name horticultural societies but do not discuss them in any detail. Thelma Strongman makes many references to the Canterbury Horticultural Society in *The Gardens of Canterbury*.⁴ Bee Dawson’s *A History of Gardening in New Zealand* mentions the large city horticultural societies of Wellington and Christchurch, while Alan Jellyman’s history of nurserymen James Duncan and Victor Davies (*The Growing World of Duncan and Davies: A Horticultural History*) refers to the New Plymouth Horticultural Society.⁵

Many of New Zealand’s local horticultural societies have produced an unpublished history upon reaching a significant milestone such as twenty, twenty-five, or fifty years, and these are useful in charting their development. Generally based on old minute books, these histories are useful compilations of the office holders, significant events, and membership of individual societies. However, they do not position the society in the community they are operating in and are more in the nature of a chronological record than a true history.

The widest coverage of horticultural societies in New Zealand is that by Matt Morris in *Common Ground: Garden Histories of Aotearoa*.⁶ In this monograph, Morris builds on the findings presented in his thesis on gardening in Canterbury to give a broader exploration of gardening in New Zealand.⁷ This includes discussion of the activities of the big horticultural societies of Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury, and Dunedin as well as the smaller societies of Timaru, Onehunga, Wadestown, Kaitangata, Bruce, and the Runanga State Collieries.⁸

To date, there has been no study of suburban horticultural societies within a New Zealand city which examines why they were founded, how they grew and developed, their place in their community and their decline. Local horticultural societies operated on a very different level to the large city societies which served a much greater area, had a wider membership, and were established for very different reasons. This case study will look at the societies founded in

Wellington from 1910 and their growth, activities, membership, and survival or otherwise up until 1940. It will add to the body of knowledge about suburban horticultural societies in New Zealand, why they were formed, how they developed, and how they benefitted the communities in which they operated.

This study highlights the importance of local societies to Wellington's garden history and their contribution to community life in the region. It also contributes to a greater understanding of how gender, class, and race impacted on the membership of these societies, reflecting New Zealand society as a whole and how this changed over time. Unlike some New Zealand cities, Wellington is not renowned as a city of gardeners; but this case study shows that gardening and garden competitions were as popular in Wellington as they were elsewhere.

Background

The history of European gardening in Wellington from 1840 has been well canvassed by Winsome Shepherd.⁹ Gardens made by settlers for their own benefit ranged from small gardens alongside humble dwellings to very grand affairs with multiple gardens and gardeners, "whose layout and rare plants symbolised the refinement and sophistication of their owners."¹⁰ These gardens included the magnificent properties of settlers such as Thomas Mason in the Hutt Valley as well as many smaller, lesser known or unknown gardens. From the first, what to plant in the gardens was of key importance. The early settlers brought seeds with them and these were advertised for sale as early as 1839.¹¹ Keen to plant a variety of vegetables and fruit trees, and later plants to enhance their environment, dozens of varieties of plants and seeds were imported from Britain from the first days of colonisation and local nurseries were established from 1847.¹² The migration of the Chinese to New Zealand from the mid-1860s further opened up new networks for transferring plants from other countries and brought in new species and gardening methods.¹³

Supporting horticulture among its citizens was the Wellington Horticultural Society (founded in 1841, only one year after the Royal Horticultural Society in England), which introduced many plants to New Zealand in its first decade.¹⁴ By 1870, most plants available in the Northern Hemisphere were available in Wellington and this was largely due to the Wellington Horticultural Society.¹⁵ Many of the society's early members were prominent in horticulture in the city, either as owners of significant gardens or as nurserymen. In Wellington's first few years of settlement, the growing of edible plants was favoured and, therefore, in the early years of the Wellington Horticultural Society fruit and vegetable classes took priority over ornamental plants. However, this changed over the course of the nineteenth century and by 1900 a large number of classes in the Society's shows were for floral specimens.

Although civic and large private gardens and their gardeners have earned a place in New Zealand's garden history, little research has focused on suburban gardeners, who frequently belonged to the suburban horticultural societies. Consideration of the founding, operation, and membership of these societies contributes to a fuller picture of horticultural activities and the role of the amateur gardener in New Zealand during the first part of the twentieth century.

Little is known about leisure in New Zealand's rural and suburban communities between the years 1890 and 1940, a period critical in terms of the development of modern Pākehā society.¹⁶ In the more organised urban society with regular work and school hours, smaller families, and better transportation, local and national bodies were formed to control existing sports and activities.¹⁷ There was time and money for leisure activities, including gardening. The suburban horticultural societies operating in Wellington during the period 1910 to 1940 enabled the

recreational or amateur gardener to participate in a gardening community within his or her suburb, contributing to the broad social development of New Zealand cities. In their desire to compete against their peers, the societies' members indirectly encouraged the importation of plants and seeds and the development of New Zealand hybrids, as well as horticultural journalism.

The Beginnings of Wellington's Local Horticultural Societies

The years between the world wars were the golden age for suburban horticultural societies in New Zealand. Interest in gardening flourished and many suburbs established their own society, running educational programmes and extensive horticultural competitions under its umbrella. This upsurge in the popularity of gardening and consequent growth in the number of societies and the size of their memberships was the result of several converging factors.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Garden City movement and its offshoot the Garden Suburb movement had developed in Britain and the garden suburb had become a popular town planning goal. This movement advocated functional and attractive dwellings set in a pleasant and green environment.¹⁸ The United States also embraced the idea of its citizens living in an environment which constituted a harmonious whole, and inaugurated the American City Beautiful movement, a progressive social reform movement under the leadership of the middle class who wanted to improve the lot of the working man.¹⁹ In New Zealand, farmland was incorporated into towns and new suburbs were created. By 1911, the urban population of New Zealand exceeded the rural population for the first time, with home ownership at over fifty percent by 1916.²⁰ These suburbs were promoted as providing an attractive and healthy living environment.²¹ Louise Beaumont has described the 1920s and 1930s as characterised by an almost obsessive concern for the health and moral fibre of the family unit, leading to a social climate in which individuals felt a moral responsibility to beautify their home's environs.²²

The desire to create an environment to uplift the human race was espoused by Sir Frederic Truby King. The founder of the Plunket movement, King was also a fanatical gardener; he wrote not only on the wellbeing of mother and child (*Feeding and Care of Baby*, 1910) but also on that of plants and animals (*The Feeding of Plants and Animals*, 1905). King argued that "in plants, just as in the case of animals, the inroads of disease are best prevented by keeping the organism well nourished, vigorous, and healthy."²³ In the garden he created in Melrose, Wellington, in the 1920s and 1930s, King sought to create a beautiful environment for himself and his family as well as the mothers, babies, and staff in the nearby Karitane Hospital. King and his wife Bella had travelled widely and incorporated many of the plants and garden features they had seen into their garden. Designed by King himself, the garden featured four Japanese style pergolas and had ships' lanterns set low into brick walls around the house to provide an effect similar to that seen in gardens in Japan.²⁴ King's plantings also reflected his interest in *Japonisme* although the many Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) he planted were not suited to the Melrose climate. In keeping with his belief in the importance of environment to personal wellbeing and the significance of gardening in this respect, King was keen to improve the suburbs surrounding Melrose. He delivered plants and instructions on how to cultivate them to locals.²⁵ Keen to encourage local horticulture, King was one of the patrons of the Wellington Horticultural Society from 1925 until at least 1930 and one of its vice-presidents in 1930.²⁶

