

Thomas Kirk (1828 – 1898)

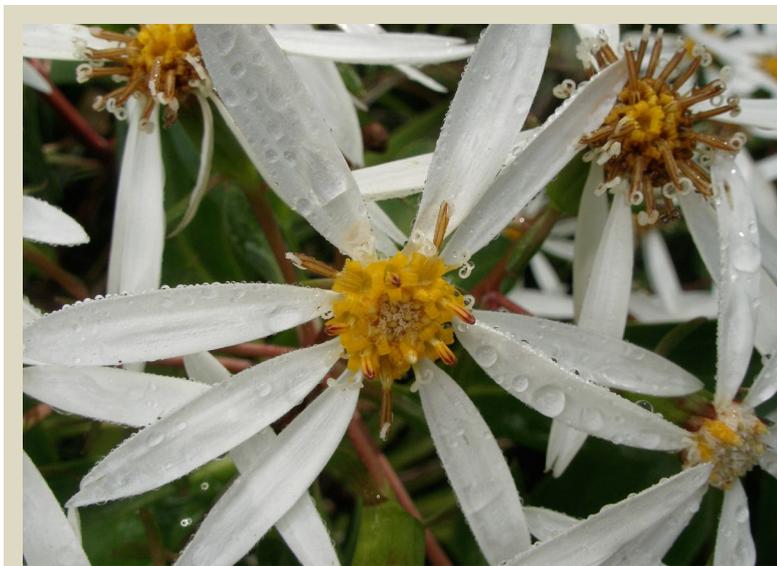
Thomas Kirk was born in Coventry, England, on 18 January 1828, the son of George Kirk, a nurseryman and his wife Sara, née West, a nurserywoman and florist. He had no formal schooling, but with tuition from his father and assiduous self-study, he was well educated. His parents fostered his early interest in natural science and gave him a thorough grounding in botany; he worked in the family nursery, and published a paper on ferns, the first of many, when he was nineteen. In 1850 he married Sarah Jane Mattocks, daughter of a warehouseman; they were to have nine children, five of whom reached adulthood. After the death of his father, Thomas struggled to keep the nursery going to support the family. His health suffered, leaving him with a permanent chest weakness, and for several years he took less exacting work as bookkeeper at a local timber mill.

In 1862 ill health and depressed economic conditions led him to migrate to New Zealand with his wife and four children, and soon after their arrival at Auckland he set up in business as a timber merchant. His work-related trips were wonderful opportunities to botanise, and in 1866, with geologist Frederick Hutton, he explored Little Barrier and Great Barrier Islands. From 1868 to 1873, on the recommendation of Hutton, he was secretary and curator of the newly founded Auckland Institute and Museum. Further botanical explorations during his more than ten years in the Auckland province included the northeast coast of Northland, Thames goldfield and Waikato, Rotorua and Taupo districts, and specimens of his many new finds were sent to museum herbaria and plant collections worldwide. In 1871 he was elected a fellow of the prestigious Linnean Society of London.

From 1874 to 1880 he lectured in natural sciences at Wellington College, at that time affiliated to the University of New Zealand, and when the position terminated due to restructuring, he moved on to Lincoln Agricultural College in Canterbury. At both institutions he won the respect and interest of his students. As chief conservator of state forests from 1885, he introduced regulations to reduce wasteful use of native forest, and dedicated 800,000 acres as forest reserves. When the section closed in 1888 as an economy measure, he was made redundant but employed for a further three months to complete the *Forest Flora*. The task took an additional nine months, however, which left him out of pocket!

During his enforced retirement he made botanical explorations in Stewart Island and the subantarctic islands. He had always been a prolific writer, corresponding with settlers, students and botanists in New Zealand and many parts of the world, and contributing papers to scientific journals. His *Forest Flora of New Zealand* was published in 1889, but *The Students' Flora of New Zealand and the Outlying Islands* was unfinished when he died after a burst pleural abscess, on 8 March 1898. However, enough progress had been made for it to be completed and published in 1899.

Thomas Kirk was hard working, dignified and courteous, with an endearing sense of humour. He gave generously of his time and knowledge, and for three decades he was the leader of botanical investigation in New Zealand. He is honoured in the specific names of a *Pittosporum*, *Aciphylla*, *Dracophyllum*, *Dacrydium*, *Carmichaelia*, *Lepidium*, and the beautiful kohurangi, *Brachyglottis kirkii* – Kirk's daisy.



Brachyglottis kirkii* var. *kirkii

Originally classified as *Senecio* and later transferred to *Urostemon*, Kirk's daisy is now considered more closely related to *Brachyglottis*, a genus of over 20 species endemic to New Zealand. This usually epiphytic plant, with its masses of white flower heads in North Island forest treetops, has the Māori name, kohurangi, meaning 'mist of the skies'. The mist came to earth on Rangitoto, where it grows on the lava, forming a small bush with broad fleshy green leaves on reddish stems. Until it flowers in spring it is easily overlooked. Another terrestrial form, *Brachyglottis kirkii* var. *angustior*, has narrow leaves and flowers in autumn and early winter.