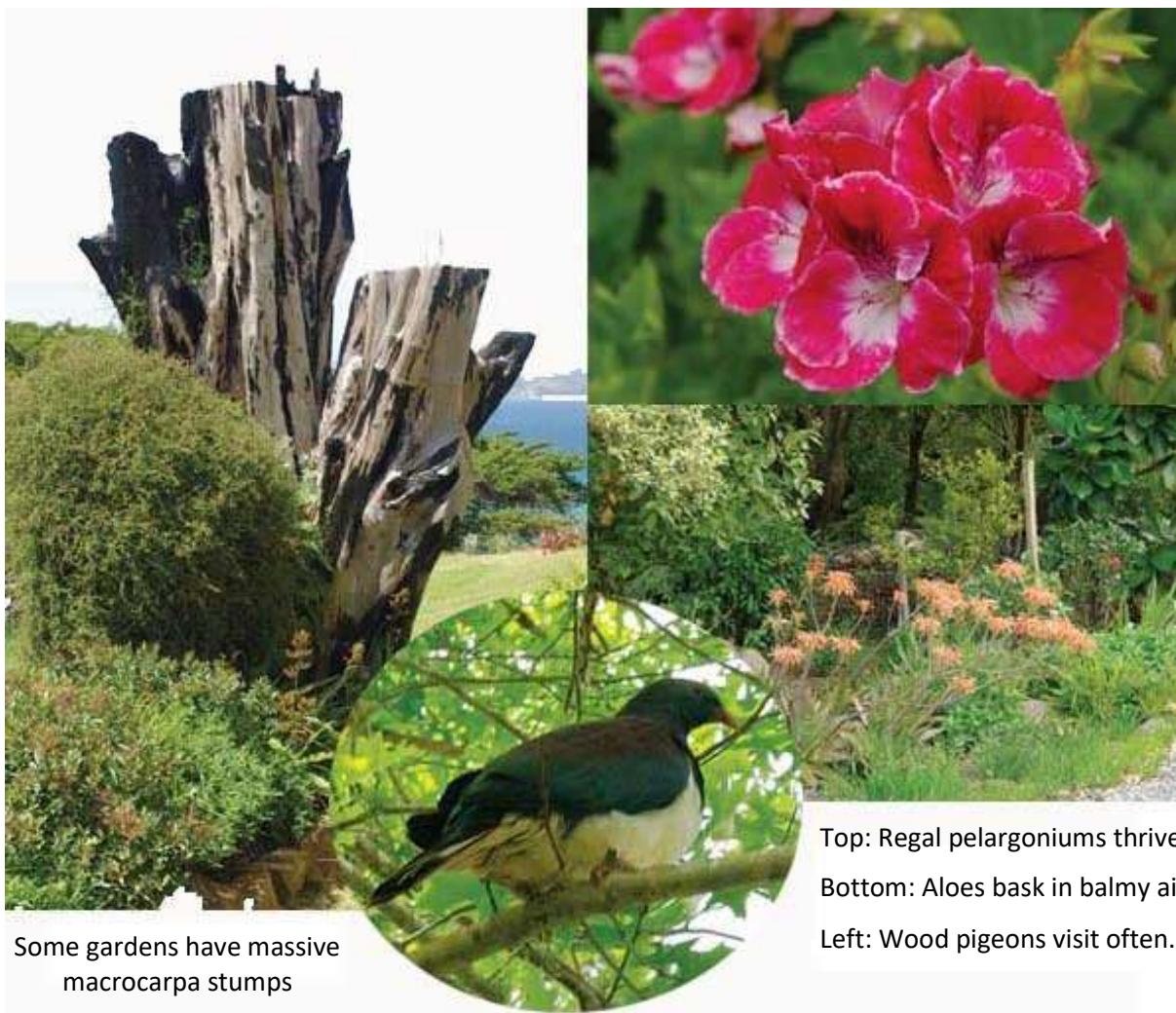


Weekend Gardener Magazine article - Nov/Dec 2008

Islandstyle

Susie Longdell visits Great Barrier Island and finds some enterprising gardeners.