In addition to fulfilling a desire for a beautiful, uplifting, and healthy environment, gardening was seen by some as a means of coping with the stresses imposed by the First World War. That is, the popularity of gardening and the resultant rise in the number of horticultural societies was, in part, a reaction to global upheaval, uncertainty, and distress. More recently, the

beneficial effects of gardening on mental health have been highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and many well-known gardeners have been open about how gardening has helped them cope with depression.²⁷ Gardening helped build a healthy mind as well as a healthy body.²⁸

An attractive garden was also seen as an indicator of its owners' place in society. For wealthy sheep farmers, a garden designed by the foremost garden designer of the time, Alfred Buxton, not only complemented their newly built homestead but was another outward manifestation of their wealth and status.²⁹ In the same way, the middle class saw an attractive, well-maintained garden as an essential part of the ideal suburban home.

The onset of the Depression created not just a desire but a need to grow edible plants; home-grown fruit and vegetables were an important addition to a family's diet. Membership of the Canterbury Horticultural Society increased sharply during this time, rising from 537 members in 1927 to one thousand in 1929, with a consequent increase in the number of entries in horticultural shows.³⁰ In New Zealand it was no coincidence that "the worst years of the Depression coincided with a great burst of interest in both garden competitions and horticultural shows."³¹

With the increased emphasis on the suburb as a unit of community, the desire to belong to a local group and interact with other gardeners who were also neighbours became important to many. Joining a community of gardeners provided the means to learn from others, develop horticultural skills, and share successes and failures. The local horticultural society gave members the chance to meet regularly and develop local connections, and, for some, an opportunity to serve on a committee and participate in the life of a community organisation. It also gave keen gardeners numerous opportunities to pit their horticultural skill against that of their peers in the form of horticultural shows—competitions to see who had managed to grow the best specimens of particular species.

All these factors—economic, social, and physical wellbeing—contributed to a heightened interest in gardening and a desire to connect with other gardeners, often in a competitive sphere. It created an atmosphere in which local gardeners were eager to improve both the productive garden that was going to feed them and the decorative one that would enhance their quality of life.

This led to the formation of twelve suburban horticultural societies in Wellington between 1911 and 1933. Keen gardeners got together in Johnsonville (1911), Khandallah (Onslow Society, 1916), Makara and Karori (1916), Wadestown (1918), Hataitai (1919), Brooklyn (1920), Ngaio (1926), Northland (c. 1928), Miramar (1927), Vogelstown-Mornington (1933), and Kelburn (unknown date) to form local horticultural societies. In addition, a horticultural society in Newtown (Saint Thomas', formed in 1899), merged with the Island Bay Society (revived in 1929 after a lapse of some years) in 1930 to become the Wellington South Horticultural Society.

Very few documents relating to these societies survive. The Alexander Turnbull Library has an extensive archive from the Wadestown Society and broken ranges of show schedules from the Karori and Onslow societies.³² It also has a history of the Johnsonville Horticultural Society, but, as the author had little archival material available, it is based primarily on personal memory.³³ The Onslow Historical Society has a comprehensive archive of the Onslow Horticultural Society from the late 1930s and two show schedules from the Johnsonville

Society. Newspapers have proved to be the greatest source of information for the remaining societies, and they support information found in the existing archives. The formation of a local horticultural society usually warranted newspaper coverage, as did the shows they mounted and the efforts they made to enhance the appearance of their suburb.

Format of the Societies

Most of these local societies were eventually affiliated to the Wellington Horticultural Society, which had been operating (albeit with a break from 1851 to 1861) since 1841. Like the Wellington Society, each suburban society had a patron and was run by a committee, consisting of a president, several vice-presidents, and committee members. In the early years, as well as a committee which was made up entirely of men, some societies also had a “Ladies Committee,” while others had mixed committees from the start. In addition, there was a treasurer, a secretary, an auditor and, in at least one instance, a librarian.³⁴ These local societies held regular (usually monthly) meetings which often included a lecture. They also mounted one or more horticultural shows a year where choice flower and vegetable specimens grown by members were judged. This competitive aspect of the societies was an important component of their operation—for many, the most important.

All societies encouraged the use of the garden as a producer of food but also enthusiastically supported the cultivation of decorative plants, as “the modern home was considered to be incomplete without its ornamental garden.”³⁵ The Wadestown Garden Society was formed with “a view to encouraging the growth of garden produce, and thus reducing, if only in a trifling degree, the cost of living to the growers” as well as “the cultivation of flowers to increase the attractions of the suburb as a place of residence.”³⁶ The Ngaio Society’s founding objective was to foster “all-round gardens.”³⁷ In keeping with the ethos of the Garden City and American City Beautiful movements, as well as providing a venue for local gardeners to gather, learn, and compete, many of the societies also aimed to “beautify” their suburb, not only by encouraging householders to take pride in their own gardens but also by improving community spaces and thereby enhancing the appearance of the suburb as a whole.

To emphasise this role, many societies such as those in Johnsonville, Wadestown, and Onslow included “Beautifying” in their nomenclature at some point in their early years. Indeed, many societies seem to have been formed with this beautifying aspect as a dominant reason for their creation, and garden competitions were often promoted soon after a society was launched. On its founding in 1918, the horticultural society in Wadestown, then named the Wadestown Cottage Gardening and Beautifying Society, awarded prizes for the best kept flower and vegetable gardens in the suburb. In the Johnsonville Society’s first year of competition (1912) one of the prizes, won by Mrs W. Cook, was for the best kept and best stocked garden within a one-mile radius of Johnsonville Post Office.³⁸ The Wellington South Society ran a cottage garden competition in 1931 with gardens visited at least three times during the season by the judges who awarded points each time.³⁹

Other horticultural societies also had competitions for the best garden, encouraging the enhancement of the suburb by fostering competition between gardeners in the area. From 1924, the Karori Society had a “Self-Help” garden competition cleverly named to reflect not only its entry requirements (only those members of the Karori Horticultural Society or Progressive Association who did not employ any labour in his or her garden were eligible) but also its origins, as the donor of the Self-Help Challenge Cup and seven cash prizes was Karori local Benjamin Sutherland, the founder of the Self-Help grocery chain. The judging was undertaken from December to April with gardens visited on four dates and points awarded after each

