

# Hockings, David

**Friend of all gardeners:**

## F. David Hockings AM

**David Hockings has spent a lifetime devoted to plants and their problems. Writer, radio and TV presenter and public servant, he is an expert in his field and Maleny celebrated with the launch of his latest book, published by the CSIRO.**

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by Dale Jacobsen



**O**N A PERFECT autumn afternoon on Sunday 27 April, over one hundred very enthusiastic people gathered at Maleny Pioneer Village as Andrew Powell launched *Pests, Diseases and Beneficials: Friends and Foes of Australian Gardens* by David Hockings. A true celebration of a life devoted to the relationship between plants and their associated fauna such as beetles and thrips.

It was while walking around his parent's dairy farm in Springbrook that a young David first noticed native orchids. He became fascinated by their delicate and intricate structure, a fascination that set his course for the next 50 years.

"A local bloke of Dept. of Agriculture and Stock [later Department of Primary Industries] took an interest in me and invited me to sit the Public Service entrance exam. I thought 'bloody public service, I'll do it for a joke'. Well, I topped the exam and was offered a post.

He was transferred to Toowoomba where the second phase of David's future was set in train. "Fruit fly expert Dr Alan May took an interest in me and taught me so much. I was really interested in how insects and plants work together."

David has always been keen to share his knowledge with gardeners. Back in the days of black and white television, he presented a show which was the forerunner of ABC's Gardening Australia.

"It had a local focus," explains David. "Programmes were filmed in private gardens about the various creatures that could be found there.

"He also did local talkback radio shows, taught adult education and wrote columns for the *Sunday Truth* in Brisbane. "I had to use a *nom de plume* as the DPI didn't take kindly to their staff working in a second job."

The Department targeted rural industries for the sake of developing the state's economy and its only nursery interest was in fruit trees. Other branches of the Department resented David's appointment to assist ornamental plant nurseries and cut flower growers.

He was told "we equate nurseries with pony clubs". It was a time before plastics and nurserymen would salvage tins from rubbish dumps to use as plant containers. Things have changed dramatically since those days.

David had always been interested in native plants and this interest grew over the years to include Western Queensland



species, no doubt influenced by his mother who grew up out there.

The catalyst to writing *"Friends and Foes"* came when he shared a platform with an expert who, when asked to identify the culprit that had chewed some azalea leaves, replied: "an azalea lace bug". David squirmed. He knew the bug was a sap sucker, not a leaf chewer. It made him determined to write a book.

By 1980, David had accumulated enough knowledge to produce the book, *Friends and Foes of Australian Gardens*, which quickly sold out. He retired from DPI in 1985, intending to devote all his time to his Maleny nursery, Wanetta.

Wanetta was the name of the family pearl shell business at Thursday Island.

He and Olive tended nearly 900 species of plants, some of them very rare, discovered and even rescued by David on one of his many bush 'trips'.

David and Olive exported their impressive range of Australian native cut flowers to Japan and other countries. Many were new varieties that they developed in their nursery. His retirement only lasted a couple of months.

"I got a phone call to see if I could fill in at DPI while someone was on holidays. David stayed another 10 years, answering phone queries from nurseries and home gardeners. He was in the hot seat.

Years of experience enabled him to answer without the need for research. David is disillusioned with today's so-called experts. "You needed to have all the facts in your head," he said.

Retiring for good in 1998, David focused on plant disorders, including pests and diseases, as a consultant, looking for alternatives to replace the overuse of pesticides.

For some years, friends and colleagues in the horticultural industry tried to persuade David that it was time to reissue his book. This he did, retitled *Pests, Diseases and Beneficials: Friends and Foes of Australian Gardens*, published by CSIRO and now widely available.

In 2007, David was honoured with the award of Member of the Order of Australia in recognition of his work in horticulture problem solving for over fifty years.

He is indeed a friend of all gardeners, and has identified every species growing in the garden of State Heritage listed Pattermore House and propagated plants in preparation for the replanting.

Over the years, as well as writing many books, his name has been commemorated in *Acacia hockingsii* and *Grevillea hockingsii*. One of his Wanetta series paper daisies was chosen as the floral emblem for Queensland's Centenary. Following this he was invited as keynote speaker at the 2005 Australian Native Flower Conference in Brisbane.

These days, indifferent health has slowed David, but he still retains his sense of humour. When I asked David if he has any qualifications, he replied, with a cheeky grin: "I learnt what I know empirically - the only degree I have is 98.4°F".

**'Bloody public service, I'll do it for a joke.'**