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Some gardens have massive macrocarpa stumps

Top: Regal pelargoniums thrive.

Bottom: Aloes bask in balmy air.

Left: Wood pigeons visit often.

ONE of late spring's special treats is the chance to see other people's gardens. When those gardens are on an offshore island, 90 km from Auckland, and tucked away in places the summer tourists never see, it's even more of a delight.

It's a chance to see another way of life and how people garden when faced with many of the same challenges as other New Zealand gardeners, but also some that are significantly different.

One of the biggest differences when gardening – and living – on Great Barrier Island is the cost of resources. Goods have to be "imported" by boat or air and besides the greater inconvenience, there's the increased costs that result.

You don't just pop down to the nearest gardening outlet and grab a bag or two of cheap compost. Even if it was that easy, some islanders don't have cars – and some properties don't have vehicle access anyway.

Another difference is the proximity of the bush, which is heavily protected by planning laws that strongly favour its expanding footprint. The effects are many. For example, many islanders must cope with the long shadows tall bush casts on small cleared areas.

Also, the extensive native flora, coupled with the absence of many mainland animal pests, including possums, goats, hedgehogs, stoats and weasels, means bird life abounds. And living with wood pigeons and kaka has its price. They like to feast on their favourite fruit, foliage and buds, both native and exotic. Kaka, in particular, can clean out some homegrown crops, even citrus fruits.

This is a real drawback when you live on an island where you can readily grow both temperate and sub-tropical crops and where freight costs add to the cost of bought fruit and veggies. It is especially frustrating when bad weather can stop ferry deliveries for two weeks at a time. Backyard veggie growing is thus an integral part of island gardening, taken for granted as part of the way of life. So is self-sufficiency.

Most islanders – and their gardens – must manage with rainwater collected in tanks. There's no council water supply for the about 1000 full-time and many more summer holiday residents. Islanders must also produce their own power (usually from solar panels and diesel generators).

When it comes to gardening, self-sufficiency also rules. Residents mainly use natural resources at hand, such as seaweed, rushes (for mulch) and local rocks to create their own special, sustainable garden places.

Grace's garden



A flower-filled border greets visitors.



THE roots in Grace Benson's garden go deep, as they must in gardens built on shifting sand, but her roots in this small part of Great Barrier Island are deeper. Although Grace lives and works off the island (she is a nursing tutor at Manukau Institute of Technology), she spent her childhood on 'Barrier' and belongs to one of the island's early settler families.

Her garden, which she started 20 years ago, is on a small part of the former family farm – and now home to 'Souvenir de la Malmaison' roses that can trace their roots back to the specimen her grandmother grew on the island. The former family washhouse from those early days when,

roughly a century ago, clothes were washed in a small shed behind villas, also now sits in the garden where it's home to a small museum.

Grace tends her garden during holidays and occasional snatched weekends.

She cheerfully admits importing plants on every trip back. "I come off the boat laden."

But like other island gardens, her garden is also a celebration of shared cuttings



people coming here to share in that."

and making do with local resources – such as dried and baled rushes for mulch and local rocks, used here to make a low stone wall.

Though Grace is a part-time islander, there's still a producing veggie garden – two in fact as is often the case in island gardens. One is close to the kitchen and a larger one is further away. She notes that pepinos do especially well.

There are always family and friends resident on the island to make sure nothing goes to waste and tui, wood pigeon, kaka and banded rail to help out, especially when the mulberries are ripe, and hibiscus buds and flowers on offer.

"You won't see perfection here," Grace says at the end of our visit. "But there is perfection in nature – nature is beautiful. I love having

Jenny's garden



"I was not going to do much gardening up here," Jenny Napier says viewing her plant-packed garden on what was a grassy slope with a single flax bush.

