

Paddock to *perfection*

Ohaupo landscaper Graeme Burton uses his design tricks of the trade at home

STORY: BARB ROGERS PHOTOS: STEVE WOOSTER



On the shady side of Rukuhia Homestead, foliage plants thrive. Clumps of yellow *Sedum makinoi* 'Ogon' grow on dome-shaped mounds of potting mix on plywood sheets perched on metal legs. The sedums have been a success for four years; Graeme gives them an annual haircut with hedgeclippers to encourage new growth. *Sedum makinoi* 'Ogon' is available from www.parvaplanets.co.nz.



Graeme Burton loves plants but he's no wide-eyed romantic. The Waikato plantsman turned landscape designer can rattle off a list of his favourites and it's possible you haven't heard of half of them. But they're all happily growing in the enormous country garden he shares with wife Val Glenn.

The land has been in Val's family for three generations. Her grandparents, Tom and Doris Glenn, bought the farm back in 1925. Five years ago Graeme moved in with Val – whose themed event business has won numerous national gold awards – and they instantly got cracking on this joint venture. Together they've concocted a suite of styled rooms, each with a different theme.

“It's a garden of many styles,” says Graeme, who brings his potential clients home. It's better to show than to tell, he reckons.

“It's a garden of many styles,” Graeme explains. And it's here Graeme brings potential clients for his Rukuhia Homestead Landscaping firm. It's better to show than to tell, he reckons. Want a tropical garden on a windy site? Snap. A garden for that shady spot where nothing grows. Done. Or you might also want to check out a formal English romantic style, a touch of beauty from Bali, a formal potager, topiary for Africa. Water features: three. Outdoor sculptures, check. You name it, Graeme's got it here. And it's all lush and flourishing, belying its youth. Would you believe the gardens at Rukuhia Homestead, spread over a hectare of land, were only planted in 2005? Apart from the trees, that is.

Graeme loves the enormous historic trees that stud paddocks about twice the area of the gardens. They're his favourite part of the property, plus

they provided the necessary shelter to nanny his fledgling plants. “Several trees are 150 years old. There's a rhododendron that's twice as high as the house; massive, multi-branched camellias with real character and huge oaks and plane trees that line the driveway. The copper beech next to the tennis court could be one of the biggest and oldest in the Waikato. And there's a prehistoric-looking Himalayan cedar (*Cedrus deodar*).”

On Graeme's side of the family, plants run deep. He's been involved in the nursery industry for 35 years, mainly raising plants for garden centres. “In my first years out of school, after completing a Diploma in Nursery Production, I worked for my father, John Burton. He had three garden centres around Hamilton.”

After John sold these, Graeme spent the next 30 years producing and importing plants from all over the world. A year ago he started this new venture in landscaping. “I always felt I had creative flair,” he says. “I always had an idea of what plants went with what. It's a matter of understanding how plants work. Once you know that, you know where's the best place to put them so they'll flourish.”

Which is why you'll never find ivy in his garden. Or an overdose of roses. Or English perennials. “The worst plants for me are those that continually need spraying. Or the ones that need deadheading. Or plants that look good for only a short time. As for ivy... I've seen so many places where it has wrecked a garden, especially older properties where it's been a groundcover. It's gone ballistic, up trees, you name it.”

Above left: There are three water features in the garden – this one nestles into bromeliads. Above: Beyond the long arms of an ancient and gnarled camellia tree you can spot mondo grass mounds emerging from the lawn like giant field mushrooms. Graeme likes to push design boundaries.



Wise words

Graeme Burton, pictured above with wife Val Glenn, is no fan of the cottage garden style nor does he favour the overuse of English perennials. Too labour intensive, he reckons. If you don't want to spend your life weeding, take a leaf out of his book and plant for your climate and local conditions. And leave no soil uncovered!



Clockwise from top left:
Cedrus deodar 'Aurea'
 underplanted with mossy
Scleranthus uniflorus
 and green mondo grass;
 Glossy dark green leaves
 of *Ligularia reniformis*
 nod above the golden
Sedum makinoi 'Ogon';
 The rare and beautiful
 shade lover *Podophyllum*
 'Kaleidoscope' has very
 distinctive foliage; This
 rustic recycled farm gate
 beckons visitors to a red
 corner with *Cordyline*
 'Red Fountain' in front.



