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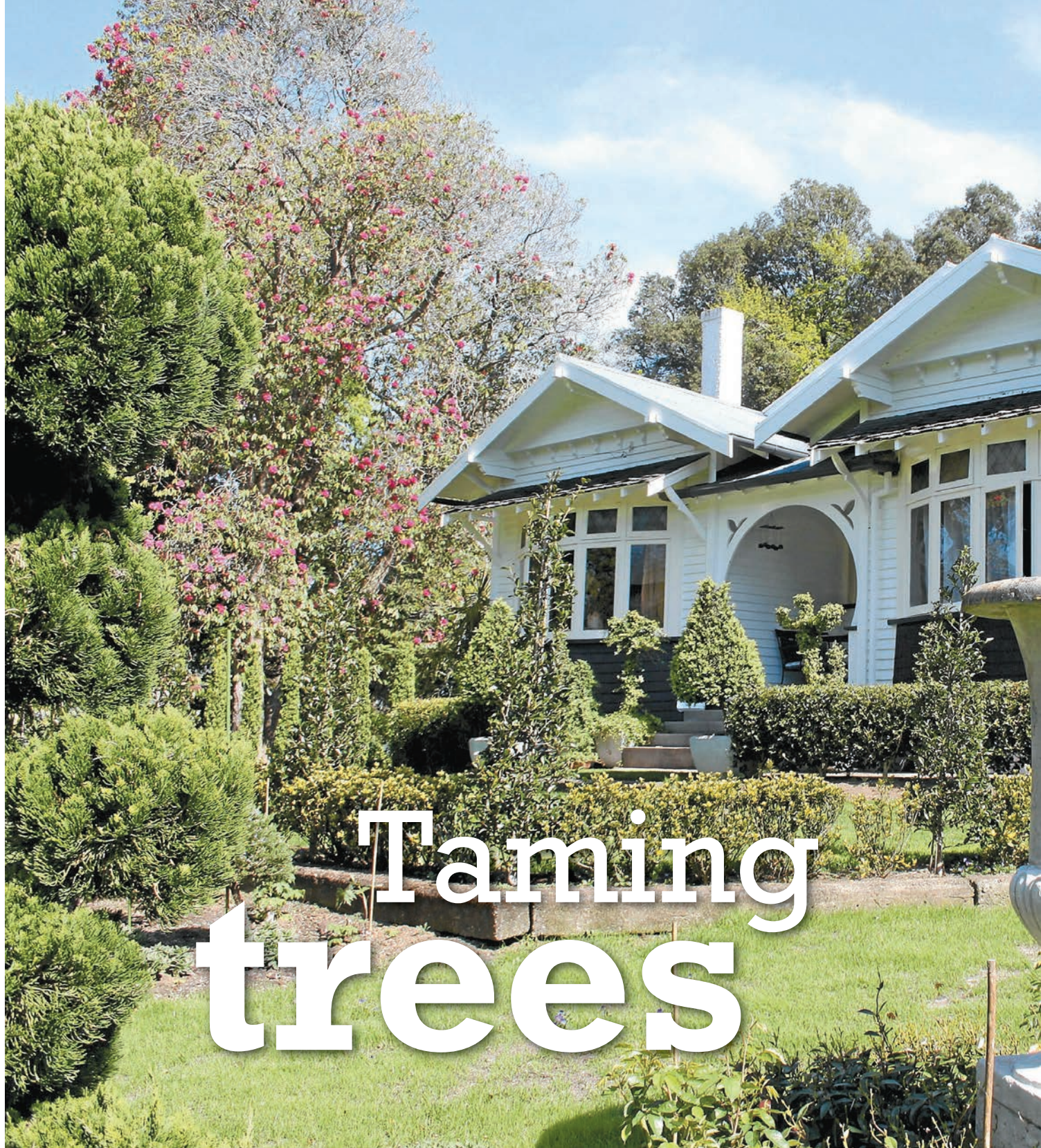
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Taming trees

Story by Lisa Potter

GRAEME Burton is extremely patient. The landscape designer has spent most of a decade painstakingly nurturing and crafting an impressive display of some of New Zealand's largest topiaries.

A once-barren tennis court on a sprawling Waikato property is now laden with shapely topiaries, neatly standing to attention as they succumb

to his careful shaping, each yielding to the form in his mind's eye.

