

A Herb Awareness Month Project in Southland Reported by Jane Jones

During the month of March 2023, Southland celebrated Heritage Month, the heritage of the region. It is an opportunity to show case, amongst many other topics, past celebrities from the area.

One very significant personality for the Southland Herb Society is Olive Dunn, (1918 – 2014). For those members who were not in Invercargill from 1950 to 2000, she was the inspiration behind the establishment of our Society (1981), The Heritage Rose Society and the Victoria Group. She also helped establish, along with Jean Young and others, The Fragrant Garden at the Low Vision and Blind Centre where we hold our meetings.

Olive was an exceptional florist, horticulturalist and collector of all things beautiful, especially pottery and china. Over the years she travelled extensively to examine flower cultures of other countries to return with many innovative ideas.

She established an extremely popular florist shop in Dee Street, in 1949, called The Floresta, Spanish for 'the place for flowers'. Here she practised what she had seen abroad. Next door Olive ran a tea shop, very old fashioned with gingham table cloths and bone china tea sets, homemade sandwiches and baked items to die for.

To provide blooms for her Floresta shop, Olive established a nursery and extensive country cottage garden in her large Chelmsford Street property, not a blade of grass in sight, just trees, flowers and herbs. She was enthusiastic, innovative, active: developing different perspectives to flower arranging, introducing floriography (the language of flowers) and later, the use of fragrant flowers and plants.

The Southland Heritage Month also coincides with HFNZ Herb Awareness Month and our Herb Society decided to celebrate both with the subject, "The tussie mussie". A workshop on Saturday, March 4th was held at The Blind Centre and was open to the public. It was facilitated by Julianne, Betty, Jill and Sylvia, on behalf of The Herb Society and was very relevant to Olive's life.

Olive, who was the inspiration for the tussie mussie, and it uses the language of flowers - knowledge of the ancient use of flowers and herbs to communicate through the use of or the arrangement of them (eg. This craft goes back thousands of years, before Christ and each

stem used has its own specific meaning.) Olive wrote a book on the subject called "The Language of Flowers".

'The tussie mussie is a small bouquet, popular for bridal bouquets, especially in the Victorian era, using only flowers and herbs with a meaning for the bride. These mussies were also used on funeral caskets, for secret love messages or to hide the stench of body odour or warn off plague micro-organisms: remember 'Ring a ring of roses, a pocket full of posies'? This rhyme relates to The Great Plague of London 1665'.

Twenty one participants came to hear about Olive's life in Invercargill, admire the displays, and to watch Betty, Julianne and Jill demonstrate their version of the tussie mussie. They explained what each flower or herb/leaf represented: and then invited the participants to make their own. This was a very lively and friendly activity, each lady creating their own bouquet from the beautiful flowers and herbs provided.

Julianne, Betty and Jill knew Olive well, each having fond memories and showing mementos either given by Olive or collected from her estate. We heard some incidents that were remembered involving Olive that made us chuckle.

The Blind Centre was filled with Olive's beautiful china, replica pot-pourri (Olive was renowned for her dried flower, herb and spice bags), photos, books, and vases of roses, garden flowers, rose hips etc.

This was a true inspiration for all and a lovely afternoon.

Some examples of the meaning of popular flowers in a tussie mussie are:

Red rose – true love.

Yellow rose – jealousy.

Thyme – courage, strength.

Rosemary – remembrance. Basil – good wishes.

Red carnation – true love.

Pink carnation – I will never forget you.

Tulip – passion.

Marigold – grief.

Bay – glory.