

Scavenged sheep troughs brightened up with begonias make a striking water feature among the tall topiary shapes and terracotta pots. Every now and then owners Lloyd Houghton and Harry Janssen toss in lime green duckweed (*Lemna minor*) to keep the troughs clean.

# Good things TAKE TIME

What began as a dilapidated slice of Waikato swamp has grown into a graceful garden that rivals the best in the land

STORY: DEBBIE HARRISON PHOTOS: SAM SEATH



If anyone knows how to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, it's Lloyd Houghton and Harry Janssen. When they bought a bare 1.2ha block in Gordonton, on the outskirts of Hamilton, back in 1990, it was a bit of a stretch to see the potential. There was a small house site edged by a steep bank that led down to a quagmire that tended to flood when there was heavy rain – which, in the Waikato, is quite often. "It was good-for-nothing land," says Lloyd. "There was only one place to build the house and the rest of the land was swamp. People laughed at us. They said, 'What are you buying that for?'"

Harry and Lloyd planned to make a quick buck by shifting a four-bedroom home onto the property before selling it. They brought in the

land. They then used the soil from the pond excavation to flatten the slope and create three terraces on which to create the garden.

The top level, around the house, boasts a substantial potager at one end, a paved courtyard at the house entrance and a formal lawn and garden, which was originally themed with only yellow and purple plants.

The potager, or kitchen garden, came first. The couple was determined it would have a formal look, but they didn't formulate a plan on paper. "To be honest, we rotary-hoed the whole area and just kind of made it up from there," admits Lloyd.

They planted standardised lemons, bay trees, mandarins and columnar 'Ballerina' apples, as well as a mulberry tree that Lloyd had spent

**From left: From the roof of the house, you can see the edge of the upper formal garden and the two circular lawns. "We've had some pretty good parties in the garden," says Lloyd. "It can hold 300 people. We've put big marquees up over the potager and people gather in all the little areas."; The garden's owners, Lloyd Houghton and Harry Janssen.**

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house... and there the investment plan ended. Instead they moved in, planted a garden and started selling herbs from a roadside stall. Soon they were selling plants to local nurseries, then cataloguing and selling old roses. Before they knew it, they'd set up Hamilton's famed Wairere Nursery. As business grew, so did the garden, which they developed as a display space in which to show plants to customers.

Fast forward 18 years and the property has expanded to 11ha and includes the nursery, three dwellings, six dogs and a spectacular garden, though the landscape has completely changed since those early days. There's now a substantial pond at the bottom of the garden – Lloyd and Harry created it to channel water to one point, rather than let it dribble all over the

years lugging around in a pot after rescuing it from his first-ever nursery job. "It was a reject that's kind of gnarly, but it's got character."

Follow a path marked by two impressive spiral buxus cones and you'll hit a circular lawn. A few steps on is another circular lawn, this one an Asian-themed garden featuring maples and irises and surrounded by a hedge of 'Kirin' azaleas. From here you can overlook the pond at the bottom of the section.

It's a garden so elegantly designed, with such clever vistas, that it feels as if it goes on forever. "It feels like that when we work on it too," says Lloyd wryly.

Lloyd's a plant nut, but he's particularly partial to magnolias, unusual plants, and species plants rather than fancy hybrids.

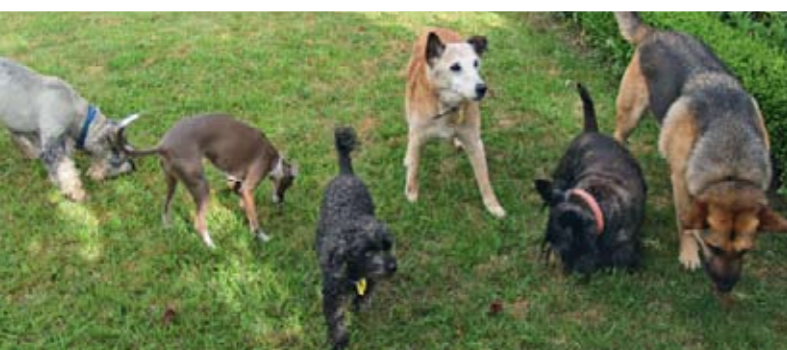


#### Fly away home

The dovecote was made by Lloyd's clever brother David and can just be glimpsed through the rose-covered arch. Wooden dovecotes are scattered through the garden because Lloyd and Harry used to stock them in the nursery.



Clockwise from top left: A private spot to sit; The potager was the starting point of the garden. Lloyd's weeping mulberry tree (*Morus alba* 'Pendula') can be spotted in the upper right quarter. It's hard to beat the birds to the copious amount of white-pink fruit that appears from December; Standard lemon trees underplanted with salvias, white bedding begonias and a deep pink *Rosa gallica officinalis*; Cabbage trees tower over two layers of hedging: *Euonymus* 'Emerald Gem' and *Teucrium fruticans*.



But while he loves all things green and growing, he's not a sucker for rescuing every wilting waif from the couple's nursery next door. "I don't muck around with plants – I'm too long in the tooth for that sort of carry-on. Generally speaking, if I want plants in the garden, I put good plants in."

Harry also has his favourite plants – and they're not always the same as Lloyd's. "We argue endlessly about them," says Lloyd.

What makes this stylish, well-designed, perennial-packed garden work? Lloyd reckons structure is the key to a cohesive landscape. "It's actually quite hard to have an informal garden looking informal without it growing out of shape and getting too big. But if you choose the right plants you can do it. People plant native

"I love the winter roses and wintersweet," he says. "So many gardeners miss out because they don't venture outside in winter."