Many, such as the dome, ball and cone, are immediately obvious; others will take years to grow into their final shape.

With some of the creations up to 3m high, there's nothing discreet about the designs. From clouds, obelisks, pillars and twisted columns, every tree is unique and a sculptural artwork.

"The large topiaries are perfect for lifestyle properties and farms - they

look amazing grouped together in clumps or lining a driveway," he says.

Graeme's passion for his craft is evident as he enthuses about his trees and shrubs. He and wife Val Glenn recently had a trip to Europe where they immersed themselves in the world of topiary, returning home laden with fresh inspiration from the Chelsea Flower Show, Floriade Horticultural World Expo and the Garden of Versailles.

"A lot of people think topiary is just the traditional lollipop shape bush on



ABOUT TOPIARY

Plants have been trained and cut into artificial shapes for decorative effect since the early Egyptian and Roman eras.

Many grand formal European gardens have extravagant examples of the art form but the visual appeal of topiary has trickled through to even small inner city apartments.

Topiary provides instant impact and can become living art.

Traditional topiary is an art based on patience and a steady hand. Many amateurs rush to achieve instant results and their chosen plants can be "one season wonders".

Slower growing trees and shrubs may not yield results as fast, but the experts choose them for longevity.

Topiary is a definite skill but learning the basics is a key to success. Sharp clean tools are a must to make accurate cuts on flexible new growth.

the former paddock into a showcase for their skills. Val's design influence is evident throughout the garden and is the perfect marriage for Graeme's lifetime in horticulture.

The couple have created a series of themed outdoor areas including English, Balinese, Mediterranean, coastal and French romantic gardens, a tropical shade corner, a formal garden and a potager.

Each pocket reveals the influence of Graeme's love of topiary.

Nothing gives him greater pleasure than sharing his passion, introducing people to the world of plants and topiary.

"We're fortunate to have a variety of growing conditions here, from an exposed hill to a shady corner, so we can plant to suit and then show visitors first-hand what works in certain areas," he says.

Towering trees, many over a century old, surround the homestead. An enormous copper beech stands guard over the topiary collection; camellias, planes, oaks and rhododendrons impress with their height and girth.

A labour of love, the expansive grounds have become a hot destination for garden clubs around New Zealand.

Arriving by the busload, visitors are treated to garden tea in a new outdoor

a single trunk, but it's so much more," he says.

His body of work is evidence. From plaited trunks, whirling spirals and extravagant bursts of green clouds creating striking visual impact, the couple's own garden is a superb example of the many uses of topiary.

Pride of the patch may not be the most stunning piece in the grounds, but it is laden with nostalgia.