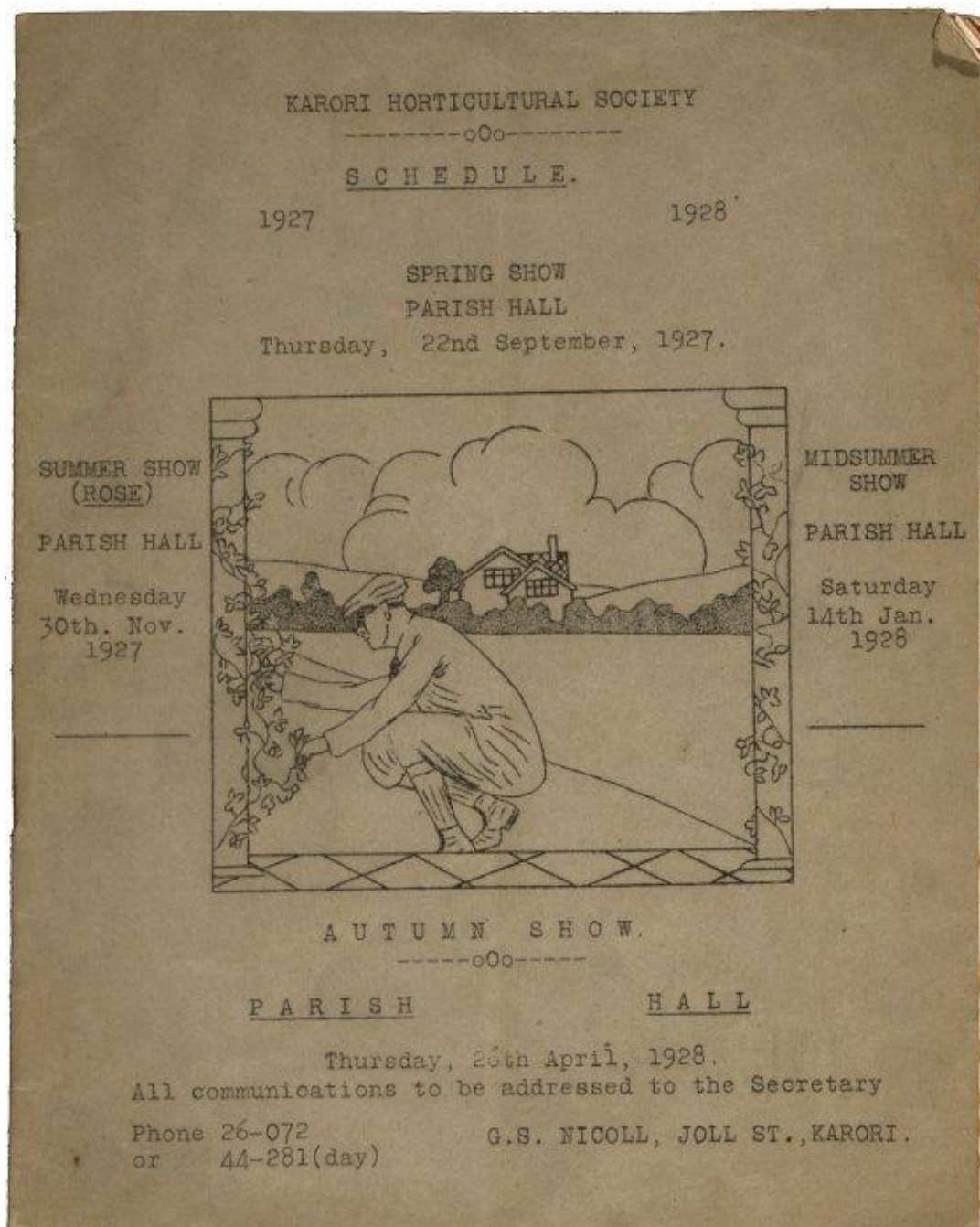
visit.⁴⁰ Benjamin Sutherland was a vice-president of the Karori Society and his magnificent garden, Homewood, was the source of many displays at the Karori shows but he did not compete in the Self-Help Challenge Cup as he employed at least one gardener, Mr G. Fearn.⁴¹

Gardens to Beautify the Home

As part of their beautifying agenda, many of the societies made submissions to their local body regarding what they perceived as unsightly parts of their suburb. In 1921, after being approached by the Wadestown Society, the Wellington City Council agreed to build a rock garden at the tramway terminus in Wadestown if the horticultural society would agree to keep it in order. Some of the rocks remain today at the parking area at the junction of Weld Street and Wadestown Road, and the society still keeps the area cleared of weeds and debris. The Wadestown Society also petitioned the Council to remove gorse and weeds in various areas of Wadestown and was active in planting trees and shrubs in the suburb. On the corner of Waitoa and Waipapa Roads in Hataitai, members of the Hataitai Horticultural Society cultivated a vegetable patch during the 1920s. Furthering their interest in beautifying the suburb, they proposed clearing and planting shrubs on vacant land at the corner of Kainui and Kata Roads at a meeting in 1922.⁴² The Johnsonville Town Board received a deputation from the Johnsonville Society in 1937 seeking their help in removing eyesores and affecting improvements in and around the district. The Society wanted the entrance near the stock yards cleaned up and proposed doing some work in the children's park on the plot near the Anglican church. The Johnsonville Society also planted trees around the perimeter of the children's playground in Dr Taylor Terrace.⁴³

Some societies were more assertive, not merely content to encourage locals to tend their own garden and thereby enhance the suburb but targeting everyone in the area, members or not. In 1935, the Northland Society "decided to wait on all householders in the district to commend to them the society's claim for support in the work it is doing in beautification and encouraging the growing of good quality flowers, shrubs, and vegetables."⁴⁴ There is no report of how this was received by Northland's residents, nor of its success or otherwise.

