

# Garden of the week: Resourceful gardening on Great Barrier Island

Nicky Pellegrino | Jan 2017 | sourced from Stuff | NZ House & Garden article



*SALLY TAGG*

The productive vegetable plot is Linda Jamieson's favourite place in the garden to spend time working.

Great Barrier Island breeds a certain type of gardener – and Linda Jamieson's creation is living proof of it. The island is a challenging place for any gardener – it pays to be hardy and resourceful; and to know how to use all that nature provides.

It's a plane-ride away from the nearest garden centre so there's no popping out with a trailer to pick up a few landscaping supplies. And the climate can be harsh, with gales blowing in from the sea, cool winter rains and dry, hot summers.

Linda Jamieson never intended to create a garden on Great Barrier Island. She was perfectly happy with her quarter-acre section in Orewa. But more than two decades ago, her husband Max visited Great Barrier and loved it so much that when he heard about a house and two acres for sale in Tryphena he was very interested indeed.



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The garden opposite the deck has a pink and purple theme with 'Strawberry Ice' roses and campanula growing along the hedgeline.

"Max came over and bought the property without me seeing it," recalls Linda, who admits she wasn't exactly thrilled at the prospect. "I had been on camping holidays but never thought we'd live here. I wouldn't even come over for a year."

When at last she relented and started visiting Great Barrier it didn't take Linda long to spot the potential of that generous two-acre plot.

"It was a mess; covered in broken cars and the grass was waist-high," she says. "I like a tidy garden so started clearing it up and, as I did, I began to see what you could do with it."

For a year Linda lived alone on the island while Max, a plumber, commuted over on weekends. "That's when the garden really began to develop," she says. "My children were grown up and I wasn't working, so I had all that free time. I'd get out of bed in the morning, be in the garden all day, and not have to cook dinner... I planted and planted and planted!"

There were already some big trees – a pin oak, a Japanese cherry and an Indian bead tree – and an area of native bush with big nikau palms. Linda has filled the areas around them with plants she loves. There has never been a formal design, a desired colour palette and certainly no planting plan.



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Staghorn fern flourishes in the bead tree (*Melia azedarach*) and bromeliads are generously planted beneath.

"It's very random," she admits. "When I go to a garden centre and see something I like, I'll bring it home and plant it. There are no strict rules about anything. I like a garden that is densely planted and rambling – but still tidy."

Linda tends to fly back to the mainland every six weeks and has got in the habit of taking an empty banana box with her. "It always comes back full of plants," she laughs. "I'm known for it."

It might seem inconvenient to be 100km away from the shops, but it actually makes things more exciting, says Linda. "When I go over I can't wait to get to the garden centre. I'm always writing down the names of plants I see in magazines like *NZ Gardener* and I take my notebook with me, otherwise I won't remember everything I want to buy."



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Linda loves a particularly pretty pink rose that flowers abundantly from spring to late summer. "I was given it for free when I bought some other roses, but wasn't sure what I was going to do with it so bunged it in and now it's beautiful. "People have tried to take cuttings from it but they won't grow. And none of the visitors who have come through on garden tours have known what it's called. I didn't even want it and now it's my favourite. I'll miss it when I go," says Linda.

Linda also finds plants at the regular Saturday craft and produce market on the island and picks up her terracotta pots on Trade Me, hoping they'll survive the ferry trip over without getting cracked.

Over the years Linda has put in a mix of old-fashioned cottage garden plants and subtropicals. Those terracotta pots are her secret to growing things that don't take to the fairly inhospitable ground.

"We have poor soil and it can be pretty hard to grow things here," she explains. "It gets really wet and bogs up in winter, then in summer it's rock hard."



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Rosa 'Albertine'.

Her regular helper Jenny Napier suggested that bromeliads should be put in the ground in their pots and they live that way very happily, only needing a quick sluice with the garden hose now and then to prevent the water in the cups from stagnating. Fuchsias, daisies, hydrangeas and geraniums also thrive in pots. And containers are great too for raising herbs in the winter when the ground is sodden.

Elsewhere Linda has worked hard to improve the soil, adding masses of homemade compost and mulching with seaweed and seagrass she picks up from the beach. "It's straight out the sea and onto the garden," she says. "I don't wash off the salt and it doesn't do any harm."

Even with all that loving care, some plants don't survive. Recent victims include Linda's hibiscus, which died after the long, wet spring. And if the foxgloves don't get knocked over by the wind, they tend to rot. "They're not good stayers," says Linda, sadly. "But when things don't work out I'll try again and usually only give up after two or three years.



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Rosa 'Abraham Darby'.

By accident a pink, purple and white theme has emerged in the cottage garden. Linda has roses, wisteria, port wine magnolias, hellebores, star jasmine, Mexican sage, pink flower carpet roses, lavender, primroses, dianthus and white impatiens, so there is something flowering year-round.

Although she loves to sit on the deck and admire the blooms, it's the vegetable garden that is her favourite place in which to spend time. It's also where her islander's resourcefulness is most in evidence. An old metal bedhead and frame has been converted into a glass house to raise seedlings and cuttings, leftover pipes from Max's plumbing business are cut to size and planted with cucumber and strawberries, there's an old tin baby bath filled with lettuce, and a plastic toolbox with herbs and a climbing cucumber. The main vege garden, constructed from sleepers and surrounded by shell paths, supplies the couple year-round. Meanwhile the 25 chickens that roam provide plenty of eggs.

"The chickens can be a challenge," admits Linda. "They dig up the mulch and eat the impatiens – although they're also happy to eat the snails from the vege garden and we get a lot of those."



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In the vegetable garden an old bedstead has been adapted to house seedlings and cuttings.

Among Linda's favourite plants are the two huge frangipani in pots that are sheltered by her porch over winter then moved outside once the weather warms. She also loves a particularly pretty pink rose that flowers abundantly from spring to late summer. "I was given it for free when I bought some other roses, but wasn't sure what I was going to do with it so bunged it in and now it's beautiful.

"People have tried to take cuttings from it but they won't grow. And none of the visitors who have come through on garden tours have known what it's called. I didn't even want it and now it's my favourite. I'll miss it when I go," says Linda.

Indeed, Linda and Max, both 70, have sold up and are moving off the island this year to be closer to family in their retirement. Although Linda is sad to be leaving some of her special plants, such as the roses and old-fashioned freesias planted by her mother who recently passed away, she is fairly stoic about leaving her garden behind. "I'll just start a new one," she says.



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The bougainvillea against the fence is planted in a large pot. Terracotta pots are Linda's secret to growing things that don't take to the fairly inhospitable ground.

The area they plan to live in has clay soil. "I've never had that before so it will be a challenge. I'll probably go for lots of pots and raised beds and, since I won't have so much space, I'll have more of a semi-tropical garden with hibiscus and frangipani. And I may take some of my big bromeliads with me too."

The enduring memories of her Great Barrier garden will be the time spent enjoying it with family and friends. "And the days of toiling alongside Jenny with constant chatter and laughter. We can always be found by our chatter!"

Linda may not have been very enthusiastic when Max first bought the property but she has long since forgiven him for the impulsive purchase. "I forgave him after a couple of years when the house started being renovated and the garden began to take shape," she says. "I always wanted to have a beautiful, large garden but now it's time to have a new adventure and let someone else enjoy it."