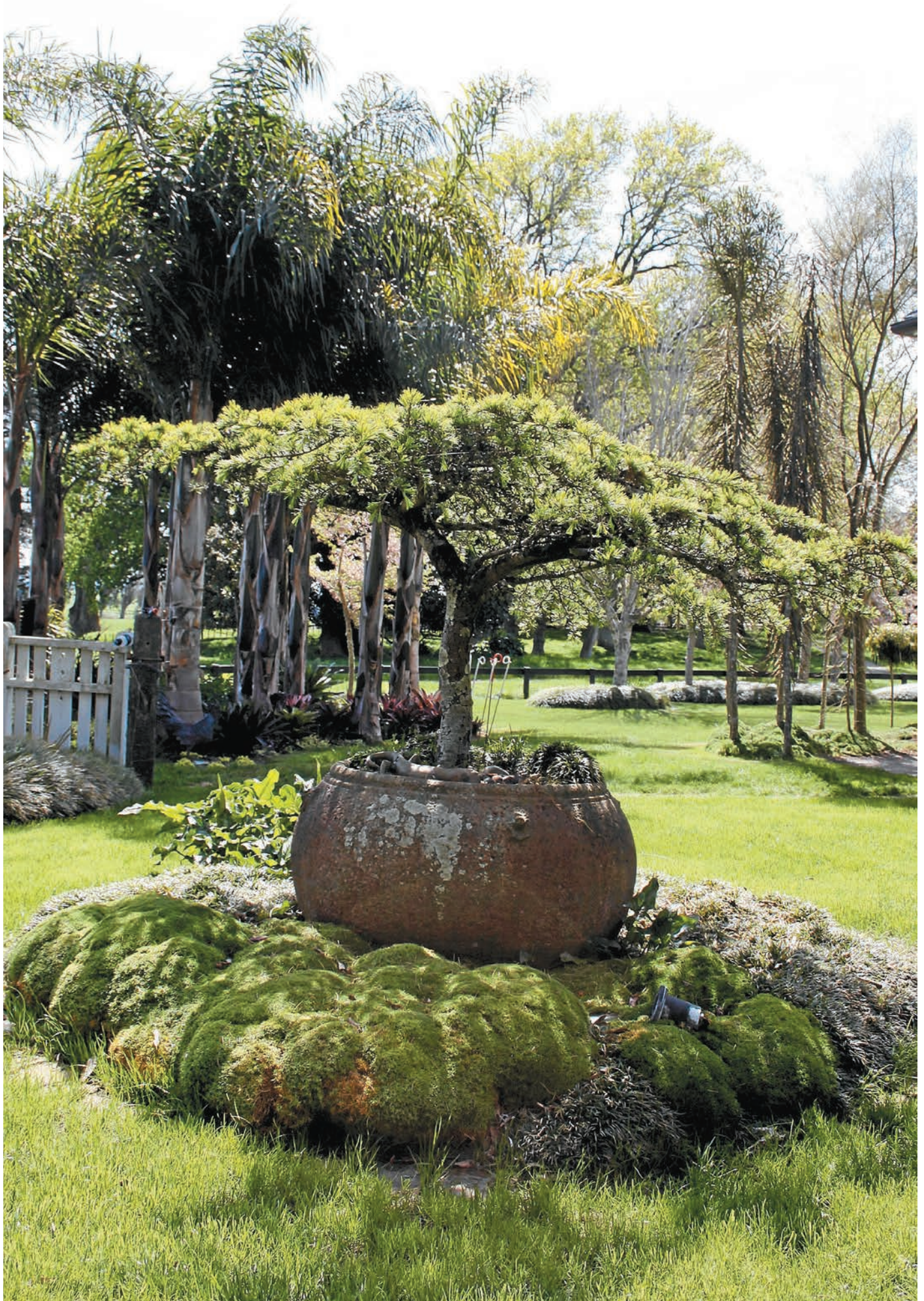
For 35 years since he started working for his father John, Graeme has grown a large golden Indian cedar

bonsai, which now forms a centrepiece at the side of the house.

The son has nurtured and shaped the tree through the decades; a rotund pot balances a magnificent umbrella-shaped canopy.

In the stunning grounds of Val and Graeme's Rukuhia Homestead, it is hard to believe that just a few years ago cows grazed right up around the house, which has been handed down through generations of the Glenn family.

Val and Graeme have transformed



A 35-year-old bonsai, *Cedrus Deodara Aurea* (golden indian cedar) grows as a feature in a large pot in the garden. The pot helps lift the plant up, making it look bigger and more impressive. It is underplanted with dwarf green mondo grass and *scleranthus biflorus*. Graeme has shaped and nurtured this bonsai for 35 years.



**Landscape designer
Graeme Burton with
wife Val Glenn.**

tunnel house, where Graeme delights in sharing his expertise and educating visitors on everything from garden design to selecting plants and ensuring their longevity. Topiary is undoubtedly his favourite topic.

"I've always had a gut feeling about topiary," he says. "As more people turn their attention to their grounds, whether a huge country garden or a small balcony in town, the topiary lends itself to any situation.

"It's a living piece of art and has definite wow factor."

After years carefully growing, shaping and trimming his sizeable collection, Graeme recently launched his new business, Topiary Different, at the Waikato Home and Garden Show.

No stranger to public exhibitions, Val ensured the site was eye-catching. An experienced event organiser, Val won several gold awards, including the supreme award, at Ellerslie Flower Show, in 2005.

Her designer's touch is evident

throughout the property in features such as a collection of woven balls she created to hang from an enormous camellia tree at the front of the house.

The pair's individual skill sets combine harmoniously to create the Rukuhia Homestead experience - a hands-on garden tour, an informative talk by Graeme and plenty of tips and advice on choosing and caring for plants.

Having grown up in the world of horticulture, Graeme was fortunate to learn the basics from two of New Zealand's most respected nurserymen - his father and the late Trevor Davies, of Duncan and Davies.

One of the most important lessons was the importance of thinking creatively and outside the square.