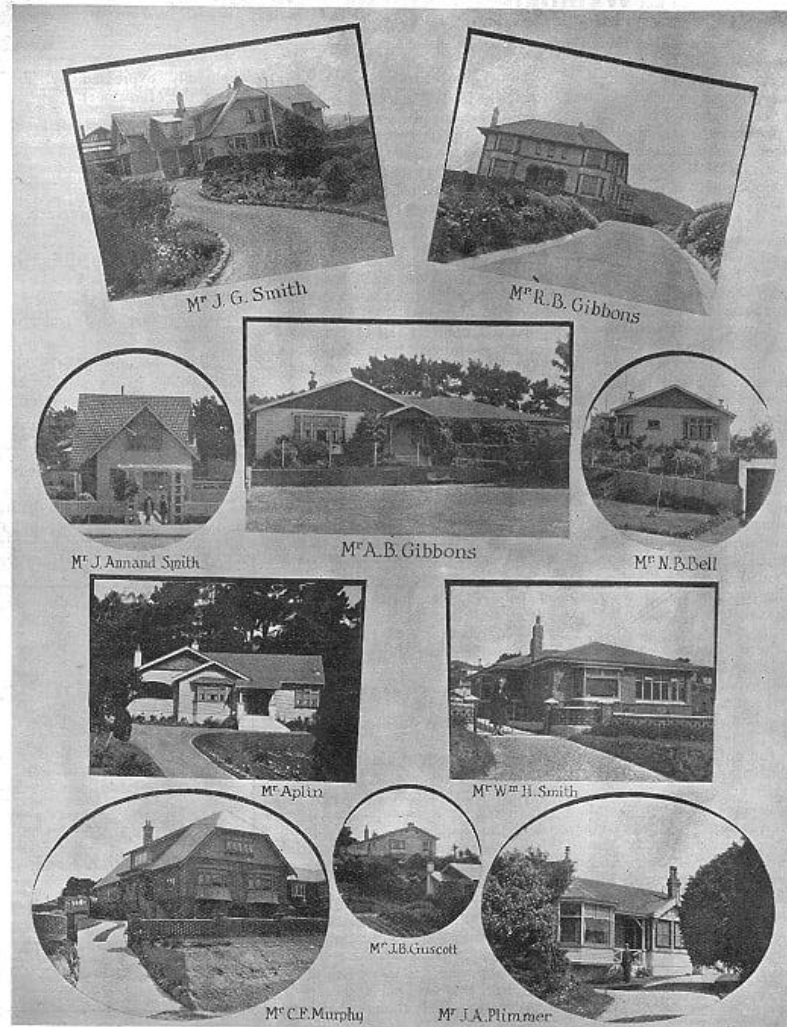
The cover of the 1927 show schedule for the Karori Society reflects an emphasis on home beautification. Although the gardener is in the foreground, the house is at the centre of the cover and the gardener is enhancing the house's setting by adjusting a climber growing up a substantial pillar. The gardener is male, indicative of the heavy weighting of men in society memberships, and he is dressed in plus fours, a cap, and tweeds, perhaps just tweaking a loose bloom before heading off to a game of golf.



Cover of the Karori Horticultural Society Show Schedule, 1927–28

Evidence of the rivalry between homeowners that was fostered by the horticultural societies can be seen in the pages of the *The Ngaio and Khandallah Review*, later *The Social Review*, which was published from December 1932 until early 1935.⁴⁵ As well as covering the social life of the Ngaio and Khandallah area, the publication gave in-depth coverage to the activities of the Onslow Horticultural Society and extensive coverage of the exteriors of residents' homes and gardens with full-page spreads of a single garden or a montage of several houses and gardens on one page. As well as the social cachet, their property's inclusion gave the owners another means of encouraging others to improve their own property and showing what could be achieved in a similar environment.

*Picturesque Ngaio & Khandallah Homes in
delightful surroundings.*



The Ngaio and Khandallah Review, December 15, 1932, 4;
Onslow Historical Society collection.

The horticultural societies became an important part of community activity and attracted input and support from local and national politician Robert Wright who was a keen advocate of the beautification component of the local horticultural societies. Wright was Minister of Parliament for Wellington South (1908–11), Wellington Suburbs and Country (1914–19), and Wellington Suburbs (1919–38) and was Mayor of Wellington from 1921 to 1925. In addition to his political duties, he was at various times patron of the Ngaio, Northland, Karori, Vogeltown-Mornington, and Onslow horticultural societies. In his opening remarks at their shows, he frequently stressed the importance of their role in the development of a pleasant living environment for all.

The Wellington Horticultural Society, as well as operating on its own behalf, also acted as an overriding body for the local suburban societies and supported and encouraged their activities. From 1922, the local societies were able to be affiliated to the Wellington Society and, as noted above, many were. The Wellington Society encouraged inter-society competition at their shows; awards for the suburban society winning the most points were donated by prominent Wellington personalities and businesses. In keeping with his support for the beautification of Wellington's environs, the first of these was donated by Wright (the R. A. Wright Trophy) which was awarded annually to the suburban horticultural society winning the most points in the Wellington Horticultural Society's spring competition.⁴⁶ The local society earned the right to keep the trophy outright after winning it in two successive years; the first winner was the Onslow Society in 1923. In 1922, the *Evening Post* donated a trophy for the winning suburban society at the Wellington Horticultural Society's rose show and, in 1924, Rose Joseph donated the Rose Joseph Suburban Trophy for the suburban society gaining the most points at the Wellington Horticultural Society's Autumn Show.⁴⁷ Rose Joseph lived in Hobson Street in Thorndon and was a keen gardener, member, and competitor within the Wellington Horticultural Society.⁴⁸ To complete the seasonal inter-society challenges, Wright donated another trophy in 1936 for the Wellington Horticultural Society's Summer Show.

Providing horticultural education was an important part of the societies' activities and members were keen to extend their knowledge and learn from other gardeners both within and beyond their membership. With the emphasis placed by many members on success at the horticultural shows, information on how to improve crops or grow better flowers was sought after. As noted above, most societies had a monthly meeting which frequently included a speaker talking on a topic of horticultural interest. These speakers often came from outside the society and sometimes they were a member of another local society. The lectures included topics relating to specific genera such as roses, carnations, chrysanthemums, and narcissi, as well as broader topics—the art of the garden, bulbs in season, the herbaceous border, New Zealand birdlife in relation to horticulture, and American gardens.⁴⁹ One of Ngaio's vice-presidents was the eminent botanist Dr Leonard Cockayne and he often presented lectures to the society. J. G. MacKenzie, the first Director of Parks and Reserves and an important contributor to Wellington Botanic Garden, regularly spoke to one or other of the societies. To enable access to gardening reference material, the Ngaio society took its educational responsibilities even further and set up a library for its members with its own librarian.⁵⁰

The horticultural societies were firmly rooted in their local community and many fund-raised for community causes. In December 1914, the Johnsonville Society held a Dutch auction with the proceeds going to the Belgian Relief Fund;⁵¹ the proceeds from the November 1915 show went to the Wounded Soldiers' Fund. Non-financial aid was also given. In 1918, the Wadestown Society helped families of local men serving overseas by assisting them in their gardens. During the Depression, the same society offered seeds and fertilisers for work schemes for the unemployed. The Ngaio Garden Club organised vegetable plots for the unemployed in 1932.⁵²

The horticultural societies were frequently supported by generations of the same family with parents and children entering competitions, serving on the committee, and donating prizes. In a history of the Johnsonville Horticultural Society, member Alison Masterton recalled how her grandfather, Ben Wolf, had been one of the society's founders. His daughter, Flora Richardson, became involved in the society as a young woman and took Alison along to flower shows where she had entries in the children's section. Alison herself later became a member.⁵³

The Seddon family were key members of the Wadestown Society. Tom Seddon (son of Premier Richard John Seddon) was president from 1934 to 1949 and later patron. In 1938, he donated the Seddon Cup to the society for the highest points in Class A—flowers. The Seddon garden featured rhododendrons and camellias and, in November 1944, Tom Seddon gave a talk to the Onslow Horticultural Club on rhododendrons, which he referred to as “the queen of shrubs.”⁵⁴ Tom’s wife Beatrice was an accomplished painter and many of her works were of her garden. The winning white camellia entrant at the Wadestown Society’s Spring Show still receives a painting of white camellias painted by Beatrice Seddon.

