

# Geometry lesson

New Plymouth landscape designer Michael Mansvelt took a mathematical approach when he created this simple but sophisticated country garden

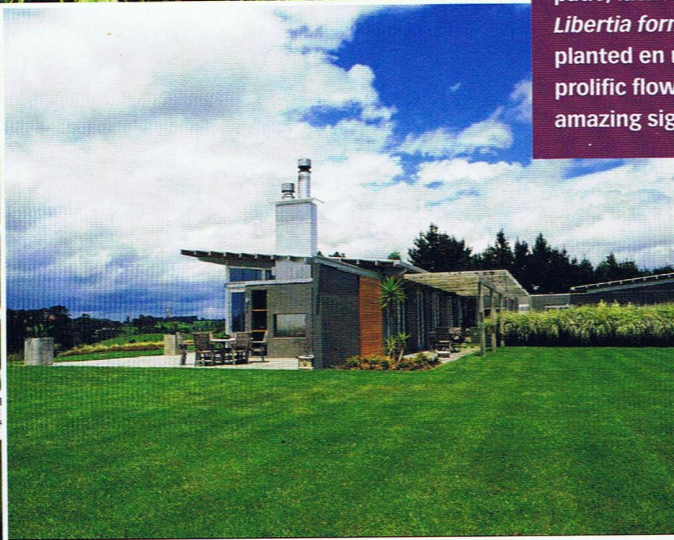
STORY & PHOTOS: JULIAN MATTHEWS



*Miscanthus sinensis* forms a backdrop to pink-flowered *Diervilla pulcherrima*. At right, the bold flower spikes of *Yucca filamentosa* 'Ivory Towers' combine with yellow *Diervilla*.



Clockwise from top left: *Chionochloa flavicans* has classy, creamy-green flower plumes; Textural mounds of mass-planted *Carex flagellifera*; *Aristea major* has spectacular purple flower spikes that tower up to 2m tall; The angular shape of the house is reflected in the patio, lawn and borders; *Libertia formosa* has been planted en masse. Its prolific flowers are an amazing sight in spring.



Bold yucca flowers complement the contemporary architecture.



A low-maintenance – yet highly appealing – garden to enhance a contemporary house with expansive views in a country setting. That, in a nutshell, was what New Plymouth garden designer Michael Mansvelt was asked to provide for Jenny and Russell Brooking's property on the outskirts of the city.

Michael decided from the outset that the garden should be bold yet uncomplicated. The plant palette needed to be extremely restrained, with bold blocks of planting to suit the simple lines of the long, low house.

Turning to the drawing board, Michael and his team at Plantation set the garden and house out as a grid pattern. Then it was time to draw in

the essential landscaping features – driveway, parking areas, paths, patios, lawns and garden beds. All have been designed so they are either parallel or perpendicular to the house, drawing attention from every angle.

The grid concept was also applied when setting out trees beside the long driveway. Italian alders (*Alnus glutinosa*) were planted at 3m spacings and now, just three years later, they're maturing nicely, the trunks lining up perfectly and creating strong vertical lines through which the house can be seen. Michael says the grid pattern of the trunks creates a sense of movement as you drive between them, further enhancing the feeling that something special is unfolding as the house and garden come into view.

The alders were chosen because the hilltop site is sometimes subjected to salt winds and they are one of the few deciduous tree species which can take this sort of abuse. Although lacking in the autumn colour department, they redeem themselves in spring with beautiful displays of golden catkins on the bare branches.

Beneath the alders, groundcover plants that can cope with dappled light conditions and suppress weeds form a textural planting. These include hostas, *Helleborus orientalis*, the climber star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) – it makes an excellent groundcover when lightly clipped once a year – and *Libertia formosa*, which becomes smothered with snow white flowers on long stems in late spring.

The white theme continues on the near boundary, with a dense screen of *Camellia* 'Setsugekka', one of the autumn-flowering sasanqua varieties. It blocks out unwanted views as well as providing shelter for the groundcover plants beneath the limbed up alders.

The planting at the front of the house was designed so that the approach to the front door, via the long, straight path, would be dramatic. Judging by the comments from visitors, this has definitely been achieved. No matter what the season, there's interest from both foliage and flowers, planted in big swathes to provide the illusion of a prairie.

