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 out. 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.

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**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.

**Lawns**

Lawns make the setting for a garden. The shape should be simple – no jinky 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**

“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.

**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 to 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?
Innovation

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

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 outsize plaster gnome peers at visitors from within the house (17b).

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.’

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.
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.

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.