The Plimmer family lived in Khandallah and both John Alfred Plimmer and his daughter, Gertrude (Gertie), were avid gardeners and members of the Onslow Horticultural Society. Gertie won a prize for her cut flowers in the society’s first show in 1916, as did her father in the same class a year later. John Plimmer was president of the society from 1921 until around 1926. Gertie was vice-president for at least twenty years from the early 1940s after serving on the committee for many years. The J. A. Plimmer Challenge Bowl for most points gained during the year honoured Plimmer’s involvement.

Horticultural Society Shows

An important component of the horticultural societies was the competitive element attested to by the many surviving cups, rose bowls, shields, and other trophies belonging to now defunct societies.⁵⁵ The horticultural shows differed from the garden competitions as they focused on a species and individual examples of that species rather than on the garden as a whole.

Some of the more skilled gardeners were also hybridisers and entered items they had bred themselves, while others sought out the newest and most choice varieties to plant, nurture, and enter into their chosen class. The competitions gave individual gardeners a chance to compare their horticultural skill with their peers. They were the highlights of the horticultural year and an important part of belonging to a society. The societies’ shows were held in a local hall, sometimes over two days, and attracted a large number of attendees from within the community. Most societies had three shows a year—spring, summer, and midsummer—while others had one, two, four, or more. The Karori Society had five shows in its 1930–31 season: spring in September, summer (roses) in November, midsummer in January, dahlias in March, and autumn in April. As well as certificates and silverware, some winners received cash prizes.

The horticultural shows were carefully staged with each bloom placed in an identical container, generally the green horticultural vases used at shows throughout New Zealand and Britain. Each society gradually built up their own “plant”—the display vases and trestles—although in the early years it was shared between some societies. A yearly show schedule of classes and prizes was printed, and an admission fee charged. The shows were generally for amateur gardeners only, and at least one society, the Onslow Horticultural Society, outlined what this meant in their show schedules:

AMATEUR—Nurserymen, professional gardeners, also those who sell plants, flowers or seeds for a living are debarred from competing in any amateur classes. The status of an amateur is not forfeited by reason of employing occasional assistance in his or her garden or by the sale of “surplus” plants.⁵⁶



"Evening Post" Photo.

CHAMPION BLOOM AT THE MIRAMAR FLOWER SHOW—*“William Turner” chrysanthemum, grown by Mr. B. Algar, of Miramar. This bloom won the championship at the Miramar Horticultural Society’s Autumn Show, which is being held to-day in the Taia Hall, Kilbirnie.*

“CHAMPION BLOOM AT THE MIRAMAR FLOWER SHOW—‘William Turner’ chrysanthemum, grown by Mr. B. Algar, of Miramar. This bloom won the championship at the Miramar Horticultural Society’s Autumn Show, which is being held to-day in the Taia Hall, Kilbirnie.” *Evening Post*, April 21, 1931, 7.

Many shows attracted huge numbers of entries; at the Brooklyn Society’s show in January 1921 there were 835.⁵⁷ These would not all have been Brooklyn residents as many gardeners belonged to, or competed at, several societies and their names appear on multiple societies’ trophies. Reverend S. D. H. Peryman, one of the founders of the Johnsonville Society, was a life member of the Onslow Horticultural Society and donor of the “Reverend S. D. H. Peryman prizes, bulbs and gladioliis [sic] to the value of 10/6” at the Onslow show of 1931.⁵⁸ He also competed at the Wellington South Society shows.⁵⁹ Lists of all the winners were printed in Wellington’s newspapers and sometimes significant winners were publicised further afield. Some awards were restricted to those living in the locale. The Normandale Challenge Cup (donated by Mr T. C. Bilby in the 1930s) for the best collection of gladioli at the Onslow Society show was only open to residents of Khandallah, Johnsonville, and Ngaio. And the Karori Society had a “Karori grown” category for narcissi, gladioli, dahlias, and roses in their shows during the 1930s.

Recognising the promotional aspect of a piece of silverware with their name engraved on it, local businesses donated cups, shields, bowls, and other prizes for shows. In 1931, the Wellington menswear store Vance Vivian donated cups to the Onslow Horticultural Society (for highest aggregate points awarded for pansies and violas during the current year), the Wadestown Society (for the champion rose) and the Wellington South Society (for carnations). As well as businesses, individuals also donated prizes. Sometimes they were society members or the prize was donated in memory of a family member. Many classes did not have a physical cup or similar as a prize and perhaps to recognise their own success a member sometimes donated a prize in a category he or she excelled in, often becoming the first winner of that prize. Wadestown Society members Amos and Ann Jane Sirrett donated the Sirrett Cup for champion dahlias sometime in the 1930s. Amos Sirrett was the winner on at least one occasion, in 1939.

As the garden year progressed, categories in the shows reflected the seasons. For the Onslow Society's 1931 Spring Show there were classes in narcissi, cut flowers, and decorative (decorated tables). The summer show classes were roses, pansies, violas, sweet peas, miscellaneous collection, pot plants, ladies' decorative (a range of items including gentleman's buttonhole, floating bowl, and basket of roses), vegetables, and summer fruits. The midsummer show had roses, carnations, pansies, violas, gladioli, dahlias, sweet peas, miscellaneous, pot plants, ladies' decorative classes, and vegetables. All shows included several children's classes of horticultural and non-horticultural items.

Vegetables were an important part of the shows but had fewer classes than flowers, although most societies also presented an overall prize for outstanding vegetables. In 1935, the Onslow Society introduced the Annual Kitchen Garden Shield, a competition for the best vegetables. In 1936, the *Evening Post* reported that one of the successful competitors was ninety-four-year-old John Rice who, over the previous eight years, had turned an acre of gorse covered hillside into a vegetable garden, doing all the work himself. Rice lived in Johnsonville for nearly forty years and on retirement moved to Khandallah. The location of his successful kitchen garden is not known but seemingly he was not the outright winner of the competition as his name does not appear on the shield. Another successful vegetable grower, Noel Fraser, won the shield six times between 1935 and 1960.

