



Display plantings around the nursery give it some of the attributes of a botanic garden



Oratia Native Plants founders looking for a new direction

YOU DON'T expect to survive and make money on a native plant nursery do you?"

Such was the comment made to Bev Davidson by her long-time friend, garden writer and photographer Dennis Greville, soon after she became engaged to now-husband, Geoff.

That was several decades ago, but the Davidson's Oratia Native Plant Nursery is still going strong.

Bev says Geoff has typically been one step ahead of the industry, establishing the nursery before gardening with natives really became popular; recognising the commercial potential of our native grasses ahead of the trend; moving on to wetland species then eco-sourcing; and finally committing himself to

the preservation of rare and endangered varieties. The nursery evolved and changed over the years as a consequence.

But life moves on, and Bev and Geoff now find themselves pondering on the best way to exit the business they have built up and loved for so long. "I'm already on the pension and Geoff will be in a month or two, so we really do need to look at the alternatives."

The problem is that neither of them wants to see the nursery go the way of so many; the land and plants simply sold off to the highest bidder. They believe it is too valuable a resource for that and think

its future may lie in perhaps being operated by community trust, or maybe even run as a botanic garden or arboretum.

Geoff is a founding member of the NZ Native Forests Restoration Trust. For him, the ideal solution would be found in some sort of umbrella organisation taking over the nursery for the benefit of all of the community groups doing restoration work around the Auckland region.

"There are lots of these groups that have their own nurseries, but many of them aren't big enough or don't have their own facilities." And they're all struggling and competing for funding.

Geoff wonders if a central organisation operating from the Oratia site and possibly funded by a single grant might be the answer. He says there would of course be nothing precluding such a group from also operating the nursery commercially.

It's an interesting property, being roughly triangular and nestled between the Oratia and Cochrane Streams. Geoff explains that they have undertaken riparian planting which now provides a 20m buffer along the streamside in the 6.6ha site, of which the nursery occupies 2ha.

It currently operates six days a week and supplies both retail and wholesale. A comprehensive website provides a resource for anyone contemplating native plantings and Bev says it is viewed extensively.

"Another reason for our reluctance to simply sell up the stock and land is that we have a group

of committed long term-staff who deserve better!"

Bev says that over the years the staff have picked up the sort of specialist knowledge which would be incredibly difficult to replace and is certainly as worthy of protecting as the nursery itself.

A particular focus has been on preserving rare and endangered species, part of what Bev laughingly refers to as "non-commercial horticulture."

She says a truly commercial nursery limits their range to what

sells; the couple's passion for saving threatened species contributes little to the business' bottom line, but it has kept their interest up all these years.

The extensive planting on the property has been done with ecology taking priority over aesthetics. Not only do the grounds provide a ready source of seeds and cuttings, but Bev believes they could easily be developed as an educational resource by adding appropriate signage and opening up a walking trail. If it were to be developed as an arboretum, a lot of the work is already done.

The couple hope that by opening their ideas up to wider scrutiny, there may be someone out there who offers up possibilities they hadn't even considered. But it's definitely time to look at passing the reins to someone else.

"We hope to firm up on our plans before the end of this planting season.

"Unfortunately we're not in a position to be able to gift the property. If we don't sell it, we will need to draw some kind of income stream from it."

Any expressions of interest or suggestions are welcome.

For more on the business and contact information, see www.oratianatives.co.nz



**Perennial, grasses and herbs -
over 3700 seed varieties!**

Including a wide selection of conventional and 165 organic herbs
(certification according to EU regulations)

STAUDENSAMEN · PERENNIAL SEEDS · GRAINES DE PLANTES VIVACES

Production · Breeding · Seed Technology

Jelitto Perennial Seeds
P.O. Box 1264 · D-29685 Schwarmstedt, Germany
Phone: 00 49-50 71-98 29-0 · Fax 00 49-50 71-98 29-27
<http://www.jelitto.com> · e-mail: info@jelitto.com