

John Smith (1798 – 1888)

The son of a Scottish gardener, John Smith was born on 5 October 1798 in Abadour, Fife. After several years as a journeyman gardener he worked for four years at the Edinburgh Royal Botanic Garden under curator William McNab, formerly a foreman at Kew. Like other ambitious young gardeners, Smith was attracted to Kew, and with a letter of introduction from McNab, he obtained a probationary placement in the Royal Forcing Garden at Kensington. He was transferred to Kew's propagating department in 1822, starting as a stove boy, keeping the hothouse boilers stoked and the coal cellar filled. A year later he was in charge of it! On his own initiative he re-labelled all the plants on public display with full species names on metal signs, and named and re-arranged the grass collection. In 1837 he became an associate of the Linnean Society.



Cyathea smithii

Cyathea smithii, kātote, or soft tree fern, is the world's most southerly tree fern, and easily recognised by the midribs of dead fronds that persist as a short skirt around the trunk. The brown trunk is up to 8 metres tall, and sometimes forks. The horizontally spread fronds are thin and soft in texture and a bright fresh green in colour. Juvenile plants are notable for the pale brown scales on the stipes. Endemic and common in New Zealand, *Cyathea smithii* occurs as far south as the Auckland Islands. South Island Māori ate the cooked heart of kātote, but it is seldom browsed by animals.

When Sir William Jackson Hooker was appointed director of Kew in 1841, John Smith was promoted to the new position of curator, with an annual salary of £130 and a house. From the time of his arrival at Kew, Smith was concerned about career prospects for young gardeners and the lack of library facilities for them – a recruit with more than a basic knowledge of botany was exceptional. In 1841 Hooker ensured that at least a few basic texts were available; five years later books were budgeted for, and John Smith's former cottage was converted to a reading room. Gardeners were also allowed time to become familiar with Kew's huge range of plants, and later were offered lectures by Daniel Oliver on elementary botany, chemistry and meteorology. The collections of Hooker and Smith were the nucleus of Kew's museum, which opened to the public in 1848. The curator's son, Alexander Smith, who had volunteered to arrange the collections, became its first custodian in 1856.

In 1864, suffering from failing eyesight, John Smith retired after 42 years' service, more than half of them as curator. His successor was another John Smith (1821–1888), gardener to the Duke of Northumberland. It is significant that when stove-boy Smith arrived at Kew 40 species of fern were grown, but when curator Smith retired there were 1084. "Old Jock", as he was called by his staff, encouraged his gardeners in every way, but resented the directors' frequent overruling of his judgement and experience in gardening matters. He spent his retirement dictating his recollections of Kew, which were published in 1880. His other publications included *Cultivated Ferns* (1857), *Ferns; British and Foreign* (1866), *Historia Filicum* (1875) and *Bible Plants* (1878). He died at Kew on 14 February 1888.

Joseph Hooker paid him well-deserved tribute when, in 1854, he named a New Zealand tree fern *Cyathea smithii* in his honour.