

## In Pursuit of The Great New Zealand Garden

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### INTRODUCTION

It was while recently enjoying the company of Ian and Barbara Duncalf, two worthy members of your Society, at a certain hostelry just North of Tauranga, that the conversation drifted onto the topic of The Great New Zealand Garden. Does such a thing exist? If not, why not, and if so, what characteristics qualified it for such lofty consideration? The discussion that followed was inconclusive but we did agree that a paper entitled something like "In Pursuit of The Great New Zealand Garden" or "Would The Real New Zealand Garden Please Stand Up?" could make an interesting topic for this conference.

I've been designing gardens, among other things, for a little over 20 years. Over that period I've probably designed on average, about 20 gardens a year. By virtue of a simple calculation, that means I've probably designed approximately 400 gardens, give or take a courtyard or two. I can confidently say that, as a result, there are about 400 landscapes that are more presentable than they were before we started and there are around about 400 clients who are reasonably satisfied with what has been achieved. However, without wishing to appear unduly self-deprecating, I have to concede that none of those 400 gardens could realistically be described as The Great New Zealand Garden, much as I hate to admit it.

All is not lost though, because although I haven't had the opportunity to personally inspect all the gardens of New Zealand, I doubt that anyone else has created The Great New Zealand Garden either!

### WHAT IS THE GREAT NEW ZEALAND GARDEN?

It's worth considering for a moment what qualities a garden would have to have to be described as The Great New Zealand Garden. As a start point, maybe it would be helpful to firstly dismantle and define the words. The use of the definite article suggests that there is but one Great New Zealand Garden, unless one were to use the word in a generic sense, in which case there would be one Great type of garden. All the examples of which exhibited distinctively Great characteristics which enabled them all to be lumped together. For the purposes of this discussion, let's assume we are talking about one Great New Zealand Garden.

**The Word "Great."** This implies superlativeness, significantly better than that which is merely excellent. In the context of gardens, greatness implies comparability with other gardens of the world that are recognised as great. The New Zealand cricketer, Martin Crowe, who was by far the most prolific scorer of test cricket runs New Zealand has produced, became obsessed towards the end of his career with concerns as to whether history would judge him to be a Great Cricketer. Criteria like the number of test centuries he scored, his highest test score, the manner in which he scored his runs, against whom, and how these achievements compared with those of other past players who are acknowledged as having achieved Greatness, were put forward as yardsticks against which his performance and ability could be judged. For

a New Zealand garden to be considered Great it would need to compare favourably with the great gardens of the world, such as the Isola Bella on Lake Maggiore in Italy, Le Notre's Vaux-le-Vicomte in France, Stowe or Stourhead in England, or the Ryoan-ji of Japan. All these gardens have in common the following characteristics :

They successfully blended, built, and planted elements with landform, water, and space, if not literally, then, as in the case of the Ryoan-ji, metaphorically; they reflect the social, economic, philosophical, and spiritual conditions and attitudes of their respective place and time; they are the result of considerable refinement of a particular style—they epitomise the climax of a creative movement; they are made up mostly, if not entirely, of distinctively local materials; they exploit an emotional or intellectual response which is in turn connected with the fundamental senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch; they respect and enhance the "genius loci" of the place in which they are situated; they all exhibit a sense of timelessness—an enduring quality and a meaning which appeals to, and is appreciated by, the intellect of the person experiencing it. These then, perhaps, are the yardsticks against which we must measure New Zealand gardens.

**Defining New Zealand.** Which brings us to the next words—New Zealand. We all know what those words mean...or do we? Which New Zealand are we talking about? The heavily bush clad archipelago that existed before human beings first set foot on it? (Now that must have been a Great Garden). Or is it the Aotearoa of pre-European colonisation? Or the New Zealand that I grew up in in the second half of the 20th Century, or is it the Aotearoa-New Zealand of the new millennium?

As we all know, the landscape of New Zealand has been, and continues to be, heavily modified by all of us and the plants and animals we brought with us. Our social and economic circumstances have been evolving continually and new paradigms are being established and disestablished—the most recent being over the last 15 years.

**So What Are the Essential Qualities of "New Zealandness" That We Might Look for in a Distinctively New Zealand Garden?** The most obvious item is plant material. While many of our native plants have look-alike cousins which originated in other parts of Gondwanaland, many of our native plants are endemic to New Zealand alone. Our botanical palate has been irreversibly extended through the introduction of a vast range of exotic plant material from virtually all corners of the globe. This process, of course, parallels the broadening of the human gene pool through the influx of immigrants from all parts of the planet—a process that is equally irreversible.

Some sort of botanical mix which reflects this reality is, therefore, probably inevitable in any garden that purports to represent the New Zealand of the late 20th Century, let alone the next millennium.

Our culture and lifestyles also help to define us. We have only to observe the antics of newly arrived immigrants to realise that we actually do things a little differently here.

