

Antonio José Cavanilles (1745 – 1804) and Sellier

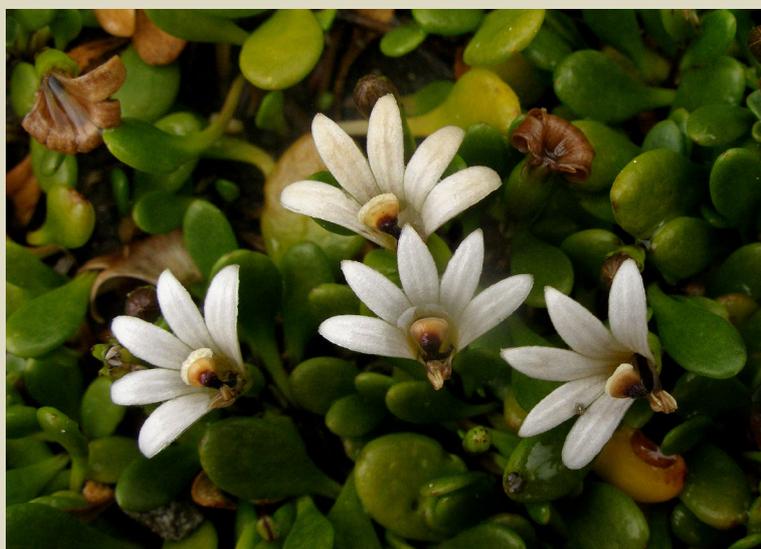
The Spanish botanist Antonio José Cavanilles was born in Valencia on 16 January 1745. He was educated from an early age by the Jesuit fathers, and in 1759, at the age of 14, began philosophy studies at the University of Valencia. After earning his first degree he took theology at Gandia, and in 1766 he graduated in both disciplines. He failed to qualify for a chair at the university, but Judge Briones, regent of Oviedo, entrusted him with the education of his children. Cavanilles moved to Oviedo with the family and was ordained there in 1771. After the death of his patron, he taught temporarily at the Seminary of San Fulgencio in Murcia, and in 1776 became tutor to the sons of the Duke of Infantado. When the duke was appointed Spanish ambassador in France, Cavanilles moved with him to Paris.

Cavanilles lived in Paris for twelve years, and associated with philosophers such as Voltaire, Rousseau and d'Alambert. Becoming passionate about plants and the natural environment, he embarked upon botanical studies in 1783, under the supervision of Antoine Laurent de Jussieu at the Jardin du Roi. He also corresponded with other European naturalists, and in four years completed the first of ten monographs, following the Linnaean classification system.

In 1789 the French Revolution forced his return to Madrid, where he continued to work on his papers. Commissioned to compile a natural history of Spain, he wrote on a diverse range of observations made

during trips through Valencia. The wealth of material he collected was a basis for his major work, *Icones Plantarum* (Madrid 1791–1801), but much of the content of the six volumes and 600 plates is devoted to American and Pacific species. These were described from herbarium specimens, drawings and living plants in the Madrid botanic garden. In June 1801 he was appointed professor of botany and director of the Royal Botanic Garden, with jurisdiction over the botanical activities of the realm. He instigated significant improvements, but died suddenly at the peak of his career, on 10 May 1804, aged 59.

A leading botanical taxonomist of the time, Cavanilles named at least 100 genera, about half of them still in use. His Australian descriptions were based on collections made near Port Jackson and Botany Bay in 1793 by Luis Née and Thaddeus Haenke, botanists on the Alejandro Malaspina expedition. *Selliera radicans*, a mainly coastal plant of Australia, New Zealand and Chile, was dedicated by Cavanilles in 1799 to François Noël (or Natale) Sellier, the French engraver who executed the plates for his *Icones* and *Monadelphiae*. Sellier, who was born in Paris in 1737, was in demand as a botanical illustrator, and used a method called stipple engraving for Redouté's images in *Jardin de la Malmaison* (1803), enabling for the first time the subtle shading of a painting to be reproduced by the printer. Examples of Sellier's work survive, but little, if anything, is known of his life.



Selliera radicans

New Zealand currently has three recognised species of *Selliera*, however one of them is considered potentially doubtful. *Selliera radicans* (Latin *radix* 'root') is a perennial herb with interlaced creeping stems, rooting at the nodes and sometimes forming a close sward of neatly overlapping foliage. The fleshy, club-shaped leaves, more or less erect, are dark green and shining. Lightly scented white flowers, like half-flowers because of their cleft corollas, are abundant in summer. Also known by the Māori name remuremu, *Selliera radicans* is widespread in New Zealand, near salt water in muddy, sandy and rocky places, and occasionally inland on wet, salty ground. Members of the genus also occur in Australia and Chile.