

William Russell Sykes (1927 – 2018)

Born in Walsham-le-Willows, East Anglia, England, on 13 October 1927, Bill Sykes grew up on a farm at Wyverstone in East Suffolk and imbibed an early passion for insects from his entomologist uncle, Jack Russell. His interest in botany and ecology began at primary school where an annual competition was held for the collection of wild flower species, and continued at the area school in Stowmarket. He left school to begin a horticultural apprenticeship with a renowned seed nursery in Ipswich, and after the end of the war was conscripted into the Royal Navy for two years as a medical attendant. To his regret, he was shore-based and did not get to see the world, but he had a good introduction to the microscope – making slide preparations of disease-causing bacteria. In 1949 he began serious horticultural training at the Royal Horticultural Society's Wisley Garden, completing the Wisley diploma course in 1951 and achieving the National Diploma in Horticulture in 1953. Meanwhile he was one of three botanists selected for joint RHS and British Museum (Natural History) expeditions to the Himalaya in western (1952) and central (1954) Nepal, collecting mainly herbarium specimens and later live plants and seeds. In 1957 he married Betty Brown, who also worked at Wisley, and enrolled at London University, where he gained his honours degree in biology in 1960.

New Zealand needed a a botanist with knowledge of introduced plants, and in 1961 at the invitation of director Eric Godley, Bill and Betty Sykes arrived in Christchurch. At Botany Division, DSIR, Lincoln, Sykes specialised in the taxonomy of horticultural plants and was immediately in demand by local societies as a lecturer and committee member. His next major research interest, the flora of the South Pacific islands, involved frequent trips and intensive study of both native and cultivated plants of the

Kermadec Islands, Tonga, Fiji, Niue, French Polynesia and the Cook Islands. His *Flora of the Cook Islands* was finally launched on 10 June 2017, after more than thirty years of toil. In 1966 his son Julian was born, and in 1970 his daughter Claire, but Bill and Betty separated nearly two years later. During the years 1970 to 1978 Sykes also worked on his section of *Flora of New Zealand* Volume IV on the naturalised conifers and dicotyledons, which was published in 1988. He then spent six months of that year as an exchange botanist at the Guangxi Institute of Botany in South China, followed by further studies in Russia and the British Isles.

Although he officially retired in 1992, Bill worked almost daily as a research associate at the DSIR herbarium whenever he was in Christchurch, and completed his work on the bamboos for the grass *Flora of New Zealand*. He joined further expeditions in the Pacific and remote parts of New Zealand and made six more trips to the Himalaya as a specialist guide for Footprint Tours of Nelson. In 1993 he married practice nurse Peggy Kelly and for more than twenty years they were stalwarts of the Packer Street Park and Community garden, "just around the corner from their home". For his services to botany, William (Bill) Sykes was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM) in 2006; in July 2017 he was presented with a Life Membership Award for his very long service as honorary botanist to the Friends of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens, and in 2017 also, he was elected FMLS (Foreign Member of the Linnean Society of London). In 2016 a New Zealand nettle was redefined and renamed *Urtica sykesii* in his honour. After a long and adventure-filled life, the eminent New Zealand botanist William Russell Sykes, familiarly known as "Botany Bill", died at Christchurch on 5 January 2018.



Urtica sykesii

Urtica (Latin *urere* 'to burn') is represented in New Zealand by six native nettles, four of them endemic, and two also indigenous to Australia. All have stinging hairs and are valuable host plants for red admiral butterflies. *Urtica sykesii* (previously known as *Urtica incisa*) is a small, soft, much-branched knee-high herbaceous plant, which usually grows in colonies. The stems and triangular, deeply incised leaves have mildly stinging hairs. The inconspicuous flowers and fruit are borne in small clusters, male and female on the same plant. *Urtica sykesii* is a plant of forest margins, clearings and other shaded places, widespread in the North and South islands, but scarce north of Auckland.