

On the garden trail

Gordon Collier¹

It is a privilege to be an assessor for the New Zealand Gardens Trust (NZGT). The opportunity to see many gardens all over the country and to meet their owners is not something we are all able to do. But there is also a huge responsibility to the scheme, to the gardens and to the gardeners themselves. I assure you this is not taken lightly. The assessment process can be difficult and especially when hard decisions have to be made.

This scheme is about quality and the assessor's task is to apply this without favour. Those gardens that reach the higher brackets are the best we have and there is certainly no stigma attached to other ranks. The critiques supplied are carefully worded to indicate where improvements can be made and in many cases if this advice

is carried through, these gardens can confidently expect a better result next time around. It has been found that it is easy to set quality standards but when there are a number of gardens of similar quality, the process becomes more subjective, even perhaps a matter of taste. In the end personal preferences have to be put aside.

An unexpected result of this scheme is that gardeners, conscious of their grading, are actually making even more effort than they did before. Thus standards are rising; a very satisfactory outcome!

In addition to the work with the NZGT I am also Garden Editor for *NZ House & Garden* magazine. Programmes for these two undertakings run side by side in the season which makes life busy but there are benefits for

both enterprises. Last February (2004), in a moment of folly, Kerei Thompson (our assessor from Wellington) and I consented to assess 54 gardens in Taranaki, for the Taranaki Rhododendron and Garden Festival – in three days. Some of the photographs have graced the glossy pages of *NZ House & Garden* and are also included in this article. Conversely, for the magazine I recently visited twenty one gardens in Central Otago and outed several outstanding ones that hopefully will join our ranks in the NZGT.

In 2004, at the NZGT conference in Pukeiti, we spoke about the various attributes by which the assessment process is carried out². This current article will touch lightly on some of these attributes but will give an insight into gardens seen and the factors that make them of interest.

First Impressions

First impressions of a garden are of real importance as these set the mood. Is the entrance overplayed? Does it seem welcoming and is there a sense of finish both in maintenance and planting? Does the first glimpse of the garden tell you that the owner knows what he or she is about?

Once we get past the first impressions of a garden, we find a wide range of different approaches to ground cover, lawns, and colour schemes.



Fig. 1 Wanaka Station Park. The entrance is through an avenue of century old lime trees – magnificent when approached late afternoon creating an air of expectation.



Fig. 2 The entranceway to the Rhind garden at Cromwell is lined with *Fraxinus* 'Raywoodii.' Exceptional maintenance in this well structured garden is at once apparent.



Fig. 3 Robin and Betty Manson's entranceway at East Takaka says it all. Well designed and maintained, with order and colour, and a touch of humour (the sign reads: "Any person who omits to shut and fasten this gate is liable to a penalty not exceeding forty shillings"). This is an outstanding plantswoman's garden and a Garden of National Significance.



Fig. 4 The magnificent backdrop of Lake Wakatipu is complemented by the garden at Matakauri Lodge, Queenstown, planted entirely in plants native to New Zealand.



Fig. 5 Joan Lawrence's stone house at Cromwell is set in a vineyard, and the garden is planted with a range of plants suited to the climate and soil. This garden is at once sympathetic to the landscape in its use of colour and stunning in its simplicity.

¹ 6 Mahuta Road, Five Mile Bay, RD 2, Taupo; gordonsc@xtra.co.nz

² Article by Gordon Collier in the *RNZIH Newsletter*, No. 2, August 2004, p. 9–11, and the *New Zealand Garden Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2, December 2004, p. 5–6.

Ground Cover

Bare ground in a garden is unattractive and we like to see it covered either by plants or mulch of some kind – compost, fine bark, leaf mould, or gravel. Ground covering plants can be many kinds from herbaceous to woody (tall or short). Too much bare ground as well as being unattractive tells also that either the owner has not enough time to do this work or that there is insufficient knowledge about this finer point of gardening.



