

# Jakob Friedrich Ehrhart (1742 – 1795)

Jakob (or Jacob) Friedrich Ehrhart was born on 4 November 1742 at Holderbank in the canton of Bern, Switzerland, the son of Johannes Ehrhart and Magdalene, née Wild. His father, a pastor, frequently made botanical excursions with Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777), a renowned physician who in 1742 published a massive flora of Switzerland. Haller was among the first botanists to appreciate the importance of herbaria to study variation in plants, and he collected material and grew specimens from many localities and habitats. Young Friedrich often accompanied the two friends and he, too, became interested in botany. By 1765 he was studying pharmacy in Nuremberg, Germany, and as a pharmacy assistant in Erlangen he began collecting plants for his herbarium.



## *Ehrharta diplax*

*Ehrharta diplax* (*Microlaena avenacea*) is probably the most abundant forest grass in New Zealand. It grows to 40 cm tall with spreading to somewhat drooping foliage, pale to deep green, often with a slightly bluish tint. The slender and dainty flower stems, up to 60 cm tall, give rise to the common name bush rice grass. Indigenous, it is found in North, South, Rakiura/Stewart and Auckland islands, from sea level to 860 metres. *Ehrharta stipoides* (*Microlaena stipoides*), meadow rice grass, is a related smaller species occurring in lowland regions of the North Island and in localised parts of the South Island, mainly near the sea, and in Rakiura/Stewart Island. As its common name suggests, it has value as a pasture grass and is one of the few native grasses that can be used for lawns.

From April 1773 until September 1776 at Uppsala, Sweden, he studied botany and collected plants under the guidance of the aging Carl Linnaeus and his son, also named Carl. Spare time from weekday lectures was spent on excursions in the surrounding countryside, and Sundays in the botanic garden. During the summer holidays, from early morning until late at night, sometimes with other students, he searched the fields, woods, moors and marshes and reported his discoveries to the master. The deep friendship and respect that developed between them was such that if Ehrhart thought that Linnaeus had made a mistake he would tell him so – thus demonstrating that he was a free Swiss! In 1776 he returned to Germany where he worked in Hanover as court botanist and director of the Herrenhausen gardens, and he died there twenty years later, on 26 June 1795.

He was a talented taxonomist, and described 185 cryptogamic and over 200 phanerogamic species. His herbarium is calculated to have comprised 16,000 to 20,000 specimens, and his collections of approximately 3,300 species in the Moscow State University Herbarium are thought to be the largest in the world, the majority assembled under the supervision of Linnaeus. Approximately eighty people contributed to his collections, many of them outstanding botanists themselves. Specimens were from the vicinity of Uppsala and various places in Germany, Denmark, Switzerland and the Netherlands as well as from cultivated plants in botanical gardens and Ehrhart's own garden in Hanover.

In 1779 Carl Peter Thunberg (1743–1828), an apostle of Linnaeus and his successor at Uppsala University, named a genus of grasses in Ehrhart's honour. Most of the 35 species are native to Africa, with a few from Southeast Asia and various islands in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans. At least two species of *Ehrharta* (*Microlaena*) are endemic to New Zealand. *Ehrharta erecta* (panic veldt grass), a native species of southern Africa and Yemen, has become an invasive weed here and in many other parts of the world.