

Alexandre Henri Gabriel Cassini (1781 – 1832)

Generally considered to be one of the last members of the French Cassini family, Alexandre Henri Gabriel Cassini was born in Paris on 9 May 1791 in the Royal Astronomic Observatory, which had been built four generations earlier when the family moved from its native Savoy. He was the third of five children and the elder son of Jacques Dominique, Comte de Cassini, renowned for completing the map of France, and his wife Claude Marie Louise de la Myre-Mory. His great-great grandfather was the famous Italian-French astronomer Giovanni Domenico Cassini, discoverer of Jupiter's great red spot and the Cassini division in Saturn's rings. At the beginning of the revolution young Cassini was sent to Savoy where he lived with his uncle and studied at the Collège de Nobles in Turin, and when hostilities ceased he returned to France, retreating to the family estate in the Thury countryside to study under his father.

He became interested in his natural surroundings, and unable to find written answers to his questions, began making notes and drawings of the plants, animals and fossils he was looking at. Later, while following family tradition and studying astronomy in Paris, he also studied botanical books, spent time at the Jardin des Plantes and botanised around the city. Insufficient funds forced him to consider an occupation from which he could make a living, and in 1804 he began to study law. Fortune prevailed; one of his professors took him on as an assistant and later as a colleague. He worked his way through the French judiciary system to the highest position, President of the Chamber, and under King Louis Philippe was made Pair de France, one of the most prestigious honorary positions in the country.

During his leisure time Cassini developed his interest in botany, admitting that he found little of interest in the minerals in the vicinity, and that he abandoned the study of animals because of the torment and suffering he had to inflict on them. "Therefore I focussed my entire attention on the living but insensitive beings that were so abundant around me, very variable and graceful, and that I could mutilate, dissect and destroy without arousing pity within me." He began to study Compositae, the daisy family, in 1810. Believing that to understand it better it was necessary to study all the organs of a plant in all the species in the family, he set about his huge task. The first of his series of papers was presented in 1812, and many of his descriptions are still valid.

In February 1812 he married his cousin, Catherine Elisabeth Agathe de Riencourt, and as proof of his "love, esteem, respect and gratitude" dedicated to her the genera *Agathaea* and *Riencourtia*.

In 1827 he was elected a member and in 1831 an associate of the Academy of Science. Alexandre Henri Gabriel Cassini became ill during a cholera epidemic in Paris, and died on 16 April 1832, survived by his wife. As his father outlived him also, he did not inherit the title of Count often incorrectly assigned to him.

The genus *Cassinia* was named in his honour by the Scottish botanist Robert Brown in 1817 for a group of shrubby Australasian Compositae. The New Zealand tauhinu has had a complex taxonomic history since George Forster's *Calea leptophylla* was transferred to *Cassinia* and joined by other variants, a few of which were then moved to the closely related genus *Ozothamnus*.



Ozothamnus vauvilliersii

Ozothamnus ('fragrant shrub', referring to the smell of the foliage) is an Australasian genus, except for at least two New Zealand species previously known as *Cassinia* and more commonly by the Māori name tauhinu. (The specific name honours a 19th century French naval and colonial administrator.) *Ozothamnus vauvilliersii*, previously known as *Cassinia vauvilliersii*, is a variable shrub widespread in lowland to low alpine areas in open scrub and tussock areas from East Cape and Taupo southwards. The small leathery leaves have slightly recurved margins and dull, yellowish-brown tomentum beneath, while the many small flower heads occur together on short stalks in tight clusters in late summer.