The shows were a community event and there were often other categories in addition to horticulture, including cooking and handcrafts. Children had their own horticultural competitions as well as others such as the best-dressed doll and the best-dressed teddy bear. The categories reflected the times. At the height of the Depression in 1932, the Onslow Society had a children's category for the "Most Original Article made from a Sugar Bag."⁶⁰ As the organisation of the societies became more sophisticated and the number of shows and classes increased, only horticultural categories were included. Several of the societies' shows had musical items being performed while visitors admired the displays. The Miramar Silver Band performed at the Miramar Autumn Show in May 1933⁶¹ and Turrall's Orchestra of Newtown performed at the Southern Wellington Society show in January 1931 and 1932.⁶² At the Summer Show held by the Karori Society in 1930, music retailer F. J. Pinny Ltd lent a gramophone and records and a recorded concert was heard.⁶³ As well as music during the show, many of the shows had evening concerts in which locals performed musical or dramatic items. At the Onslow Society's Summer Show in 1923, there was an evening demonstration of club swinging by the girls and dumbbells by the boys.⁶⁴

The horticultural societies' upcoming shows were advertised in local newspapers, where entries were called for and ticket prices advertised. After the event, an extensive list of winners

was published, and these reports were frequently accompanied by photographs of winning blooms or of personalities who had opened or attended the shows. Lord Bledisloe, the Governor-General (1930–35), opened the Onslow Society's Summer Show in 1933. He and his wife Hon. Bertha Susan were welcomed by the society's president Mr R. B. Gibbons and then inspected a guard of honour made up of Brownies and Girl Guides. This show attracted significant coverage in *The Ngaio and Khandallah Review*, with photographs of local dignitaries, the Brownies and Guides, category winners, and other attendees. Lord Bledisloe also opened the Karori show in March that year.⁶⁵

Local nurseries used competition winners to advertise their wares. In 1919, John Bass won the lettuce, peas, French runner beans, French dwarf beans, and parsnips categories at the Wadestown Society's Autumn Show, securing "Mr S. Brice's trophy for most points in vegetables." The proprietor of the Reliance Seed Store in Courtenay Place, R. A. Nicol, used this success to advertise the seeds which he had supplied to Mr Bass in the *Evening Post* of March 14, 1919.

Promotion of Native Species

Despite the increased interest in gardening furthered by the horticultural societies, the emphasis was on exotic, not native species. The Wellington Horticultural Society had a prize in its flower section for a collection of native plants in 1892 and 1893.⁶⁶ However, this early enthusiasm for native flora seems to have waned and there is no evidence of any prize for native plants in the suburban societies from 1910 to 1940. In the interwar period, natives took a secondary place to exotics, although they were available for purchase and plenty of gardeners included them.⁶⁷

Although most (probably all) of the plants being judged in the shows were introduced, the importance of planting native trees was recognised by some. Leonard Cockayne, regarded as New Zealand's greatest botanist, moved to Ngaio from Christchurch in 1914 and was vice-president of the Ngaio Garden Club from its inception in 1926 until his death in 1934.⁶⁸ In a presentation given to the Ngaio Garden Club in September 1929, he urged locals as patriotic New Zealanders to grow the plants of their own country, saying that the fact New Zealand plants were sought after and cultivated in many other countries proved their value in the eyes of connoisseurs.⁶⁹

Perhaps because of the link with Cockayne and the proximity of the Otari Open Air Native Plant Museum, a public botanical garden for the display of native plants which opened in 1927, native plants appear to be particularly evident in Ngaio. Robert Bringans, headmaster of Ngaio School, belonged to the Ngaio Garden Club and, on Arbor Day, July 16, 1933, he opened the "Outdoor Museum of Native Plants" at Ngaio School. The aim was to plant every kind of New Zealand tree and shrub and then ferns. The first tree, a kauri from north Auckland, was planted by Bringans himself and then each of the teachers planted a tree, all donated by Otto Giddall, President of the Ngaio Garden Club.⁷⁰

Lord Bledisloe was also an advocate for native plants. When he opened the Karori Horticultural Society's Spring Show in 1930, he announced a new prize for native plants as they were well worthy of a place in local gardens.⁷¹ The competition was open to any member of the Wellington Horticultural Society or affiliated societies.⁷² Lord Bledisloe continued promoting native plants during his time in New Zealand. In opening the Onslow Horticultural Society's Summer Show in 1933, he deplored the haste with which the colonists had destroyed the native bush and, hoping that children would be encouraged to appreciate and know it, commented

that on his arrival in New Zealand “not one out of ten” of the people he asked knew the names of the native plants he was curious about.⁷³

Others also encouraged the use of native plants; Mr Mason, President of the Vogeltown-Mornington Horticultural Society, asked all members to plant at least one kōwhai, the national flower of the Dominion in 1935.⁷⁴ However, despite the enthusiasm of some, the horticultural societies’ focus continued to be exotic plants—as reflected in the numerous classes for non-native flowers in the societies’ expanding shows.

Membership of the Societies

Although all the societies started enthusiastically, some had greater support than others and the number of members between societies varied. The Johnsonville Society had 150 members by the time of its first show in December 1912. The Brooklyn Society had over 200 members in 1920, its first year of operation,⁷⁵ while Ngaio had between seventy and eighty in 1930, four years after its founding.⁷⁶ The Karori Society, which included Makara, had a much bigger catchment area than most and had 400 members in 1930, jumping to 490 in 1931.⁷⁷

In the early years of Wellington’s suburban horticultural societies, the role of women was very much diminished when compared to the balance of work carried out in gardens generally. Initially, most members were male, middle class, and white.

In her study of the impact of gender in the use of the Auckland Domain from 1890 to 1940, Caroline Daley emphasises the dominance of men who used the Domain for sport and recreation, with women merely acting as “spectators and supporters.”⁷⁸ The period under review by Daley incorporates that of this study, and the same could be said of the suburban horticultural societies in Wellington, at least in the early years. Although women participated in the societies, patrons were men and membership was heavily male dominated. Most societies had only male presidents for many years, and when women were included as vice-presidents there were only one or two out of a total of eight or nine. Committees were made up chiefly, in some cases entirely, of men. Guest speakers were invariably male. The winning competitors were mostly male with the non-horticultural competitive classes of handcrafts and cooking being the domain of women competitors. However, as Louise Shaw has noted, women’s participation in the societies did increase.⁷⁹ From around 1930, women were no longer content to merely make the supper and compete in the home craft competitions; in fact, these classes were eventually dropped altogether. After a few years women even began to compete in the vegetable classes which were traditionally the province of men long after women had breached the floricultural competitions. In 1933, Mrs Curtis no doubt surprised the stalwarts of the Ngaio Garden Club when she was runner up in their vegetable category.⁸⁰

Although E. Ketī of Pah Pipitea won the “Native Prize” for six large potatoes in the Wellington Horticultural Society’s first show held on January 22, 1842,⁸¹ there is no evidence of Māori participating in local horticultural societies from 1910 to 1940, either as club members or competition participants. Similarly, although there was a large Chinese community in Wellington in 1910, apart from members of the Lee family who participated in the Wellington South Horticultural Society competitions, and who may or may not have been Chinese, there is no evidence of participation by the Chinese community (although the Chinese-owned Te Aro Seed Store did sponsor prizes in some of the horticultural shows).⁸² It seems the membership of the horticultural societies was totally Pākehā, and British Pākehā at that, with only Anglo-Saxon names appearing on lists of committee members and prize winners, despite the many other European groups resident in Wellington during this time.