In island terms, she and husband Bob Napier are newcomers and so this garden is new too. They bought their property, complete with a small 1970s bach six years ago as a holiday home (Jenny's sister already lived on the island) but just a year later opted for full-time island life.

"We set about completely renovating the house – so our three cats were more comfortable – and before we knew it, a garden was evolving," says Jenny with a smile.

The garden was probably inevitable, despite Jenny's avowal. She had been the gardener at Clifton Station in the Hawkes Bay for 18 years and once a gardener, always a gardener. Now there's not blade left of that once grassy slope.

At the front of the house, it's been transformed into a tapestry of flower and foliage colours and textures, backed by roses climbing on a rustic

fence built with weathered battens the couple brought with them to the island.

Access is via narrow paths and a set of steps that take visitors up from the road to the house and beyond. These feature colourful pottery insets of fish created by an island artisan. Jenny bought them a few at time to spread the cost.

Behind the house, there is, in true island style, a flourishing vegetable plot. This is never watered. The Napier's tank water is too precious. It would also use power, which is always carefully rationed, to pump it up to the higher level. The secret to its summer lushness lies in the way Jenny boosts and mulches the soil.



The veggie garden must do without watering.

"I put down a bottom layer of kelp and then usually something softer on top to keep as much moisture in as possible."

The same technique of using seaweed to both feed the soil and help plants through dry times is common to island gardeners – and fits their philosophy of using what nature provides.



Cabbage Tree



A bromeliad and native fuchsia.



Local children created this novel construction.

Gendie's garden



Insert: Chinese lantern shrub (abutilon). Gendie Jury in the bush enclosed garden she shares with husband Steve.

NIKAU VALE is a garden with features that set it apart. The lushness and abundance of the native palms that give this property its name is one you might expect. Not so another feature that must linger long in the minds of most mainland visitors. This garden has no road access (nor, being inland, any sea access either). Instead you travel by foot for about five minutes along a bush track and over a ford. This is dry when we visit but rushing water covers it when the stream is in flood.



This doesn't worry Nikau Vale's owners, Gendie and Steve Jury.

"It would be hard to find a more beautiful and peaceful garden from which to enjoy our retirement," says Gendie, who is in her mid-70s – and very fit, as you need to be to tackle the demands of island life.



In their three years of residence, there has been one time when the stream was too high for even the intrepid to safely cross but she is unconcerned. There are always fruit and veggies in the garden and a small orchard on their 4.5ha, mostly bush property to see them through.

Gendie likes to take visitors on a walk through dense nikau palms and the odd puriri heavily stacked with epiphytes to another feature that sets this garden apart – a natural waterfall gently splashing down a long, narrow, rock face bordered by bush.

“After heavy rain this waterfall becomes a torrent that rushes down the stream and eventually flows out to sea at Pah Beach,” Gendie says. Presumably, that’s also when the ford becomes close to impassable so few visitors must see that spectacle.

The sun-soaked part of the Jury property set in flower and veggie gardens comes as almost a shock after the shady return trip. This, like other typical island gardens, focuses on plants that thrive in the Barrier’s usually frost-free environment. There’s no place here, so close to nature, for those that need special cosseting or proprietary chemicals to survive.

Like other island gardeners we met, Gendie doesn’t mention the term ‘organic gardening’. It’s the way they do things and thus unremarkable. But the Juries draw the line at letting greedy kaka feed willy-nilly: “All the fruit trees have to be covered in net because of their voracious appetites,” Gendie says. However, they let the wood pigeons sometimes completely strip kowhai of flowers and foliage. Nature copes, soon luxuriant leaves regrow and there is a spinoff.

“The wood pigeons often perch close to our deck and we enjoy their beauty at close quarters.”

With all nature’s bounty around them, you begin to understand why this couple make little of a five-minute walk when they have to leave their very private paradise.

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