

George Stevenson (1878 – 1960)

Born on 28 August 1878, George Stevenson was the fifth son in a family of six boys and five girls. His parents, John and Jane Stevenson were pioneer settlers at Flaxton, near Rangiora, in Canterbury. After attending Flaxton Primary School, and going on to secondary school, probably at Rangiora, George worked on the family farm.

In late 1904, when he was 26, he took a 15-year lease on an 18,212-acre sheep farm in the lower valley of the Clarence River in Marlborough, calling his run Waiiau-toa, the Māori name for the river. In January 1905 at Ohoka he married Kate Bussell, the daughter of the headmaster of Flaxton Main School, Henry Bussell.

Stevenson was not a botanist, but in December 1904, when following the survey line for the boundary fence of the sheep run he had just taken up, he noticed a tree different from any others he had seen. By the end of autumn he had observed that the seedpods were round and invariably had only one seed each, unlike those of the pink brooms near the homestead that had longer pods containing from one to twelve seeds. At the time of the November muster the tree was a “huge umbrella of light purple”. The following autumn, he gave seeds to his naturalist friend Thomas Keir, a Rangiora timber merchant, who in turn sent some on to Thomas Cheeseman, curator of the Auckland Museum, who pronounced it a new species.

Stevenson’s next big find was during the November 1907 muster when he came across a grove of about fifty trees in full bloom in a sheltered basin about half a mile from the original tree. By 1910 there were several dozens plants from Waiiau-toa and neighbouring Glen Alton seed, growing in gardens from Queenstown to Auckland, and in 1911 Cheeseman described it as a new genus and species, *Chordospartium stevensonii* (now *Carmichaelia stevensonii*). He thanked Mr Stevenson “for his kindness in forwarding an ample supply of both flowering and fruiting specimens”, and Mr Keir “for placing me in communication with Mr Stevenson, and for much valuable assistance in obtaining specimens and information”.

When the lease expired, George Stevenson left Waiiau-toa and bought a mixed farm near Oamaru. Around 1945 he retired to Redcliffs, Christchurch, where he reminisced, wrote for the *New Zealand Gardener* (November 1951) of the tree broom’s discovery, and nurtured a seedling to prove that it could be grown in Redcliffs sand. He died at Kaikoura on 3 March 1960, in his 82nd year.



Carmichaelia stevensonii

The genus *Carmichaelia* is confined to New Zealand, except for one species endemic to Lord Howe Island. *Carmichaelia stevensonii* is a rare small tree with weeping leafless twigs. The bark on young branches is orange-striped; twigs, 2 mm wide, are grooved, rounded and drooping, and the flowers, white with purple streaks, are in drooping spikes. The fruit is a small dry sharp-tipped hairy pod containing a single hard seed. Weeping or cord broom may once have been more common, but now grows only in Marlborough, near tributaries of the Clarence and Awatere Rivers, usually in free-draining or alluvial soils. It is under serious threat from animal browsing, erosion and fire, and at lower altitude sites there is little regeneration due to competition from introduced grasses. It is an attractive tree frequently found in public and sometimes private gardens.