The broad goals of the Garden Suburb and City Beautiful movements were to create neat, tidy suburbs with attractive housing offset by attractive gardens. Wellington's local, essentially middle-class, horticultural societies supported these goals. In his study of Empire and gardening, James Beattie notes that enthusiasm in Britain for new plants and for gardening, especially among the middle classes, was cultivated through the publication of gardening journals, the soaring sales of commercial plant nurseries, the running of flower shows, and the establishment of new gardening organisations such as the Royal Horticultural Society (1840).⁸³ Although the period Beattie describes was earlier than 1910, many of his observations apply. New Zealand had a raft of civic horticultural societies by 1910 and dozens of commercial nurseries. In 1931, the first national gardening magazine, *New Zealand Gardening*, was launched, followed by the *New Zealand Gardener* in 1944.

The middle-class ideal of a neat and attractive garden enhancing a home was espoused by *The Ngaio and Khandallah Review*, which regularly featured photographs of local homes and gardens with laudatory captions. Many of those whose homes appeared were prominent in local horticultural societies. The December 1932 issue featured ten houses and their gardens, of which half belonged to members of the Onslow Horticultural Society.

The desire of the middle class to create a decorative and impressive garden can be seen in the changing approach of garden designer Alfred Buxton. After surviving bankruptcy during the Depression, his new business targeted the middle class and, in particular, those who had newly built homes.⁸⁴ Buxton's clients were no longer sheep farmers and wealthy merchants, but butchers, dredge masters, and clerks who had been successful in business and wanted a home and garden that reflected this.

As Morris notes, the horticultural societies' attempts to "civilise" the working class by encouraging working class members to grow for decoration, not just consumption, was unsuccessful. Despite the increasing numbers of ornamental classes in horticultural societies, the working class did not take up the challenge to beautify their homes with flower gardens, instead growing vegetables for their own consumption.⁸⁵ Although there is mention in the Wadestown Society's minutes of their offer of seeds and fertilisers for work schemes for the unemployed during the Depression, it is evident that these men were not members of the society. Cultivating an attractive and prize-winning garden or prize-winning blooms took time; for many, particularly during the years of the Depression, time spent growing flowers was time not earning money or growing food.

The Demise of the Societies

The enthusiasm for some of the societies began to wane from the mid-1930s; membership decreased and several of the societies ceased to operate. No records exist for many of the societies and newspaper reports are the only means of tracing their activities and approximate lifespan. Unfortunately, when a society ceased to meet it often seems to have just faded away without warranting mention in the daily newspaper. No evidence can be found of the Hataitai Society's activities after 1929, so it is assumed it did not operate after that date. There is no mention of the Ngaio Garden Club after 1935. The Wellington South Society went into a year-long hibernation due to lack of interest by members in 1936 and does not seem to have emerged.⁸⁶ There is no mention of the Brooklyn Society after 1937. The *Evening Post* of October 28, 1938, reported that a meeting of the Vogeltown-Mornington Society had been held the day before to dispel the notion that it was closing down, but this apparently had no effect as no further evidence of the society can be found. However, the societies of Karori,

Johnsonville, Miramar, Wadestown, Kelburn, and Onslow continued to flourish and were still operating after 1940.

Why did some societies survive and others not? A lack of documentary evidence means my conclusions must be put forward as hypotheses.

Many of the conditions which had led to the creation of the societies had changed by 1940. The suburbs were now established as the basis of urban life and many other community organisations had developed within them, competing for participants' leisure time. Some of these new organisations indirectly reinforced the necessity to maintain the family home and garden, making this aspect of the horticultural societies less relevant. The economic Depression was over, there was a welfare system in place, and the necessity of growing fruit and vegetables at home had reduced, although most suburban gardens still had a vegetable plot. The advent of war changed priorities and may have made growing flowers for competition appear frivolous; time and energy previously devoted to floriculture was perhaps being used for initiatives such as the Dig for Victory campaign, or non-horticultural activities. The Onslow Horticultural Society was a keen supporter of the Dig for Victory campaign, giving presentations to other clubs in the Wellington area and to the public, and survived until 1967.⁸⁷

A lack of members to organise and direct the societies no doubt played a part in the demise of some; the Wadestown Society went into recess from 1948 to 1949 due to insufficient members to serve on the committee.⁸⁸ Not all gardeners were competitive and the intense competition which became prevalent in some of the societies would not have appealed to everyone. When the Johnsonville Society struggled to get members in the early 1990s, a break-off garden club with no competitions was formed, and this club is still very successful today.⁸⁹ The organisation of the society, the calibre of speakers, the fellowship or lack thereof, the increased age of members, and the reduction in membership numbers would all have played a part in the demise of some of the horticultural societies. For some people, however, membership of a horticultural society remained an important part of suburban life and many societies continued to operate for another twenty years—and others even longer.

Between 1910 and 1940, Wellington's suburban horticultural societies provided a community group for local gardeners to meet, learn, and compete with their gardening neighbours. As part of their beautification programmes, the societies enhanced the suburbs for the benefit of all and encouraged gardening as a leisure activity. Their activities extended beyond the group of keen members they attracted, contributing to the development of community spirit, encouraging physical activity, and providing their many members and others with a creative and social outlet. More broadly, they helped develop the horticultural activities of Wellington and New Zealand, encouraging the importation of new plants and species, the development of hybridisation, and the fostering of horticultural journalism. These societies were an integral part of all Wellington suburbs during the period and a significant contributor to the development and history of gardening in Wellington.

¹ Louise Shaw, *Southern Gardening: A History of the Dunedin Horticultural Society* (Dunedin: Dunedin Horticultural Society, 2000).

² Colin Amodeo, *Wilderness to Garden City: A Celebration of 150 Years of Horticultural Endeavours in Canterbury* (Christchurch: Canterbury Horticultural Society, 2001).

³ Winsome Shepherd, *Wellington's Heritage: Plants, Gardens and Landscape* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2000), 151–63.

