

# John Francis Armstrong (1820 – 1902)

The Armstrongs, father and son, were among the pioneer botanical collectors of the Canterbury region. John Armstrong, a farmer's son, was born in October 1820 on a Cumberland estate in the far northwest of England. At the age of twelve he began an apprenticeship with a market gardener and seedsman, and for the next twenty years worked in gardening and forestry. When he was 24 he married Ann Bowman, and in 1850 their son Joseph was born. Shortly afterwards he left his wife and son in England and tried his luck in the Victorian goldfields, but indifferent success brought him back three years later. In 1862, dissatisfied with conditions in England, he migrated with his wife and two children to Canterbury, New Zealand.

He became gardener to George Gould, a wealthy merchant and philanthropist, who had built a grand home on his 100-acre Springfield Road property, Hambleden, named after his birthplace in England. (The historic Victorian mansion was demolished in 2011 after irreparable earthquake damage.) Gould's two sons continued his business, which later became part of the stock and station agency Pyne Gould Guinness. During his four years at Hambledon (an incorrect spelling which became established) John Armstrong grew and exhibited collections of ferns, and in his spare time, assisted by his son, he studied the local flora and collected plants for the herbarium of the Christchurch Museum, enhancing his horticultural skills and reputation.

In 1867 he was appointed government gardener, and for the greater part of his 22 years' service as curator of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens his son

Joseph was in charge of the tree nursery work. They shared an enthusiasm for collecting and growing New Zealand plants, introducing them to horticulture and making them easily available for education, research and exchange. John Armstrong was elected a member of the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury in 1868 and was encouraged by Haast to speak to his fellow members on the vegetation of the Christchurch area. The next year he collected in the upper Rangitata with William Gray, gardener to run-holder and naturalist Thomas Henry Potts of Governors Bay.

The Armstrongs lived at Hambledon Cottage until Joseph's marriage to Annie Elizabeth Abbot in 1871. The young couple then leased a house and half-acre section that John owned on Springfield Road, and around 1880 John moved from Hambledon Cottage to a small house in the Government Domain. In 1889, when the Domain Board introduced new work regulations, the Armstrongs resigned. At almost 69 years of age John was ready for retirement. He and his wife spent their last years at 16 Springfield Road, presumably with Joseph and his family, where Ann died on 19 October 1899, and John Francis Armstrong on 16 September 1903, aged 82.

A whipcord shrub, *Hebe armstrongii* is named after John Francis Armstrong. Three plants: a filmy fern *Hymenophyllum armstrongii*, the rare high alpine *Pygmea armstrongii* and the subalpine daisy *Celmisia armstrongii*, commemorate the botanical contribution of his son, Joseph Beattie Armstrong.



## ***Hebe armstrongii***

From the 1920s until 2007, the shrub and tree species of *Veronica* in New Zealand were classified in the genus *Hebe*, and are still commonly known as hebes. It is our largest and most widespread plant genus, and ranges from low or bushy alpine shrubs, to small lowland trees. *Hebe armstrongii*, a small bushy conifer-like plant usually less than a metre in height, is recognised by its yellow-green branchlets and tiny leaves which are tightly appressed to the stems and thicken at the top. Little white or mauve flowers appear on the tips of the branches in summer. Initially discovered near the Rangitata River by John Francis Armstrong in 1869, it is seriously threatened by loss of habitat.