"There's no right or wrong in garden design," Graeme says. "Everyone is completely individual in what they like and if it gives you pleasure, then that's the important thing.

"The key is selecting plants which will grow and thrive in specific areas."

Acknowledging he is no skilled artist in terms of putting pen to paper, Graeme is in his element when creating sculptural masterpieces from shrubs and trees.

He is more of a "hands-on" designer, preferring to take actual plants and show people what they will look like, as opposed to drawing fancy plans.

He admits his head buzzes with ideas and he is driven by the challenge of pushing the boundaries of what plants should do to what they are capable of.

Graeme also gets a kick out of proving the generic plant labels wrong with the expected size and growth habit and using his skills to shape unexpected results.

"You can adapt plants to grow the way you want them do," he says. "Just because the label says it grows to 4m high doesn't mean you can't keep it at a well-shaped metre high and you can

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A new variety of petunia called Pretty Much Picasso.



Podophyllum Kaleidoscope. This comes from the Himalayas and loves a shady garden or being placed under trees. It comes out of the ground each spring with a beautiful set of new foliage. The leaves have very interesting markings and in November and December a bunch of burgundy flowers, like the shape of a kakabeak, hang down from under each leaf.



A dwarf variety of the chinese lantern (Abutilon megatoponicum). Planted in the right spot, this will flower 365 days a year. Graeme and Val's super sized specimen grows over a weeping rose frame to help hold it up, as their topiary trained specimen has a diameter of over a metre. The vibrant flowers also attract waxeyes which feed daily on the nectar over winter.



Syngarus Romanzoffiana (Queen Palms) underplanted with a collection of assorted bromeliads. The palms have been planted for eight years and handle the Waikato conditions very well. They also provide overhead cover for the bromeliads; from the intense sun in the summer and the frosts in the winter.



Loropetalum Shiraz-Matazz, available exclusively from Rukuhia Homestead Landscaping.

train low-spreading plants to grow tall."

Once a family tennis court, the large square of asphalt is now covered in neat lines of carefully groomed trees in various shades of development - from the soft and frothy African totara (*Podocarpus gracilior*) to columns of rich burgundy *Loropetalum shirazmatazz*, one of Graeme's favourites.

"Colour and texture are just as much a part of topiary as shape; it's crucial to select the right plant for the right shape."

Common topiaries of lavender, daisies and genistas will inevitably lead to disappointment. These fast-growing shrubs are demanding because of their growth rate and are often one-season wonders.

Slower growing choices such as hollies, camellias and *raphiolepis* may take longer to establish, but will provide years more pleasure.

From a stunning port wine magnolia (*Michelia figo*) and tousle headed blue totara (*Podocarpus Matapouri Blue*) to new compact growing redwoods (*sequoias*), a no-prickle holly (*Ilex Lago*) and of course an impressive line-up of citrus trees, Graeme's selection of established topiary is awe-inspiring.

By offering topiaries with several years of growing and professional shaping, he effectively offers "teenagers" to his clients, as much of the initial hard work has been done.

Graeme's quirky favourites include a small-growing lime, which produces masses of small and tasty cocktail-sized fruit, for which he has trademarked the catchy name "Lime Cocktail".

"It's been around for a while but it's perfect for topiary in the entertainment area," he says. "The limes are the perfect size to pluck off and add straight to your gin and tonic or soda water."

Choosing the correct pot for topiary is crucial. If it is too small the tree will become crushed and tired.

A larger pot that balances with the shape of the topiary is far better.

"Good quality potting mix is a must," Graeme says. "There's no point putting a \$40 plant into \$5 potting mix. There's nothing nutritional or lasting in that."

"Any plant going into a container most definitely should go into a potting mix that has water-holding gel already in the mix. It's a worthwhile investment."

Graeme is convinced a quality topiary offers people the opportunity

to have a piece of living art.

Whether in a small town garden or a huge sprawling farmscape, topiary can enhance every vista.

Knowing how to look after and trim them is crucial to success. Graeme likes nothing better than educating people so they can enjoy years of pleasure from their plants.

"I love seeing the pleasure of people learning about plants and helping them find more enjoyable ways of enjoying their gardens through the careful selection of plants. You have to plant for your local climate and growing conditions."

Graeme and Val's own grounds are prolifically planted but he has used his decades of knowledge to create combinations which keep ongoing plant maintenance to a minimum. Groundcovers not only keep weeds at bay but add strong visual punch.

