

# Elizabeth Edgar (1929 – 2019 )

Elizabeth Edgar was born in Christchurch in 1929, a descendent of early New Zealand settlers. She was educated at Rangi Ruru Girls' School in the suburb of Merivale, and at Canterbury University College, where she graduated BA (1950) in classics and BSc (1953). In December 1952 she began work as library assistant at the Lincoln Crop Research Division of the former DSIR. However, a visit to Wellington, where she met Dr Lucy Moore at Botany Division, led to her decision to follow a career in botany. After being granted leave without pay to study for her MSc and then PhD degrees at Canterbury, she was appointed scientist in DSIR's Botany Division at Lincoln in 1959.



## *Libertia edgariae*

*Libertia* is a Southern Hemisphere iris genus of 15 species, with eight species in New Zealand now recognised. *Libertia edgariae* is a small endemic herb. Plants consist of leafy fans crowded or emerging at intervals from far-spreading horizontal, pale yellow stolons, the leaves green to pale yellow 120-620 mm x 15 mm. Panicles of 10–20 mm wide, three-petaled white flowers with three central yellow stamens in spring are followed by large, green, barrel-shaped fruit capsules, which turn black on maturity. The rounded or sometimes angular seeds are bright tangerine orange. *Libertia edgariae* inhabits a niche in coastal Wellington and western Wairarapa, in scrub and bracken on hillsides and old marine terraces.

There, she worked with her mentor Dr Lucy Moore in revising the taxonomy of the native monocotyledons for Volume II of the *Flora of New Zealand*. Then, with Arthur Healy, she prepared descriptions of all the naturalised plants in these families, which were published in 1980 in Volume III of the *Flora* series. The grasses – the largest and most important economically and ecologically of the New Zealand flora – remained the only unrevised family of monocotyledons, and after her retirement in 1988 Elizabeth continued to work on these as a research associate at Landcare Research, Lincoln, in collaboration with Henry Connor. The *Flora of New Zealand, Volume V Graminaceae* was published in 2000.

Throughout her career Elizabeth specialised in the compilation of the *Flora* series, but she also published many individual taxonomic papers, which made information available to botanists and others before publication of the *Flora*. In total, she has published (sometimes in collaboration with colleagues) 49 research papers, including four books, and other more general articles relating to her taxonomic research, all of them in New Zealand. She also contributed substantially to the preparation for publication of David Galloway's *Flora of New Zealand Lichens* (1985). Her expertise in classical languages was appreciated and drawn on by her colleagues, and ensured that Latin names for new taxa followed grammatical rules correctly.

A tribute at the time of her retirement records that she was one of a special group of pioneer women scientists at DSIR, Lincoln; loyal, never one to flaunt her knowledge or contributions or to push her views in any way ... an excellent scientist, friend and colleague. In recognition of her contribution to the work of the former Botany Division she was awarded the Allan Mere, and in 1990 she received the New Zealand Commemoration Medal. The Royal Society of New Zealand's Hutton Medal for 2000 was awarded jointly to Dr Henry Connor and Dr Elizabeth Edgar "for their extremely meritorious individual and joint contributions to the botanical classification and documentation of New Zealand flora". A Southern Hemisphere iris genus is named after the Belgian botanist Mari-Anne Libert (1782-1865), and in 2002, when researcher Dan Blanchon described three new species of New Zealand iris he, too, named them after women. One of the three, *Libertia edgariae*, honours New Zealand botanist and monocotyledon specialist, Dr Elizabeth Edgar. She died in Christchurch on 1 January 2019 in her 90th year.