

Léon Croizat (1894 – 1982)

Léon Croizat, of French ancestry, was born in Turin, Northwest Italy, on 16 July 1894. His father, a prominent Italian industrialist, was a pioneer in the oil, electrical and automobile industries. When Léon was six and his twin brothers barely a year old, his parents separated. Protracted legal battles and loss of interest in the business left the family almost destitute when his father died in 1915. Léon showed an early interest in living plants and animals, and spent many hours with the wealthy, eminent herpetologist Count Mario Peracca and his Galapagos tortoises and giant iguanas – but at university he studied law. Service in the Italian Army during the First World War interrupted his studies; he received his law degree from the University of Turin in 1920, and began work in a friend's textile mill.

Croizat had married during the war, and a son and daughter were born in 1919 and 1921. In the face of Mussolini's oppressive fascism, the family immigrated to the United States, landing in New York early in 1923. Forced to take whatever menial work he could find, Croizat began watercolour painting as an escape from the drudgery. He tried to further his artistic career in Paris but had little success, and returned to New York. His luck changed when he was employed to identify plants for a topographical survey of New York parks. He became known to Dr E D Merrill, then director of the botanic gardens and later of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, and in 1937 was offered a position as technical assistant at Harvard. During his ten years there his European language skills were in demand, and his free time was devoted to furthering his botanical knowledge, investigations and writing.

In 1946, when Merrill lost his directorship, Croizat was dismissed. Unable to find another post in the USA, he went to Caracas, Venezuela, at the invitation of botanist Henri Pittier. He held a number of university positions, and in 1950–1951 was botanist on the Franco-Venezuelan expedition to the sources of the Orinoco River. Divorced from his first wife, he was encouraged by his new wife Catalina to give up official academic positions and work full-time on biological issues. His first book *Manual of Phyto-geography* had been written before he arrived in Venezuela. The rest of his work – around 300 papers and several large and important botanical books – was from the “near-shack” in Caracas that was their home from 1953–1975.

In 1976, when Croizat was 82, he and his wife became directors of the Jardín Botánico Xerofito, the botanical garden they had founded in 1970 outside the city of Coro, about 500 km west of Caracas. However, the loss of an eye that year and major abdominal surgery three years later took their toll, and Léon Croizat died at Coro on 30 November 1982. He had been honoured with Venezuela's Henri Pittier Order of Merit for conservation and the Italian Order of Merit. With local support, Catalina Croizat continued the directorship of the gardens, which are now named after him. Widely known internationally but largely ignored, Croizat's work has, however, been studied and discussed in New Zealand universities. In a 1990 revision of the genera *Kelleria* and *Drapetes*, Michael Heads named the South Island cushion plant *Kelleria croizatii* in his honour.



Kelleria croizatii

Kelleria, a small genus from open uplands of the South-west Pacific, has recently been separated from the genus *Drapetes*, which is now restricted to one South American species. Of the eleven *Kelleria* species, nine are low trailing and cushion-forming New Zealand alpenes, all but one endemic. *Kelleria croizatii* is a cushion-forming plant with densely packed grey-green or glaucous leaves, and is widespread in low to high alpine areas of the South Island, from Nelson to southern Fiordland, east of the Main Divide. Like other species of *Kelleria* and *Pimelea* it is an important food source for larvae of *Notoreas*, a genus of New Zealand diurnal moths.