



HERB FEDERATION OF NEW ZEALAND - PRESIDENTS -

1986-1987 President - Adair Polson—Genge, Invercargill

1987-1989 President - Francella Davies,. Auckland

1989-1991 President - Rona McNeill, Christchurch

1991-1993 President - Maryan Mansell, Hastings

1993-1995 President - Kath Widdowson, Nugget Point Lighthouse

1995-2001 President - Corrine Beazer, Frankton

2001-2003 President - Shane Carter, Paeroa

2004-2007 President - Diana Fraser, Christchurch

2007-2009 President - Linda Carter, Taupo

2009-2011 President - Sharon Fredriksson, Wellington

2011-2017 President - Chris Tuffnell, Nelson

2017-2025 President - Karina Hilterman, Hunterville.

BIRTH OF A VISION

The beginnings of Herb Federation NZ by Jane Carden

NZ's herb history

New Zealand's family of herbs have been faithfully recorded in many historical journals. Early records indicate that NZ's cultivation of herbs probably began in the 1770s. Along with NZ's native flora, herbs were highly valued by Maori, early explorers, missionaries and pioneers alike.

Many early arrivals introduced herbs from their places of origin to the fertile soil of the 'Land of the Long White Cloud' and these herbs would play an important role in providing valuable vitamins to the meagre diet of many.

From those early beginnings, we continue today to benefit from the blending of old and new herbs. The vision and foresight of these first peoples on Aotearoa's golden shores has continued in quite a wonderful way and many people have inherited their love, understanding and use of herbs, passed down through generations.

In more recent times, we can credit people like Gilian Painter, whose outstanding contribution through her literary works and lecture tours, has added stature to the history of herbs in New Zealand.

The birth of a vision

In her reminiscences, Gilian looks back to a time when she says, *'Yes, I suppose it was my dream to form a federation. I've always believed 'knowledge is for sharing,' and I put forward my ideas in the preface to Dittany 4, but my dream was certainly*

shared by Gillian Polson. We discussed it the very first time we met with Sylvia Keys in Oratia about 10 years ago (1976). It was early spring and we had lunch together on the verandah. We never thought to replace the herb societies, who fulfil the needs of their members, but rather provide something more for those with a serious interest in herbs.'

In hindsight, we now see the vision and dedication of Gilian Painter and Gillian Polson in 1976 brought their long-awaited dream of a national New Zealand herbal body into reality ten years later.

In 1986, the Southland Herb Society accepted the challenge to host an inaugural national conference, with, I might add, much trepidation and doubt in the idea of establishing a national herb body.

Friday night - for the love of herbs

The *Inaugural Conference of the New Zealand Herb Societies*, themed *For the Love of Herbs* got underway on a high note on the Friday evening.

More than 140 conference delegates attended, representing herb societies from all around NZ. They were

greeted by an incredible scene upon arrival - the hall had been transformed into a stunning herbal spectacular, featuring static displays, craft tables and competition sections.



On the first evening, there was much noise and gaiety among the delegates upon arrival, marvelling at the impressive displays.

This delightful cacophony of noise was interrupted by proceedings, which commenced at 7.30pm with a formal speech of welcome by the president of the Southland Herb Society, Lois Edginton. Lois expressed great pleasure in welcoming the delegates to the conference and gave thanks to the Southland Herb Society for hosting the event.

Conference Convenor, Adair Polson-Genge, gave the opening address and after giving thanks to delegates, outlined the conference programme and the concept of forming a national federation.

The formal opening of the *Inaugural Conference of New Zealand Herb Societies* was graciously performed by the guest of honour, Her Worship the Mayor of Invercargill, Mrs Eve Poole, who welcomed the delegates and gave a most informative address about herbs and their many uses over the centuries. She then declared the conference open.

The speaker for the evening, Gilian Painter, delighted delegates with her chosen subject *Herbs in History*. Gilian captivated the audience and brought to life the very essence of the conference - *For the Love of Herbs* - with her command and thorough understanding of the family of herbs and their place in history. Gilian's gift of imparting knowledge with such happiness and joy of sharing what she loves was an inspiration to us all, and it was to set the mood of the conference for everyone.

