

Tom Beaumont started work at the Ballarat Botanical Gardens as a gardener at the tender age of 13 under the curator Thomas Toop in December 1924.

The statuesque Toop told the young apprentice he was "very small" but was assured by his wife that the lad would grow.

Beaumont never grew to be a man of large physical stature but he achieved worldwide acclaim for his propagation of begonias and outstanding displays at the Begonia Festival.

Toop, the curator since 1914, took a fatherly and intense interest in the training of Beaumont who was keen to learn the profession.

As the years rolled on it became clear that Beaumont was destined for leadership.

Vast changes took place during his employment. In 1924 the trees were much smaller than the giants of today and in early days there were glasshouses at both ends of the gardens.

One of Beaumont's early jobs was to boil water in a wood-fired outdoor copper for picnickers to fill up their billies and teapots.

Toop continued the pioneering work with the now world-famous tuberous begonias that began in the 1890s with blooms exhibited in the glasshouses and conservatories. New varieties arrived annually from Blackmore & Langdon in England.

Beaumont became involved in this work at an early age, learning the art of propagation.

In 1937 he was responsible for cycling to the railway station to collect a box with a pair of squirrels from the Melbourne property of Rippon Lea.

For years the squirrels delighted the public at the gardens.

Beaumont fed them whole maize and their numbers increased to 30 or 40 over the years but feral cats eventually wiped them out.

After Toop's retirement in 1943 and Beaumont returned from active service during World War II, he was appointed superintendent of the gardens in 1947.

To his credit, he was always willing to continue manual work with his staff as well as carry out administration duties.

Beaumont was delighted when the inaugural Begonia Festival in 1953, initiated by the late Edgar Bartrop, was named after his famous begonias.

The royal visits during the festivals of 1954 and 1957, first Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip and later the Queen Mother, proved to be highlights.

The Queen Mother was reported to have told Beaumont and the Mayor Cr Jack Chisholm on a walk through the conservatory begonias: "We grow them like saucers, you grow them like plates."

Beaumont was awarded the British Empire Medal for his outstanding work at the gardens.

He resided in the brick veneer residence built in about 1958 when the original curator's residence was demolished in 1957.

He worked long hours at weekends and could even be found after dark in the glasshouses or shifting hoses around the lawns and garden beds during summer.

Upon his retirement as superintendent in 1978, he continued to cultivate begonias in a glasshouse at his home. He died in June 1989.