Fig. 6 David Hobb's large garden near Christchurch, designed by landscape architect Robert Watson, is unusual for its planting concept. Here New Zealand native plants and plants bred and raised in this country are displayed in a mostly formal design. The owner does not live on site which dictates a maintenance regime excluding herbaceous plants that would usually be used to cover the earth.



Fig. 7 Betty Manson at East Takaka not only uses hostas, lamium and pulmonaria to cover the ground, she also uses their form and colour to highlight her shade garden. A Garden of National Significance.



Fig. 8 In this Taranaki garden common *Stachys byzantina* is used as an unusual ground cover in the rose garden.

Lawns



Fig. 9 Woodbridge, the Peeks' large country garden at Coatesville, north of Auckland is noted for its simple design and innovative use of colour. The broad sweep of the lawn plays an important part in the whole – very well maintained and well defined making them easy to mow. A Garden of National Significance.

Lawns make the setting for a garden. The shape should be simple – no kinky curves to the borders and trees or shrubs planted in it should be kept to a bare minimum. Most gardeners pay insufficient attention to the quality of their lawn turf and are assessed accordingly.

Colour



Fig. 10 A garden in the Kenepuru Sound has made full use of colour. In the foreground Siberian irises are grouped in a damp hollow beneath a golden elm, an oft maligned tree. The dwelling in the background provides further contrast.

“Too much colour is the sign of a beginner,” the famous French gardener Vicomte de Noailles once said. Yet colour is probably the first factor garden visitors look for. Colour is a vital ingredient in a garden's attractiveness but is only one of the attributes considered.



Fig. 12 Juliet and Peter Wosp's garden at Loburn in Canterbury reflects a knowledge of the value and importance of colour. In this yellow and white scheme roses are grouped pleasingly with other plants – hemerocallis, dwarf yellow berberis, *Euphorbia cognata*, *Thalictrum* and in the foreground the novelty *Ceanothus* 'Diamond Heights.'



Fig. 11 Jane Hunter gardens at Renwick, near Blenheim. The vibrant colours of her 'cottage' garden complement the century old cob house. The use of yellow *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Frisia' offsets the chosen pastels.

Ornamentation

Dwelling at some length on garden ornamentation breaks new ground I believe but this a fascinating subject and one about which gardeners obviously entertain their own personal views. Here the bounds between good taste and kitsch are easily breached.

I am not going to comment on the merits of each but leave it you to decide which you will have in your own garden. Do you want an original Paul Dibble or will you be content with a plaster gnome? Or will you do something highly original with the 'found' objects around you?



13a



13b



Fig. 16 This suburban New Plymouth garden is outstanding for its use and combinations of native plants. Numerous 'found' objects are used to reflect colonial days. An assemblage of old totara and rusty corrugated roofing iron conceals the garden tool shed. A Garden of National Significance.



Fig 13 a-d Melanie Greenwood has an exceptional Italianate garden at Carterton using four or five plant species only. Her topiary is immaculate with green being the sole colour. Only one ornament is allowed in the two hectare design – an antique copper fountain purchased in Melbourne for this purpose. A Garden of National Significance.



Fig. 17 a-b The elderly owner of this Otaki garden has a highly original sense of fun. A tree is festooned with tea pots of all shapes and sizes. There are also many potted plants in her garden (17a). She creates an air of mystery when an outside plaster gnome peers at visitors from within the house (17b).



Fig. 14 This Waitara garden has extraordinary examples of ornamentation. It combines objects and colour to produce an almost surreal landscape.

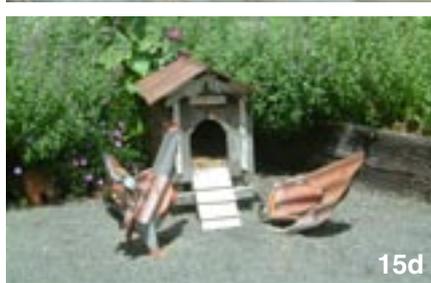


Fig. 15 a-d There seems no limit to Isla McFadden's creativity in her garden in Cheviot, North Canterbury. Her preference is to use 'found' objects from the countryside where she lives, be it wood or stone. Isla reaches new heights in assembling miscellaneous 'rubbish' to create fascinating sculptural compositions.