Saturday – workshops galore

Saturday morning came all too soon, with an early start for delegates heading off to their respective workshops.

And what a rewarding day it was for everyone; so many excellent tutors with beautifully planned programmes, every minute crammed with interesting herbal things to make and study, a day of learning in every sense, and we all finished with a better understanding of all things herbal.

In the afternoon, the hall was opened to the public on the afternoon and more than 700 visitors poured through the doors to enjoy the incredible displays.

The day was all too short, but delegates were given an insight into new horizons and enabled them to continue their search for knowledge in study and research into their particular fields of herbal interest.

An attractive scene at the Victoria Chambers greeted the delegates at conference dinner that evening. Delegates gathered for pre-dinner apéritifs and then took their places at delightful table settings of herbal accents which created a festive atmosphere and complemented the delicious herbal dinner.

In a relaxed and mellow after-dinner mood, we were to enjoy our very special guest speaker from across the Tasman, Loma Thompson, who, with her husband Fred, were making their first visit to New Zealand as the North Queensland delegates - and how thrilled we were to have them with us.

It was a fascinating and racy account which the dinner guests thoroughly enjoyed. Loma brought a new insight into our lives regarding herbs, when she described, with a fine sense of humour, just what it was like attempting to grow various herbs in the tropical climate of Queensland, but succeeding effortlessly with many luscious herbs which we find so difficult, if at all, to grow in NZ.

Sunday – down to business

The business programme, convened by Gillian Polson, saw her bring the delegates to an unanimous decision—and at 11am precisely, history was made on 16th February, 1986 – and the Herb Federation of New Zealand Incorporated was formed.

It was a moment to be remembered and was shared with tremendous enthusiasm by 140 delegates and later by the many

members of Herb Societies and related fields throughout New Zealand.

The year of quiet endeavour and dedication by so many people interested in NZ's herbs. The careful sowing of a seed by Gillian Polson and her visit to the Southland Herb Society, brought their 'birth of a vision' to fruition.

Southland's legal advisor, Christine French, presented guidelines to conference, upon which the delegates' decisions were to be based. Through debate and questions coming from the floor of Conference, delegates showed a fine understanding of what the concept of a Federation would encompass - *For The Love of Herbs* growing in stature, strength and being united through the common bond of a Herb Federation.

We were to hear two Guest Speakers during the day, starting with John Martin, the Managing

Director of *Highfield Herbs*, Christchurch and a founding member of NZ's Commercial Herb Association.

John gave a most interesting glimpse into his commercial world of herbs, from the mass production of dried herbs harvested freshly from extensive cultivation, the process of bulk drying, and the importance of herb hygiene and packaging for world markets. John also discussed the supply of commercial fresh herbs to NZ's hotel and restaurant industry.

We were also honoured to have the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research represented by John Palmer of the Crop Division. John spoke to us concerning his work in the fields of research DSIR study of herbs in field trials and indicated its intention to continue research in this area.

The formal closing of conference on the Sunday evening, was an outstanding presentation *Herbs in the Living Kitchen* by Gillian Polson. Gillian brought to life the full potential of herbs in this sphere. A relaxed and entertaining speaker with a wealth of experience in all things herbal, she brought her subject to a close with a sensitive and beautiful closing vote of thanks to the conference convenor, Adair Polson-Genge and the hosting body, the Southland Herb Society.

A final gesture followed, with a donation box being circulated among delegates, who filled it to overflowing to purchase a book gift as a token of thanks to the Southland Herb Society.

Convenor Adair, thanked the delegates for making the occasion so successful and declared the conference closed. President Lois thanked the delegates on behalf of the members of the Southland Herb Society, and wished the guests an enjoyable journey home.

Monday – the herb garden tours

A day in the southland countryside brought a complete change of scene for delegates who went on a tour of six very different herb gardens.