Lloyd spends a lot of his working day talking to customers about hedging. "Often when people want a fast screen they plant something like a row of pittosporums, which grow up into small trees and leave a gap underneath," he says.

To avoid those bare legs, he recommends hedge plants – something he knows a lot about. He and Harry have used different types throughout the property, including *Euonymus* 'Emerald Gem' and fast-growing *Lonicera nitida*. They recommend both species to customers who want an alternative to buxus and its blight.

To keep the hedges neatly clipped, they use a motorised trimmer. "The lonicera needs

**Clockwise from left: Bladderwort (*Silene vulgaris*); An unfurling *Clematis integrifolia*; The pond, surrounded by weeping green and red maples and some dwarf varieties; Waterlilies look fabulous and help to keep the pond clean; the Marlborough rock daisy (*Pachystegia insignis*); all six of the couple's dogs, each a different breed.**

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gardens with the wrong-sized plants in them, which they're forever trimming into little lollipops. Most people don't understand that they grow bigger than they think they're going to grow," he says.

Lloyd believes that gardens should look good all year round, not just in spring. "Everyone's garden looks pretty in spring – it's whether you can have a garden that looks good in winter too. Appropriately placed shrubs and hedges hold it all together."

While most of us spend the bleak winter months huddled indoors reading plant catalogues and planning for spring, Lloyd can be found outdoors, ignoring the weather, picking oranges and admiring the hellebores and camellias.

heaps of cutting back, every two to three weeks through spring and summer; buxus hedges two or three times a year and euonymus two or three times a year, depending on how much rain we've had."

The effort is worth it. Visitors to the garden are effusive in their praise. Most comment on the unusual use of hostas to hide the legs of 'Iceberg' standards and sigh at the spectacular sight of the cerise-pink 'Kirin' azalea hedge in flower.

All remark on the topiary and a few beg fruit from the medlar trees (*Mespilus germanica*) to make jam. This old-fashioned fruit tree has an apple-like flower and delicious guava-like fruit. But there's a trick to medlars: their fruit needs to be bletted (matured until it's almost rotten) before the flavour develops.



### Cherry pickers

Harry's avenue of flowering cherries includes *Prunus yedoensis* 'Awanui' and 'Mountain Ice'. Lloyd says they all looked spectacular in flower this year. 'Mountain Ice' is an almost white form of 'Awanui'.

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### TOPIARY TRICKS

Most visitors to the garden comment on the two box trees clipped into Mr Whippy ice-cream cone shapes. It takes a couple of hours each about twice a year to keep them in shape. Lloyd clips the spirals by hand with old-fashioned sheep shears for accuracy. What's his trick? "I just use my eye and don't let the staff trim them. Our Wairere landscape gardener Anthony sometimes trims them – it's the sort of thing he enjoys and is good at too! Keep your shears headed up in a corkscrew and remember to follow the curves and let the spiral get thinner as you head to the top."



Clockwise from top left: One of Harry's lilies; This flower border has a bright yellow 'Landora' Hybrid Tea rose surrounded by cornflowers and ornamental comfrey (*Symphytum caucasicum* 'Eminence'); The white, double-cupped 'Paree White' rose; One of Lloyd's favourite roses, the pink 'Raubritter'; The red shrub rose 'Eyeopener'; Lloyd and Harry are hesitant to name this pink ruffled rose with any certainty; *Zantedeschia*, a dwarf orange calla lily.

A few visitors ask how they keep the pond clean. Lloyd willingly shares his secret. The trick is to make sure you get the micro-environment just so, by putting the right plants in the right places, then leaving nature to it. He suggests lining the sides with plants that purify water, like blue-flowered pond pickerel (*Pontederia cordata*). Huge, Monet-style waterlilies not only look pretty, they help keep the water clear. The pond originally had goldfish in it, which help with the clean-up job, but Lloyd reckons that they're probably giant carp by now.

The gardening duo say they work haphazardly, fitting it around the demands of their business, and enlisting nursery staff's help when needed. And there's their canine brood to contend with. The couple has six dogs: an Italian greyhound, a scotty, a poodle, a dalmation cross, a schnauzer and a bitzer – a mix as eclectic as their planting.

"We try to keep the garden up to scratch but it's not always the case. It depends if we've got a garden ramble or charity event coming up. I get our nursery staff to help a lot, but when I want something done I get in there and do it myself because I like it done my way," says Lloyd.

"Eighteen years on, I would have done it entirely differently," he says, and now he has the opportunity to do just that. The pair has shifted a villa onto the property, allowing for a totally different garden. The new garden is more romantic and old-fashioned with standard sasanqua camellias, roses, cycads and old-fashioned annuals like pelargoniums and coleus. And, of course, hedges of the dwarf box, *Buxus* 'Green Gem', to provide that structure they love. 🐾

**How to visit:** Lloyd and Harry's garden is open every day, except Christmas Day, Good Friday and Anzac Day, at 826 Gordonton Road, Hamilton.



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### PEAK PLEASURE

"Lesson learned: never paint your arch," advises Lloyd. "You'll only have to paint it again and again when you change the colour of your house." He and Harry painted their arch to match their house the first time, but couldn't face doing it again for the next two colour changes. Among the climbers growing over it is the pretty yellow 'Moonlight' rose, a Hybrid Musk that Lloyd says has no diseases "and just flowers and flowers and flowers. You can hack it back and keep it as a shrub, or have it as a climber."

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