Planting

We also need to recognize a plant collector's garden even if he or she only plants in "drifts of one," – this is a dilemma for many! Plant content counts for 20% of the marks. This indicates there is more to a good garden than a great collection of plants.

Innovation

The assessors are always looking for innovation and flair either in design or in the use of plants.



Fig. 18 This country garden in Taranaki has some unusual elements. The timbered entrance gateway has a 'moongate' placed high and to one side. It provides a tantalizing glimpse of the garden beyond.



Fig. 19 A conventionally paved courtyard in this Egmont Village garden has been transformed by the owner replacing alternate pavers with smaller sized units. Sand fills the intervals.



Fig. 20 In the Worsps' Loburn garden, clipped shapes are strategically placed in an informal setting. Subtly they increase the perspective by drawing the viewer's attention to the building in the background, adopting the use of 'borrowed landscape.'



Fig. 21 In her Cheviot garden, Isla McFadden once again shows her innovative approach. Here she combines the locally found grass *Poa cita* with a limited plant palette of exotic subjects – lavender, agapanthus and euphorbia to produce a highly original landscape.

Fig. 22 At the Bason Reserve near Wanganui, the Mediterranean climate and near seaside conditions have been exploited to the full. *Agave attenuata* and *Echium wildpretii* growing luxuriantly on a sandy bank are an outstanding feature in late spring.

The “Wow Factor”!

Lastly we come to the attribute noted on our assessment sheets as “overall impression.” This has come to be known as the “wow factor” – in other words did this garden knock us sideways or was it just another good garden? This is a very important factor as it counts for 30% of the total marks.



Fig. 23 Near New Plymouth the Japanese garden of author and nurseryman Glyn Church is probably the most convincing of its kind in the country. The elements placed suggest but do not imitate. A Garden of Regional Significance.



Fig. 24 An Italianate garden of this magnitude is seldom seen outside Europe. Melanie Greenwood's magnificent Carterton domain commands attention – the very antithesis to the informal style adopted by so many.



Fig. 25 The Jury family garden at Waitara is renowned for its plant collection, many bred by the owners. 'Tikorangi', the garden also has outstanding landscape features. Here a formal sunken water garden features many interesting plants with a stone bench from colonial days the centre of interest. A Garden of National Significance.



Fig. 26 This Christchurch garden is the smallest registered with the New Zealand Garden Trust. The owner, Robin Kilty is an artist. She has packed a very small, well designed space with interesting plants and colourful artwork from her studio. A Garden of National Significance.

Conclusion

There are about 160 gardens throughout the country from Kerekeri to Invercargill presently on the register.

We currently recognise 24 Gardens of National Significance, which include the major botanic gardens. There is nearly the same number of Gardens of Regional Significance, and it should be noted that these are still of excellent quality.

Following some confusion over the endorsement term, some 60 gardens, formerly termed 'Assessed Gardens' are now listed as 'Registered Gardens'.

The remaining gardens also number about 60, and have not been visited by us, so are categorised as 'Unassessed Gardens' and listed for free on the NZGT website (<http://www.gardens.org.nz>). These 'Unassessed Gardens' are listed with basic contact details only, and will hopefully provide a 'seed source' of new assessments in the future.

It is therefore fair to say that gardens and gardening remain an important activity to New Zealanders.

Gordon Collier has a Diploma in Horticulture (with Distinction), and is an Associate of Honour of the RNZIH. He has been on the board of Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust for 44 years, was past New Zealand Vice-President of the International Dendrology Society, and has judged many times at the Ellerslie Flower Show. Gordon designed and constructed the nationally acclaimed Titoki Point, his former garden at Taihape and is currently Gardens Editor of *NZ House & Garden* magazine, garden advisor for Eastwoodhill National Arboretum, and an assessor of the New Zealand Gardens Trust. All images in this article by Gordon Collier.