"We may have a large garden but I probably do a lot less weeding than people with smaller gardens," Graeme says. "The secret is to leave no gaps - weeds grow where there are gaps."

"It's all about understanding how plants work and using that to make a garden which is minimum fuss, maximum enjoyment." ■

For more information visit www.thehomesteadlandscaping.co.nz

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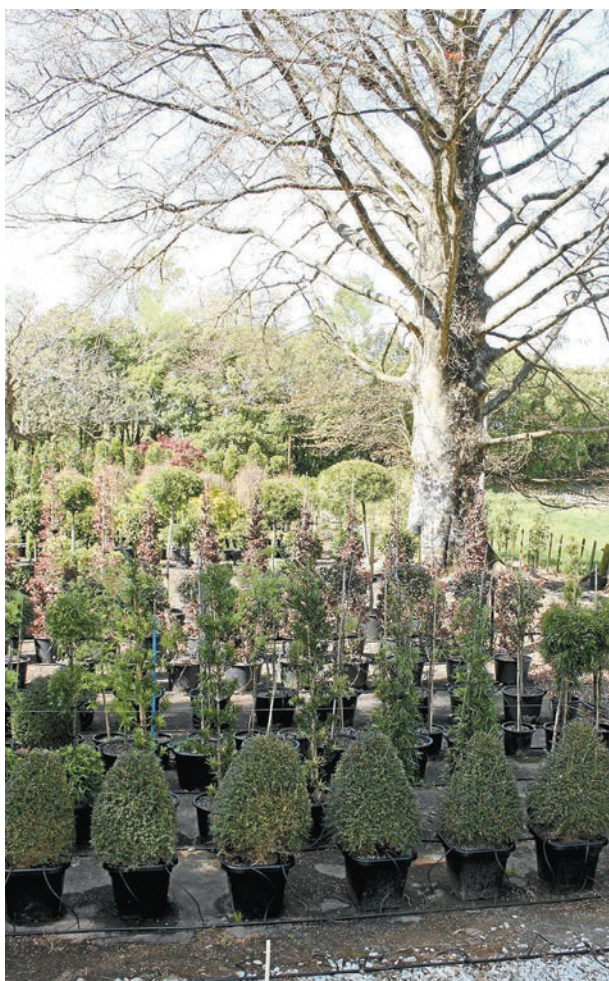
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This topiary hedgeline of buxus greenpeace has been planted with a gap between each plant to allow a peek of the garden on the other side. Buxus greenpeace naturally grows upright and is perfect for gardens where there is not much space.



Juniperus Kaizuka (Hollywood juniper) is topiary trained with large balls on the ends of the branches. This plant is one of three such specimens in this particular corner of Graeme's garden. Extremely tough to all the elements, it requires very little maintenance to keep it in shape. It is also a great option in a large pot on a patio.

Graeme's top tips for successful topiary

- The key to successful topiary is to carefully select a plant which is going to do well as a topiary in your chosen setting. Also ensure the plants growth habit that matches what you eventually want to achieve.

- If putting topiary in a pot or container, make sure the container is large enough, to match the vigour of the plant you have chosen. Select a container which compliments the style and foliage colour of the plant.

- If you are a bit nervous about trimming your precious piece of living sculpture, the best advice is to take a little off at a time. You can always take more off, but you can't put it back.

- When it comes to a potted topiary, select a plant which is very forgiving about you forgetting to water it or frequently going away over the weekends. It needs to be able live with minimal attention.

- Definitely feed all topiary twice a year with a slow release fertiliser; whether in a pot or in the ground.

(The best time is in September and March).

- Trimming is more accurate if done using a pair of hedge clippers with smaller blades,

- If you are planning to plant topiary in a narrow garden, generally the columnar type is more effective than the traditional ball shaped topiary.

- Unless you are a very dedicated gardener, stay away from purchasing any topiary that's reasonably fast growing, no matter how good it looks in a plant shop.

- If putting topiary into a pot, then definitely buy a very good quality potting mix with waterholding gel. A definite no-no is to use a cheap straight bark potting mix; it's too open/porous and you won't keep enough water up to the plant - unless it's a cactus.

- Topiary can be very aesthetically rewarding in a garden, and if you choose a good option and look after it well, it will give you many rewarding years.



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