We are generally an informal people. We tend to rebel against officiousness and officialdom. We have an aversion to pomp and ceremony ourselves, although we find such behaviour fascinating in others. We are generally hospitable and generous, although we don't like having our generosity taken for granted. We have an ability to laugh at ourselves, but we can't abide being laughed at by others. We are generally



resilient and resourceful and are used to making do with the materials available. Necessity has literally been the mother of many of our inventions. We tend to be skeptical about prettiness and good design unless such design can be shown to be clever, useful, or appreciated by overseas experts. We value our independence and privacy but we resent not being given the opportunity to be involved. We are deeply suspicious of anyone who gets ahead especially if that progress is at our expense. We exert a moderating influence on our innovators, our tall poppies. This is the curse of designers everywhere but seems particularly so in New Zealand where new ideas are frequently scorned, or even worse, ignored. Our innately conservative attitudes drive the most talented of us overseas and dilutes the remaining poppies into bland and ubiquitous buttercups.

It is interesting to ponder the thought that maybe it is our very egalitarian heritage of the sharing of resources and opportunities and our approach to welfare that has worked against the development of greatness in our gardens. I believe it is no coincidence that all of the great gardens that I mentioned at the beginning of this talk were created at the climax of a period of great power and influence and were thus an expression of that power.

The increasing stratification of New Zealand society and the accompanying redistribution of wealth is creating a clientele for designers who are willing to humour the design gifts of our most able and innovative designers. Many a half-baked pie has also emerged as a result our vulnerability to the forces of fashion, our scanty garden design heritage, and the invasion of the designing niche by an assortment of well meaning, partially qualified amateurs. It never ceases to amaze me how little training some people reckon is necessary to equip them adequately for spending other people's money!

**Defining Garden.** None of the meanings in my copy of the Concise Oxford Dictionary do justice to the way we perceive gardens today. Gardens for us have become much more than "a place where fruits, vegetables, and flowers are cultivated" or "a public place for the display of plants of various kinds". The establishment of a relatively affluent middle class in New Zealand has increased the extent to which gardening is undertaken here as a leisure activity. In contrast to the "deep and meaningful" approach of traditional Asian garden designers and the grandiose creations of the Europeans, the New Zealand version reflects partly the Kiwi "she'll be right" attitude, partly the constraints of size, space and limited resources and partly our unwillingness to look a gift horse in the mouth. Our willingness to compromise a carefully composed planting combination with "just a few bits and pieces from Aunt Margaret's lovely garden" is one of our more charming tendencies. It's little wonder greatness eludes us! Our gardens suffer generally from a lack of attention to detail, particularly with respect to the "hard landscape". This may be because, unlike the Australians, we haven't had the benefit of a large Italian migrant population, many of whom brought with them skills in masonry and stone-working.

Nevertheless, gardens and gardening have become a major growth industry as we all know. Along with the memoirs of our sporting heroes, books about gardens have become our best sellers. The perception that "doing up the garden" is probably going to be a better investment than overhauling the dwelling is now firmly established in the Kiwi psyche. The fun and satisfaction element of creating a garden is also a big part of why we are switching on to gardens.

For us, a lot of the value of the garden is in the making. Our gardens have become places to be in, as against places primarily designed to be looked at. We think of the garden as an outdoor area associated with a building of some sort—usually a dwelling. We have moved on a long way from the version of the garden displayed on the cover of the old Edmond's "Sure To Rise" Cookbook.

## CONCLUSION

So, where does that leave us? Is there any chance that a Great New Zealand Garden will happen? My guess is, dare I say it, probably not, though I would be delighted to be proved wrong. I believe the globalisation of world fashion militates against such distinguishable excellence in gardens evolving here. While it is tempting to suggest we should ignore such influences in pursuit of a pure expression in Aotearoa New Zealand, these pressures are remarkably strong. Gardening books, magazines, television programmes, and the visiting of existing gardens all perpetuate images and consolidate expectations, particularly on the part of our clients (our modern-day patrons), of the need to re-create a little bit of Kent or Kyoto or Tuscany.

Even the deliberate and exclusive use of our native plants doesn't necessarily relieve us of the constraints of the picturesque or gardenesque landscapes of abroad—the so-called "pidgin picturesque" is alive and well in Aotearoa.

It would probably require a life-long, single-minded quest on the part of a group of skilled and dedicated designers to achieve the goal of a Great New Zealand Garden. The group best equipped to conduct such a quest, landscape architects, have, by and large, bigger fish to fry. A few make garden design their primary focus, but there tends to be a progression towards broader scale projects, where their impact will be greater and their rewards enhanced.

Home-grown or semiqualfied exponents of the art of garden design, while responsible for some flashes of brilliance, generally lack the breadth of skills necessary to achieve greatness. Despite the commonly espoused ethic that "anyone can do it" there is a good deal more to the design of outdoor spaces than meets the eye. Which is not to say that the goal itself is not a worth pursuing. Yet The Great New Zealand Garden, if there ever is to be such a thing, will probably occur more by chance, than as the result of a drive towards perfection. It will be a place that owes its existence to a love of this land of ours and an understanding of, and sensitivity to the mauri, or essence of the place in which it stands. It will reflect the rich and youthful geology that underlies it. It will exhibit subtle understatement combined with diversity of form, colour, and texture. It will almost certainly **not** contain palm trees—at least not exotic ones. It will have places for all people of all ages. Its conception will have been the result of willing and generous cooperation of many people. It will combine landform, plants, water, structures, and spaces into an harmonious whole that will, like a great wine, improve with age. Let the pursuit continue!

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