

CLIVIA IN NEW ZEALAND

TONY BARNES

New Zealand has often been called “A Nation Of Gardeners”, and there are several reasons why.

The majority of New Zealand’s colonising settlers came from the British Isles during the mid to late 1800s, many of them from working class rural backgrounds, seeking a better life. There were also, however, members of wealthy families who bought huge tracts of land, and built large country houses and surrounded them with large gardens, importing plants to remind them of home. So the British love of plants and gardening, and the idea that it was an art form and part of one’s culture, was brought to New Zealand. Those with money, accustomed in their homeland to having access to the wealth of new plants being discovered and introduced to the West at this time, continued to seek these, and bring them into their new country.

Situated between 35° and 46° degrees latitude, New Zealand enjoys a temperate maritime climate, with the majority of the country seldom experiencing summer daytime temperatures higher than 26°C or below 10°C in winter. Corresponding night temperatures are 15°C and 0°C. Rainfall is regular, with the wetter west coast of both islands receiving between 2500mm (8.2 feet) and 1500mm(5 feet) annually, while the drier east coasts receive about 750mm (75cm). There is a very high U.V. light intensity, lots of sunshine year round, and fairly good soils, tending slightly to the acidic in most places.

So for coastal parts of the South Island, and much of the North Island except the mountainous central area, summers are moist but not too wet and humid, and winters are mild and often frost free. Even within cooler parts of the country, most gardens have a sheltered, warm, north-facing spot with a microclimate that enables relatively tender plants to be grown. I have seen *Clivia gardenii* growing happily on a north-facing slope in Dunedin, despite the fact that Dunedin receives brief winter snowfalls twice a year. *Clivia miniata* has been growing happily outside for decades

against a north-eastern wall of the palm house at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens, suffering only light frosting of leaves in some cold winters.

It is easy to garden in New Zealand, with few extremes of either temperature or rainfall, reasonably good soil, and a history and love of gardening in our ancestry, along with the urge to be adventurous and try something new.

The first record I have been able to locate of *Clivia* being offered for sale in New Zealand is in an 1892 nursery catalogue of David Hay, whose Montpelier Nursery in Remuera was Auckland's leading nursery for many years. Hay was an excellent plantsman, and also frequently corresponded with the great American plant hybridiser Luther Burbank, of Santa Rosa, California, from whom he may well have sourced plants.

"*Clivea nobilis*. A splendid bulb for pot culture. Produces a profusion of large crimson flowers. Highly recommended. 2/-"

Listed under "bulbs and tuberous rooted plants", it is interesting to speculate exactly what this plant was. The word "bulb", and the "large crimson flowers" description are slightly off putting when thinking of clivias. My guess is that it was actually the *C. miniata* x *nobilis* hybrid *C. cyrtanthiflora*, which has been sold in New Zealand for decades as *C. nobilis*, the mis-identification only being recognised and rectified in the last twenty or so years.

Another reason for thinking the plant listed was in fact *C. cyrtanthiflora* is that in Remuera/Parnell, the affluent Auckland suburb where Hay had his nursery, very old clumps of both *C. miniata* and *C. cyrtanthiflora* are relatively common. Miss Harrison-Smith, a 93 year young gardener and member of our New Zealand Clivia Club, lived the first half of her life at her grandfather's property in Remuera, close to where Montpelier Nursery was. She clearly remembers the nursery on Shore Road, and also recalls well established plants of both *C. miniata* and *C. cyrtanthiflora* in their garden when she was a child. I have found these two varieties in large old gardens, both public and private, in Tauranga, Hawkes Bay, Taranaki, Wanganui, Wellington, Nelson and Canterbury.

To the best of my knowledge, *C. nobilis* was not in New Zealand until imported by Keith Hammett and Terry Hatch about twenty years ago. Lyndale Nurseries of Auckland imported seed of *C. nobilis* from Cape Seed and Bulb Co in South Africa in 1998, and sold approx 1000 two year old plants to various growers around New Zealand. As far as I am

aware, this crop is the only quantity of *C. nobilis* that has been sold commercially in New Zealand. I have never seen mature plants of *C. nobilis* growing in gardens. They have always proved to be *C. cyrtanthiflora*, or occasionally *C. gardenia*.

The most widespread clone of *C. miniata*, both here and in Australia, is a narrow leafed, fairly rapidly clumping form, with soft apricot-orange flowers, which have rather narrow gappy petals. It is undeniably attractive, but as the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt, and it is often scathingly referred to by clivia enthusiasts as "*C. crappiata*".

This form, along with *C. cyrtanthiflora* and possibly *C. gardenia*, probably reached our shores via Australia over 100 years ago, and would have been spread around the country largely by divisions swapped among keen gardeners.

Interestingly, the 1899 catalogue of David Hay did not list *Clivia* again, and despite searching dozens of nursery catalogues dated between 1895 and 1930, I have not located any other listings of *Clivia*. This would seem to suggest that they were not readily available, or greatly esteemed. Perhaps, because they are a slow growing and slightly tender evergreen perennial, they did not fit easily into the production techniques of either of the two main types of nursery (i.e. tree and shrub, or hardy bulbs and perennials). Maybe the fact that *Clivia* had lost popularity in Britain and Europe had something to do with it, or perhaps because of their ease of cultivation in N.Z. they were not considered enough of a challenge to grow.

With gardening listed as the country's No. 1 pastime from the 1920s until the 1990s, (when walking took over as No. 1), every rural and urban community was awash with horticultural and gardening clubs, all holding seasonal shows where members vied enthusiastically with each other to win the cup for the biggest, brightest, healthiest and best grown chrysanthemum, dahlia, gladiolus, daffodil, iris, aster etc. People WANTED plants and flowers that they could lavish time and effort on, which would reward the grower with bigger better blooms. *Clivia* simply didn't fit the bill.

