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Assessing gardens for the New Zealand Gardens Trust

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While travelling around New Zealand over the past years I have seen many gardens, large and small, unknown and famous, ranging from the excellent to the not so worthy. It has always surprised me that in most of these there is a good story, and more than likely a photo shoot that would pass muster in a glossy magazine. But the camera can lie, and it often does as it selects only the images the photographer wants it to see. Looking more closely at some of these gardens, a different overall picture emerges.

What is a garden? When asked, ten gardeners will give ten different answers. I am sometimes directed to a 'good garden' only to find on arrival, in my opinion, it is not.

Beverley McConnell and I were entrusted to rate the gardens that came forward. We did not want to give a view that would pass muster to the casual observer or one that was just publishable, but a view that would be acceptable to the very high standards of the horticulturists and knowledgeable gardeners of the world who come to see what New Zealand has to offer.

It is an honour to be an assessor for the New Zealand Gardens Trust. Having acted in this capacity before, we knew some of the pitfalls and we knew that not everyone would be pleased with the outcome. Of course this proved to be the case. This was never intended to be a popularity contest. The assessing of gardens

could be said to be subjective, and it is to a degree. But having been trusted with this task and with a number of strict attributes to work to, the way appeared straightforward. We undertook to provide each garden owner with a critique as a constructive outcome of our visit. These were to be written in a positive way to provide an explanation of what we thought could help them to achieve a higher ranking. Bev wrote to each owner after the visit, while I wrote, with the owner's input, the description of each garden for the website (www.gardens.org.nz). This description was the key to potential visitor enjoyment. It was most important to present an accurate picture.

The assessment of 30 gardens from the Bay of Islands to Invercargill was carried out over a three month period late last year, concluding in Wellington just seven days before Christmas. We were received with friendship and hospitality on all occasions and apart from an encounter with a tow truck up north and another with a police officer somewhere south, the way was smooth.

As we had worked together before, we were comfortable with each other's views. In fact, when we got down to brass tacks there was only one garden on which we differed. When it came to drawing a line between each grouping we were faced with difficult decisions: should we raise or lower the barrier? What

were we looking for? Did the garden achieve its purpose?

I was looking for the complete garden: the finished garden that showed cultivation skills combined with good design, good plantings, attention to detail and excellent maintenance. I tried to view each garden through the eyes of an overseas horticulturist accustomed to seeing the best, the object being that a visitor with a limited amount of time to spend could see the best garden sites New Zealand has to offer. Those with more time at their disposal or when geographically well placed could perhaps visit the many other good gardens featured on the website.

On arrival at each garden we asked the owners whether or not there was any part of the garden that they did not want us to see. This was their chance to conceal their sins! If required, time was then spent discussing the assessment process and answering questions that arose. Depending on the size of the garden, most visits took up to two hours. The larger properties took much longer than that. We marked our sheets as soon as possible and spent hours discussing the assessment as we drove.

The addition of the marks and the calculation according to each section's weighting was done in Dunedin after we had finished the journey. Sections such as

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maintenance, safety, hard landscape, design, and plant material each had their own attributes and marks scored out of ten. However, the biggest mark went to overall impression, what we came to call the 'wow factor'. It is interesting that the scores for this section were high with all gardens, scoring between 7 and 9 out of 10. This mark represents just what it says: the overall impression, the camera's view, as it were, and we found this relatively simple to apply. This score indicates just how good each of the 30 gardens is regardless of their final ranking.

However, when we applied the other factors (maintenance, safety, design, plant content, and facilities etc.), the gardens were more closely examined according to each attribute. Maintenance was generally high and we did expect this to be so. However, while a few weeds are almost inevitable and acceptable, overseas visitors do not want to see plants engulfed in cleavers, nor do they need to see piles of garden waste, which could be disposed of out of sight or chipped to provide mulch. Untrimmed edges in a formal setting and murky ponds also received a low mark. Plant material usually scored well. Overall the toilet facilities were only adequate and there was room for improvement in many gardens. This also applies to the botanic gardens and the other public gardens we visited. While it is not my intention to single out any particular individual, everyone should see for themselves (and be impressed by) Larnach Castle's facilities.

One of the difficulties we faced was the diversity of the gardens we had to assess. For example, New Zealand's botanic gardens, with highly trained staff and considerable resources, were lumped together with smaller private gardens, many of which were worked part-time by their owners. There was no way around this, no factor which differentiated, for example, ten hectares with one labour unit and the same area with ten labour units. No matter how interesting the garden, nor how devoted the operators, the gardens worked part-time by their owners

invariably lost out to the better staffed, or to gardens of a more manageable size. When it came to maintenance and an acceptable level of cultivation it was just not possible for them to compete. Pukeiti would have to be the outstanding exception to this. Unfortunately, big is not necessarily better and anyone attempting to run an area on their own of over, say, one hectare, unless their management skills were sharp, was seriously compromised by this particular process. But those whose gardens did not make a higher ranking should not be discouraged on these counts.

Another difficulty lay in the diverse types of gardens we looked at. How could they be compared one with the other? There was no alternative but to mark strictly to the assessment sheets. If for instance a garden had a rock garden, this had to have well placed rocks, be of a good standard of cultivation with interesting plants. Good rock gardens were few and far between. Rock gardens are notoriously labour intensive, as are herbaceous borders. Again, fortunately, there were few that attempted the latter display. The best herbaceous borders by a country mile were in Dunedin where they were superb. Hedges in several instances were exceptional, those at Richmond, for example, while the lawns at Woodbridge were remarkable.

Then there were the old friends, the ones who had worked hard on their properties for years, and the large broad-brush gardens with extensive plant collections. How were they to be judged? In the end these factors could not be considered, and the sheer size of a garden could only partially enter the equation. Ideally, I wanted to see all cultivated soil covered either by well chosen plants or by a suitable mulch, and the outer, sometimes rougher, perimeters well screened. But it was design, the quality of finish coupled with high standards of gardening, and the owners' innate flair with plants that were the deciding factors.

This assessment scheme broke new ground for horticulture in this country. It was not perfect, but never before

have our gardens been subject to such scrutiny. Bev and I were privileged to get a unique oversight, like that of viewing a slow moving slide show. Thus we were able to compare each garden, one with the other, helping us make our decisions. There will be changes to the protocol. For instance, ornamentation was not examined and safety attributes may need to be revisited. But in any issue such as this a line has to be drawn between the good and the very good. This was not easy. I can say with confidence, however, that each of the gardens we saw was of great interest and well worth visiting.

Concluding, I trust you and the wider audience who may read this will have a better understanding of the judging process and the difficulties that Beverley and I faced in making our decisions. I would say to all the Founding Gardens that each can close the gap and reach a higher rank.

Our thanks are due to Jayson Kelly for his support. And praise too for all the hard miles he has run to make the New Zealand Gardens Trust an effective force in this business of gardening.

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