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- ⁴ Thelma Strongman, *The Gardens of Canterbury: A History* (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1984).
- ⁵ Bee Dawson, *A History of Gardening in New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 2010); Alan Jellyman, *The Growing World of Duncan and Davies: A Horticultural History 1899–2010* (Taupo: Sir Victor Davies Foundation, 2011).
- ⁶ Matt Morris, *Common Ground: Garden Histories of Aotearoa* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2020).
- ⁷ Matt Morris, “A History of Christchurch Home Gardening from Colonisation to the Queen’s Visit: Gardening Culture in a Particular Society and Environment” (PhD diss., University of Canterbury, 2006).
- ⁸ Morris, *Common Ground*, 61, 70, 77, 85.
- ⁹ Shepherd, *Wellington’s Heritage*.
- ¹⁰ James Beattie, “‘The Empire of the Rhododendron’: Reorienting New Zealand Garden History,” in *Making a New Land: Environmental Histories of New Zealand*, ed. Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2013), 245.
- ¹¹ Shepherd, *Wellington’s Heritage*, 10.
- ¹² Shepherd, 166.
- ¹³ Beattie, “‘The Empire of the Rhododendron,’” 244.
- ¹⁴ Shepherd, *Wellington’s Heritage*, 159.
- ¹⁵ Shepherd, 163.
- ¹⁶ Caroline Daley, “A Gendered Domain: Leisure in Auckland, 1890–1940,” in *The Gendered Kiwi*, ed. Caroline Daley and Deborah Montgomerie (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1999), 89.
- ¹⁷ Daley, 90.
- ¹⁸ Sarah Rutherford, *Garden Cities* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2014).
- ¹⁹ Naomi Blumberg and Ida Yalzadeh, “City Beautiful Movement,” *Britannica Academic* (June 24, 2014), <https://academic-eb-com.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/levels/collegiate/article/City-Beautiful-movement/605248>.
- ²⁰ Morris, *Common Ground*, 88.
- ²¹ Dawson, *A History of Gardening*, 220.
- ²² Louise Beaumont, “Gardens of the 1920s and 1930s,” in *A History of the Garden in New Zealand*, ed. Matthew Bradbury (Auckland: Penguin, 1995), 135.
- ²³ James Beattie, “Scientific Agriculture, Health and Gardening: Japan, New Zealand and Bella and Frederic Truby King,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 16, no. 2: 62.
- ²⁴ Beattie, 62.
- ²⁵ Lloyd Chapman, *In a Strange Garden* (Auckland: Penguin, 2003), 191.
- ²⁶ *Evening Post*, July 23, 1925, 1; July 1, 1926, 7; August 18, 1927, 16; July 16, 1930, 16.
- ²⁷ Ivy Shiue, “Gardening is Beneficial for Adult Mental Health: Scottish Health Survey 2012–2013,” *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 23, no 4: 320–25.
- ²⁸ Beaumont, “Gardens,” 135.
- ²⁹ Rupert Tipples, *Colonial Landscape Gardener: Alfred Buxton of Christchurch, New Zealand, 1872–1950* (Lincoln, Canterbury: Lincoln College, 1989).
- ³⁰ Morris, *Common Ground*, 85.
- ³¹ Dawson, *A History of Gardening*, 225.
- ³² “Subject File – Wellington Horticultural Society and Suburban Societies,” 96-318-93, Alexander Turnbull Library; “Karori Horticultural Society: Schedules for Shows 1920s–1950s,” Eph-A-HORT-Soc-Karori, Alexander Turnbull Library.
- ³³ Margaret O’Connor, “History of the Johnsonville Horticultural Society 1911–1994 and the Johnsonville Garden Club 1994–2004,” MS-Papers-8315, Alexander Turnbull Library.
- ³⁴ The Ngaio Garden Club had a members’ library which was established in 1932.
- ³⁵ Beaumont, “Gardens,” 136.
- ³⁶ *Evening Post*, May 16, 1917, 6.
- ³⁷ *Evening Post*, February 8, 1932, 4.
- ³⁸ *Dominion*, December 19, 1912, 8.
- ³⁹ *Evening Post*, August 29, 1931, 7.
- ⁴⁰ *Evening Post*, October 27, 1924, 7.

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- ⁴¹ *Evening Post*, May 2, 1927, 9.
- ⁴² *Evening Post*, July 29, 1922, 9.
- ⁴³ O'Connor, "History," 6.
- ⁴⁴ *Evening Post*, July 18, 1935, 5.
- ⁴⁵ Onslow Historical Society collection.
- ⁴⁶ *Evening Post*, September 4, 1922, 9.
- ⁴⁷ *Evening Post*, January 23, 1931, 13.
- ⁴⁸ *Evening Post*, May 27, 1925, 3.
- ⁴⁹ *Evening Post*, August 13, 1920, 9; September 25, 1926; August 27, 1927, 10; March 23, 1929, 4; May 19, 1931, 14; February 23, 1933, 9; April 12, 1934, 7; October 11, 1940, 5; February 7, 1941, 7.
- ⁵⁰ *Evening Post*, May 25, 1934, 5.
- ⁵¹ *New Zealand Times*, December 3, 1914, 3.
- ⁵² *Evening Post*, August 5, 1932, 3.
- ⁵³ O'Connor, "History," 6.
- ⁵⁴ *Evening Post*, November 11, 1944, 5.
- ⁵⁵ The Onslow Historical Society has a large collection of these.
- ⁵⁶ Eric Moulton Archive, Onslow Historical Society.
- ⁵⁷ *Evening Post*, January 29, 1941, 4.
- ⁵⁸ "1931 Onslow Horticultural Show Schedule," Eric Moulton Archive, Onslow Historical Society.
- ⁵⁹ *Evening Post*, January 18, 1934, 5.
- ⁶⁰ "Show Schedule for the Onslow Horticultural Society, 1932," Eric Moulton Archive, Onslow Historical Society.
- ⁶¹ *Evening Post*, May 18, 1933, 15
- ⁶² *Evening Post*, May 18, 1933, 15 and January 17, 1931, 6.
- ⁶³ *Evening Post*, January 17, 1930, 7.
- ⁶⁴ *Evening Post*, December 10, 1923, 10.
- ⁶⁵ *Evening Post*, March 6, 1933, 8.
- ⁶⁶ Morris, *Common Ground*, 94.
- ⁶⁷ This was similar to the situation in Christchurch as outlined by Morris, *Common Ground*, 111.
- ⁶⁸ A. D. Thomson, "Cockayne, Leonard," *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1996; *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, accessed April 21, 2022, <http://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3c25/cockayne-leonard>.
- ⁶⁹ *Evening Post*, September 14, 1929, 11.
- ⁷⁰ *The Ngaio and Khandallah Review*, July 1933, 13, Onslow Historical Society collection.
- ⁷¹ *Evening Post*, September 24, 1930, 16.
- ⁷² *Evening Post*, November 22, 1930, 15.
- ⁷³ *Evening Post*, February 4, 1933, 10.
- ⁷⁴ *Evening Post*, August 15, 1935, 4.
- ⁷⁵ *Evening Post*, September 15, 1920, 6.
- ⁷⁶ *Evening Post*, June 28, 1930, 10.
- ⁷⁷ *Evening Post*, July 26, 1930, 7 and *Evening Post*, July 2, 1931, 4.
- ⁷⁸ Daley, "A Gendered Domain," 89.
- ⁷⁹ Shaw, *Southern Gardening*, 86.
- ⁸⁰ *Evening Post*, February 10, 1933, 12.
- ⁸¹ Shepherd, *Wellington's Heritage*, 153.
- ⁸² For example, the Northland Horticultural Society show in 1940; *Evening Post*, March 13, 1940, 5.
- ⁸³ Beattie, "The Empire of the Rhododendron," 243.
- ⁸⁴ Tipples, *Colonial Landscape Gardener*, 115.
- ⁸⁵ Morris, *Common Ground*, 92.
- ⁸⁶ *Evening Post*, June 18, 1936, 8.
- ⁸⁷ Eric Moulton Archive, Onslow Historical Society.
- ⁸⁸ "Wadestown Wilton Horticultural Society, "A History of the Society," unpublished document.
- ⁸⁹ O'Connor, "History," 1.