Keen interest was shown in the luxuriant and abundant herbs in their many different categories, each garden a delight in itself.

Midday saw the herb hunters enjoy a wholesome lunch box picnic in the sunny and sheltered setting of Anderson Park. The wonderful day

ended with a delicious finger-tea at the tranquil Blind Centre Lounge.

The time had come when final farewells were said and convenor Adair Polson-Genge brought the happy gathering to a close with a few well-chosen words - leaving the delegates with the lovely thought that we would meet again in Auckland, for the Biennial Conference in November 1987.

In conclusion – vote of thanks

The members of the Southland Herb Society submitted an article to *Dittany* to express their thanks to delegates for their whole-hearted support and good fellowship during the Inaugural Conference of Herb Societies.

“You made conference so successful for us all, as did our convenor, Adair Polson-Genge, who made it all possible,” they wrote in *Dittany*.

“Adair’s convening of the conference was tremendous. Her ability and business acumen combined to make the organizing of conference an enriching experience for all who worked with her. Her hard work over many months was constant, and sustained at all times with goodwill and humour.

“Adair’s dedication and love of herbs brought a special grass-roots atmosphere to conference, with a lovely hint of the deep-south pioneering spirit pervading the conference hall.

“Time and again delegates were to express their pleasure in the warmth of hospitality and friendship, and at close of conference we were to hear Adair, in her new role of HFNZ president, reiterate that the executive would work for, and in close relationship with all members of HFNZ.

“Thank you Adair for your vision and dedication in the birth of the Herb Federation of New Zealand.”

Footnote: I was asked to write something about the start of the Herb Federation of New Zealand (HFNZ), so I copied excerpts from *Dittany*, a national herbal publication produced by Gilian Painter before and during the early years of HFNZ. – Jane Carden



HFNZ - THE ORIGINS

by Sharon Frederiksson

When I hear someone mention the 40th Anniversary of the Herb Federation of New Zealand, I am intrigued to know exactly where and when the very first concept of thought took place regarding the formation of a national body; a Herb FEDERATION of this country.

Having listened to several people and read many chapters on this subject I can say it clearly seems to have started in the south, in Invercargill, in line with several trains of thought in other parts of the country .. in Auckland, and elsewhere.

Dittany, as a publication, had first been printed in 1979. Its formation was promoted by Gilian Painter of Glen Eden, Auckland, as she recognised there was a lack of information about growing and using herbs in New Zealand. It was a small-format magazine which was brought about by members of many herb societies around New Zealand wishing to contribute articles of interest on herbs.

Herb Societies were expanding. Marilyn Wightman wrote that in the late 1970s and through to the 1990s there was a groundswell of interest in gaining knowledge of lost lore and rediscovering the useful plants - herbs. People had more time to garden and cook, go to meetings and generally enjoy being members of herb groups. At one stage, there were 38 herb societies listed in the Directory of Herbs in New Zealand. The publication of *Dittany* was part of that enthusiasm which led to the Federation of the herb societies.

When Gilian was writing her page in 2010 entitled Final Word for the last edition, which was numbered Volume 29/30 of that great little publication, she wrote *‘Times have changed .. people now have less time and less disposable income, the phenomenal increase in traffic means it’s more difficult to attend meetings’* and *‘available knowledge about herbs has increased’* (referring probably to the internet) so that there is a lessened need for herb groups and subsequently membership of herb societies has declined.’

Gilian, a herbalist, had a stall selling plants at the very first national conference and wrote several excellent books on herbs, including *A Herbalist’s Medicine-Making Workbook* and co-authored *Material Medica of Western Herbs for the Southern Hemisphere*.

Our Herb Federation of NZ has continued partly due to the fact that many people have joined as individual members. And the herb societies which remain - some of which still have vibrant meetings and days out together - are all included under the umbrella of the Federation.

When I recently spoke to Rona McNeill, who is 94 years of age, she said interest in herbs in Christchurch was begun by Avis Hill. *‘She was a lot older than me,’* recalls Rona. *‘I had not been*

long in Christchurch, having come with my husband from Papakura, and remember going to little get-togethers and breeding different edible herbs.’