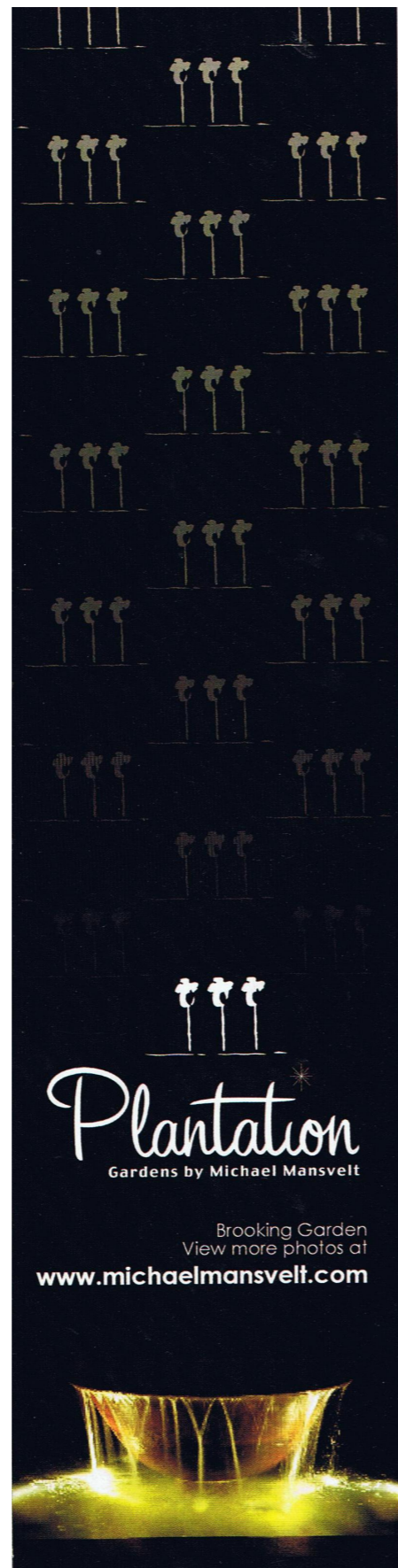
*Yucca filamentosa* 'Ivory Towers', a native of Arizona, is used as an edging to the path. Its grey, shapely foliage is always attractive and, in midsummer,

#### Groundcover contrast

- **Groundcovers** are used to great effect in the Brookings' garden. The flat-growing, fresh green coloured conifer *Juniperus* 'Horizontalis' (left) looks dramatic against a row of low-growing green flax – as well as keeping the weeds out.
- **Native rengarengas** (*Arthropodium cirratum*) have handsome light green foliage year-round and masses of frothy white flowers in midsummer.
- **The miniature version** of the native

toetoe, *Chionochloa flavicans*, has creamy green flower plumes in late spring. Michael Mansvelt used it to edge the garden as well as covering steep banks beyond the lawn. It looks stunning in flower when seen with the countryside beyond or, if you turn the other way, glimpses of the house.

• **Dense groundcovers** are planted in large blocks bordering the lawn. They make an intriguing contrast to the grass and their low growth ensures that they don't restrict the rural views.



### Grand grass

- **Miscanthus sinensis** 'Variegatus' (pictured) is used as a bold background for the long borders which line the path leading to the front door. Its green and white striped foliage is a picture from spring through to the end of autumn, by which stage the maize-like flower heads appear.
- **There's a sense** of movement once the grasses have reached their full summer height (1.3m). From then until autumn the stems move with the breeze, as if conducting the weather.
- **Maintenance** of miscanthus is easy – cut down to ground level in winter and add a little fertiliser and mulch in spring before the new foliage appears. There's no need for spraying and when planted as a group it forms one of the best weed suppressors of all.
- **As is to be** expected with a grass which is deciduous and native to Japan, it's completely cold-hardy.
- **Propagate** by dividing established clumps in winter.



Has the garden achieved its aims of being contemporary and low-maintenance? Definitely.

it puts on an extravagant flowering performance with ramrod-straight, 1.2m tall flower spikes topped with masses of creamy bell-shaped flowers.

Behind the yuccas are masses of *Dietes grandiflora*, a South African iris relative that is renowned for being tough, yet wonderfully generous with its pretty white and blue flowers borne on dainty, metre tall stems. These flowers are profuse in midsummer, and there are spasmodic repeat flowerings over many more months too.

The evergreen foliage of *Dietes grandiflora* is dark green, retaining its tidy appearance year round. It has also proven ideal for helping to disguise the unremarkable leaves of angel's fishing rod (*Dierama pulcherrimum*). This plant makes up for its lack of beauty at other times of the year by putting on quite a remarkable show of arching flowers on long, thin stems in December. One glance is all it takes to realise how

appropriate the common name is.

The pink flowers of the angel's fishing rod came as a bit of a surprise, as Michael had ordered the white flowered version, envisaging it as part of the all white and green colour scheme. When the flowers opened for the first time it was quite a shock, especially for Jenny who doesn't like pink. It's a credit to the charm of this plant that she let it stay.

Has the garden achieved its aims of being as contemporary as the house, as well as low-maintenance? Definitely, says Michael, who is so delighted with the way the garden has developed that he is planning a similar design for his own new home. 🌿

### Contacting the designer

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