



STEPS IN TIME



SQUARE STONES, MATURE TREES AND A GENEROUS
BUDGET PAVED THE WAY FOR A COUPLE OF VERY
IMPRESSIVE TARANAKI GARDENS.

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PHOTOGRAPHS REBECCA SCOTT



PREVIOUS SPREAD: (Wells Garden) Each element of the garden slowly reveals itself like a new surprise. OPPOSITE: Calming water features are a predominant feature of this garden. ABOVE: Strong vertical lines force the eye upwards towards the tall Pohutakawa trees in the background.



NO MATTER HOW COMPLICATED their design and construction, New Plymouth-based landscape designer Michael Mansvelt ensures his gardens appear effortless. This principle is nowhere more evident than in two of his recent gardens, both in Taranaki.

The Wells garden has one of the best coastal locations in the district with its unpretentious seafront bach squarely centered on the site, leaving large swathes of space fore and aft. As the house itself lacked any architectural character, its owners wanted the garden to create this, a brief Mansvelt relished: "I like my gardens to have strong architectural interest, feel solid and be extensions to their houses."

He also appreciated the moderate level change the site had from street to house front door for the opportunity this gave him to create an unforgettable entrance. A singular memory is visiting a Japanese-themed garden as a young boy, stepping across its floating bridge to the house's front door left a lasting influence, even a career direction.

The Wells front garden is on its cold southern side, previously a bleak space, although sheltered from the prevailing wind by a line of large Pohutukawas on the reserve that borders the site on three sides. Mansvelt has used these defining features to create a three-layered approach to the house: first a grove of Nikaus, through these a beautifully crafted stone wall, which opens onto generous cantilevered pavers that float above water, taking you in just five steps to the front door. And when that door is opened to your knock, surprise awaits: a clear view to the Tasman Sea beyond.

"I love the way this garden gives up its secrets one by one," enthuses Mansvelt. "You are barely aware of the water as you step down, but looking back you see the delicate layering of water and pavers, enfolding walls and the lush green of Nikaus in their opening."

Mansvelt had expected much more solid pavers, but because these could be boxed and constructed as one piece on site by his contractor Creativescape, their hidden block and steel supports created a lighter sequence.

Another surprise has been the rapid success of his plantings; block and plaster walls and sheltering Pohutukawas appear to have created a microclimate that has tripled their expected growth rate in less than a year. A generous planting budget allowed him to put in good sized species - Cycads and *Phoenix robellinii* (Pygmy date palms), in addition to the Nikaus as his structural framework - with under plantings of *Philodendron 'Xanadu'*, bromeliads and kangaroo paws (*Anigozanthos* and *Macropidia*), the latter an economical choice that seemingly flower almost continuously. Against the house front wall are flowering orchids.

Although he has used good-sized blocks of same species plantings their placements are randomized giving a softer effect.

The garden at the house's back is quite different, as here the

LEFT: The solid pavers were boxed and constructed as a single piece on-site by a contractor.

clients wanted to keep their expansive ocean view afforded by the esplanade reserve; with the only other requirement being a paved area equal to a third the size of the remaining lawn, both giving the family unimpeded play space.

THE BARNETT HOUSE IN THE SAME DISTRICT is both similar and different, reflecting Mansvelt's view that the designer shouldn't push a singular design agenda onto the client as that's far too limiting.

"I'm a big fan of the garden being at one with the client and their home... I'm influenced by a range of ideas from the great designers that have gone before me."

What the Wells and Barnett gardens do have in common, however, is their exquisite attention to detail and craftsmanship, the result of a seven-year collaboration between the designer and his contractor Creativescape, says Mansvelt.

The Barnett garden, which sits on a very large property of several acres, had to respond to several diverse features: the 'Cape Cod colonial' architecture of the house, an extensive contemporary kitchen/living wing on a tight corner by architect Glen Brebner, a new swimming pool and pre-existing volleyball court, spa pool and huge garage.

Fortunately the client saw the merit in putting in large, established trees, allowing Mansvelt to quickly create the vertical structure, which along with a careful choice of materials, allowed him to tie all these elements together. A clear brief from the client helped too: "We want to come home to feel like we live in an oasis, our garden is our passion."

"It's the biggest garden budget I've had to date," recalls Mansvelt. "And I pretty much went for gold!"

The swimming pool had to arrive yesterday, so was dropped in pre-made by helicopter then lined with Bisazza mosaic tiles, the paving around it constructed from the aptly named Golden Sand, a warmish, softly-hued Indian sandstone.

Kwila and block and plaster, the garden's main materials, link it to the house texturally, while the planting palette pushes the boundaries of what can be grown in Taranaki's often harsh climate. "Wind is our worst enemy here, it can and will kill a garden," says Mansvelt.

Fortunately the driveway was already lined with large Phoenix palms creating a flavour he associated with the tropical Caribbean.

"I feel no need to reflect native New Zealand, I prefer to play with the client's ideas and the brief," he states without a trace of remorse.

On such a flat site he created interest by using raised fin seating with under-lighting, a large outdoor fireplace and a lush planting scheme. Kensia palms, two massive pre-existing Phoenix palms, tranquil fish pond and under-story plantings of hundreds of *Cymbidium* orchids and gardenias along with *cycads*, *heliconias* and *Phoenix rubellinii* create a veritable sub-tropical oasis, just to the client's heartfelt desire.

RIGHT: (Barnett Garden)
Goldfish swim gaily
through the angular pond,
a fitting water feature in a
lush, green garden.





OPPOSITE: Statues (detail).
 ABOVE: The pool was airlifted
 in by a helicopter then laid
 with mosaics. NEXT SPREAD:
 Stone artworks are attractive
 and outdoor-friendly.