‘After a trip to England, accompanied by a young woman who had a strong interest in plants, Avis developed a huge herb garden on her own extensive property.

‘The first meeting from which the Federation was formed was actually held in Invercargill. We all gathered there together.

There were three very interested women down south there. Olive Dunn, the florist, would have been one, of whom Southland Herb Society’s first President, Adair Polson-Genge, wrote ‘Olive Dunn was the driving force in Southland. Her talent with flowers and crafts was a wonderful inspiration and her willingness to share was a true gift to the Southland members which peaked at almost 400 members hosting Herb Festivals and lavish monthly programmes.’

‘The spin off was that Southland rapidly became a bit of a flagship of herbal innovation and by 1986 was seen as the Society that could best host and lead the development of a National Herb Society. This came about in February of that year and the Herb Federation of New Zealand was formed with a Southland-led executive (Adair Genge, Marilyn Pagan, Bev McDowell) to take it through its first two years.’

Rona mentioned another lady with a very big

garden on the side of a hill who developed patches of it into herb areas. *‘We had one big meeting following that’,* said Rona, *‘and then at the 3rd meeting I was the President. We had a couple of enormous meetings of the Federation. We were able to rent a space for next-to-nothing out at Lincoln which is nowadays Lincoln University. There were two large halls where we created wonderful displays of herbs and a competition. We were also supplied with all this wonderful food. People came from all over New Zealand; several hundred of them. We hired a bus and arranged trips for them around Christchurch and Canterbury. It was a most successful weekend and as a result there was a regained interest in herbs.’*

Rona recalled how Phyllis Aspinall of the Upper Clutha Herb Society and her husband who were high-country sheep farmers and in later years lived on the shores of Lake Wanaka had become great friends of her and her husband. *‘Phyllis developed a large, abundant garden of herbs,’* she said.

I asked about Jeanie White, from Nelson ... *‘oh yes, Jeanie was there in Invercargill in 1987 at the inaugural meeting and we became great friends. Jeanie attended all the New Zealand conferences and almost all of the Australian ones. Jeanie was a tiny person with a big spirit. Jeanie’s love of plants saw her involved with the establishment of the Nelson Herb Society, researching, writing, growing and using herbs. Always contributing and never a passive participant, Jeanie took up the challenge to organise and run the NZ Herb Conference in Nelson with great results. She made and donated a miniature library which is displayed in the purpose-built Herb Society Library at the Avis Hill Craft Centre.*

Rona also recalled Marilyn Wightman who lives in the Manawatu and was a founding member of the Federation, and Gillian Polson from the Lyttelton peninsula who has written books on cooking with herbs, and confirmed what I had read about the three South Island sisters who originated from Otago and spoke at several of our conferences - Helen Leach who wrote on the history of NZ gardening, Mary Browne who wrote cooking and gardening books on behalf of all three, and Nancy Titchbourne who illustrated her sisters’ literary pieces.

As a founding member of the Wairarapa Herb Society in 1982, Alison Croskery became the face of Wairarapa, from beginning of the Herb Federation and continued for a quarter of a century. Alison combined immaculate record-keeping and a great practical knowledge and the ability to demonstrate the many uses of everyday herbs with a will to encourage the best in people and the natural world.

In the Otago district, Bunny Rathbone, with her extensive herb garden, was another outstanding member of our Federation, often speaking at meetings, sharing her knowledge and love of herbs.

The Kapiti district’s herb society founded by Anne Webb, Jeanne Samuel, Alison Proctor and Katrine Pope - which came about as a result of them having met at a local course about herbs - attracted more than 100 members per month for a sustained

period ... buoyed up always by treasurer Maisie’s hilarious joke session. No-one knew her source of content - and it bore not the slightest mention of anything herbal - however it certainly proved an extra drawcard.