So for most of the 20th century *Clivia* lurked in dark corners of old gardens, forgotten and neglected.

R.E.Harrison's bulb and perennial nursery was established in Palmerston North in 1920, and he was respected as New Zealand's leading expert in this field for almost 50 years. His comprehensive *Handbook of Bulbs and*

Perennials for the Southern Hemisphere, published in 1953, mentions *C. miniata*, *C. nobilis*, and “a most desirable yellow-flowered variety, deeper in colour at the throat, that is known as *C. miniata 'aurea'*”. Was this form already in New Zealand or had Mr Harrison seen it overseas, or perhaps simply read about it? It would seem the latter, as in his pictorial companion volume *Know Your Garden Flowers...Bulbs and Perennials*, published in 1967, he states, “*Clivia miniata* is usually found in this part of the world in the salmon-apricot-coloured form, but a range of other shades from pure yellow through orange to deep red is also grown abroad”. The October 1950 and June 1955 issues of *The New Zealand Gardener* magazine contained articles about them, the latter, more comprehensive one written by R.E.Harrison, who encouraged the importation by airmail of different coloured forms, by importing seeds from U.S. and U.K. catalogues.

A few passionate plantsmen scattered around the country, such as Dr Ray Freeman, and Max Goodie of Auckland, imported seeds from Schenkel in Germany, and *C. caulescens* from Gordon McNeil, about 30 years ago, while Felix Jury and Jim Schumacher of Taranaki, and Stevens Nurseries of Wanganui appear to have done the same in the late 1950s or 1960s. Dave Austin of Kaitia and David Thorns of Nelson both imported seed from Santa Barbara in California in the 1960s, hybridising and selling plants locally for many years.

Clivias were seldom offered for sale (an old gardening friend in Taranaki, Mrs Gwen Masters, recalls purchasing her first three *C. miniata* plants from Pettigrew's Nurseries in Stratford in the early 1940s). Clivias tended to be swapped and exchanged among interested plant friends more as a curiosity than a plant of any value or real use.

However, as society changes, so do people's tastes in plants. During the 1960s, 70s and 80s Dow Seeds of Gisborne, were importing seed from European growers, Antonia nurseries in California, and various sources in South Africa. At a similar time Ken White of Parva Plants was obtaining Californian seed for his mail order plant business. Ken mentions going over to visit his *Clivia* breeder, who was very sick, and being given all sorts of “special” plants. However Ian Duncalf, who bought Parva Plants from Ken a few years later, saw these plants and doesn't recall them being anything special.

Peter Lees, working for Barry McKenzie's Topline Nurseries in the mid-late 1980s, was importing up to 50,000 seeds a year for a short time

from Miyaki in Japan, and these were shared with North Shore Nurseries (Bryan King) and Model Nurseries (John Davies) of Auckland. These were broadleafed, deep orange/red, and sold around N.Z. as *Clivia* 'Grandiflora' when two years old. They were retailing at between \$15 and \$20, which most gardeners considered expensive at the time for a smallish plant. John Davies tells me that a couple of batches of variegated seed were also brought in, but germination was poor, and none was offered for sale. Topline closed down soon after, but Peter Lees tells me that North Shore Nurseries have continued to source seed from Miyaki to the present, to provide plants for the Kings Plant Barn chain of garden centres.

New Zealand experienced a gardening boom and frenzy from the mid 1980s to the late 1990s, with three weekly gardening programmes on television, several gardening magazines, and a myriad of new nurseries opening to supply the seemingly insatiable demand for plants. Many plants that had been traditionally difficult to propagate and hard to obtain were tissue cultured, and suddenly available in large quantities. Everyone had to have a garden, even those who until now had not been remotely interested in knowing the difference between a protea and a pansy!

Keen gardeners began to break away from the historical European temperate style of gardening, seeking new and different plants, pushing the limit with subtropical plant types, and generally being more adventurous with plant associations and garden design. At last New Zealanders were developing a style of their own, fusing traditional plants and designs with the much brighter, luxurious, and often flamboyant flora that would grow in our warmer conditions.

It was about now that nurserymen and plants people began to take a real interest in *Clivia*, especially the hybrid forms offered by overseas nurseries. I believe this happened more because they were not widely known or grown, and so regarded as "new", than for their intrinsic beauty and easy care qualities, which have only really been appreciated about a decade later, after the bubble of gardening enthusiasm burst, and people realised that they'd been conned – gardens DID entail some work after all. Drat! Let's forget the roses and pansies and look for plants that take care of themselves. *Clivias*!

It was at this time, too, that the clone named *C.* 'Redgrove' appeared on the NZ market, one of the few named varieties to be marketed in NZ and also the first to be tissue cultured. There is a story attached to this, but for

now let's just say the planned release coincided with the demise of Topline, and that 'Redgrove' was not a particularly noteworthy variety, merely one of the best available at a time when there wasn't much around.

At this stage of the story many different people enter, and integrating the strands becomes tricky, rather like weaving a tapestry, or hybridising a line of plants. I think for clarity's sake, (and my sanity), I will outline the broad picture, then tell you in greater detail later about individual clivia personalities involved and where their stock came from.

The second part of this article will appear in the August issue of The Gardener's Journal. (Editor).

Tony Barnes has been a keen gardener all of his life, and a nurseryman for half of it. He and partner John Sole have a large, much visited garden, Ngamamaku, near New Plymouth. He has been especially interested in *Clivia* for the last 10 years, and has spoken about clivias in New Zealand, at the International Clivia Conference in Pretoria, South Africa, and also in Changchun, China.

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***Clivia* from Tony Barnes – Interspecific *miniata* x *nobilis* F2**

Photo by Tony Barnes