So many interested people around our country have been involved in forming or maintaining herb societies - I think of the late Anne Simpson of the Glen Eden and Auckland Herb Societies, and Jane Carden who is still running her successful

Epsom group, and of Helen Loe of Tauranga, dedicated and knowledgeable, who is heading the Tauranga Herb Society as our host this weekend.

There are three notable couples who have contributed lots over the years and they are Heather and Francis Young, Linda and Jim Carter, and Marilyn and Ian Wightman. The three hobbies involved certainly also gave generously of their time and enthusiasm to the Herb Federation.

Heather and Francis were instrumental to the Federation’s development in the early 2000’s ... at a point where it was actually deciding whether or not to disband. Francis recalled that it had been created at the height of renewed interest in herbs with societies springing up all round the country .. but, the movers and shakers were getting older, and, the societies were closing down. Heather, together with our current President Karina Hilterman, helped found the Katikati Herb Society and garden. Heather and Francis ran Herb News magazine for around 8 years.



Linda ran a conference in Taupo - which she themed with Hildegard von Bingen - virtually single-handed. Some time later Linda met Jim, who built and looked after our first website.

Marilyn was North Island Vice President in 1993, whilst Berylla from Nelson Herb Society ably assisted in the running of the Herb Federation in the 1990s. Berylla and her daughter lived in Richmond with her sister. They had a great herb garden which was toured at the Nelson Conference. Berylla had another sister, Francella - each of them went by their single, chosen names.

Marilyn has written dozens of informative articles for our magazine and also writes for the publication *Kiwi Gardener*. Ian Wightman was our Treasurer and Secretariat, all rolled into one, for 9 years and was responsible for our memberships, printing, advertising and distributing of the quarterly newsletter, *Herb News*, which was founded in February 1986, simultaneously with the formation of the Herb Federation of New Zealand. He and Marilyn would bundle up the copies of *Herb News* at their kitchen table and take them to the post office. Ian still chuckles that when he stepped down, five people took on the various tasks - all divvied up between them.

In early 2007, the NZ government of the time was proposing to create the *Trans-Tasman Agency Bill* which would have required expensive and extensive testing for every type of herb grown, manufactured into a product and marketed for sale in New Zealand or exported. Tested by Australians in an Australian laboratory and with an Australian CEO deciding on the future use of herbs in our country!

This bill, had it passed, would have severely threatened our abilities to grow and use the herbs our forefathers and mothers have used, and which we still use today. The list of herbs which would have come to the chopping board for the last time was long and the ridiculous proposed rules would have supported only the government and large pharmaceutical companies.

The Herb Federation of New Zealand made a stand against this proposal. I was

president of our Herb Federation at the time and represented us by giving an oral submission to a standing committee in parliament. Many other entities or companies did likewise (if their application to do so was allotted a time space) and history proved, thank goodness, that this ghastly bill was kicked-out.

After all, how would any Kiwis who appreciate New Zealand rugby like it if - all of a sudden- the government decided to appoint an Australian, working in Australia, to be totally responsible for all decisions regarding rugby in our country?

If anybody is ever in doubt as to the validity of the Herb Federation then they can reflect on this as an example of how, in cases such as that, we take the series issues and get our teeth into them.

From 2009 Chris Tuffnell, a Medical Herbalist, was a great President for more than 8 years, 2009 - 2017, and developed our Herb Certificate Course - of which she has been the sole volunteer marker for 14 years ... which she said she still really enjoys doing.

Emma O'Connell graduated from this course after being awarded the 2023 Heather Young Scholarship and Emma is now the HFNZ Librarian.

Karina Hilterman, Medical Herbalist, ably followed Chris Tuffnell's years as President in 2017 and we are still enjoying her wonderful, knowledgeable and beautiful monthly member's newsletters. Long live your wonderful life spirit

and tremendous understanding of herbs, Karina. You are so appreciated.

Many, many more members have, over the 40 years, contributed in so many ways .. helping to organise conferences, writing articles for our publications, sharing herb seedlings and knowledge at meetings all over NZ and - most of all - sharing their respect for and love of herbs.



Sharon Fredriksson
8th of October 2025