Clockwise from above:
The life-sized lady from Bali
is so heavy she's concreted
into place; The gazebo
is an ideal spot to study
views of the farm. Two
cloud-pruned 'Kaizuka'
junipers welcome visitors.



Garden visits

Graeme welcomes visits from clients and garden groups, by appointment only. Rukuhia Homestead is in Ohaupo, near Hamilton. For details, phone (07) 825 2620.

Graeme is a practical guy. Why would you want to invite trouble? "Everyone wants a low maintenance garden. They don't want to do the work, they have less time and they can't be bothered with a plant that needs spraying and constant work." Admittedly, he does have one hedge of roses, 'White Romance' in fact, because it doesn't need much attention. Pruning is easy: he just uses the hedge trimmer.

Graeme has hardly any weeds to battle. "I probably do less weeding than people with much smaller gardens," he says. The secret is to

foliage brings a lush look to any formal garden". And then there's *Cussonia paniculata*, the South African cabbage tree? "It's the most awesome large container plant. Its gnarled twisted trunk is a real feature and it looks spectacular with uplighting at night".

Podocarpus gracillior is perfect in containers but makes a great screen or hedge too. Plus everyone who sees the rare *Podophyllum* 'Kaleidoscope' in spring falls for its eye-catching foliage.

If there's a must-have fern for a shady spot, look no further than the Japanese painted ferns,

Buying a plant on impulse can be costly. "You end up pulling it out or it dies anyway. Then you have to start all over again."

cram in plants. Leave no gaps. "Because weeds only grow where there are gaps," he explains.

Enough of what he hates. What are Graeme's favourite plants? Top of the hit parade has to be *Loropetalum chinense* 'Burgundy'. He's trained five of them into topiary pillars, but this plant can be a groundcover, standard, hedge or shrub too. 'It's so versatile and it looks fantastic all year round. It is a true 10-out-of-10 plant.'

Then there's *Lomandra* 'Tanika'. "One of the best-performing grasses on the market," he says. "It certainly outperforms most of our own native grasses and it's outstanding in dry conditions".

Portuguese laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*) makes "fantastic topiary and its clear lime-green

Athyrium niponicum 'Silver Falls' or 'Ursula's Red'. Sure they die down over winter, but "their new foliage is truly amazing".

Last on his list is 'Limequat', a compact but little-known citrus that forms a small fragrant hedge. It will even grow in a pot in small spaces.

What are Graeme's best tips for novices? Choose plants that will perform with ease. Feed twice a year, spring and autumn with slow-release fertiliser. He uses one called Growers Choice. Water every week over summer. And don't give in to an impulse buy. "More often than not this will be a costly exercise because you end up either pulling it out or it dies anyway. Then you have to start all over again." 🌿



Shed style

This used to be the farm's killing shed – the place where deceased ducks, sheep or whatever else was on the menu, could be hung and stored until butchering time. These days it's put to much less messy use, as a storage room for garden tools. Like anything on a farm, waste not, want not!



Art in the garden

Val Glenn, Graeme's wife, used tricky design work to fashion fun butterflies from polycarbonate sheets (above) to hang in a tree. Elsewhere, wire flowers (below) add a sculptural touch.



Graeme uses plants for interesting new landscape effects. See www.thehomesteadlandscaping.co.nz.



1

Leaf contrast

'Ursula's Red', a Japanese painted fern, snuggles up in the shade with the golden Japanese sedum 'Ogon'.



2

Leave no gaps

Under these standardised Portuguese laurels, black mondo grass and mini yuccas smother any weeds.



3

Fancy dark foliage

Graeme's favourite plant, the versatile *Loropetalum chinense* 'Burgundy', grows up poles to form cones.

Graeme's inspiration

- **Hamilton Gardens**, with its various themed garden rooms, is a must-visit place for novices and experienced gardeners alike, says Graeme.
- **John Burton**, Graeme's father, "has been teaching me about plants all my life. He's still one of the most passionate, enthusiastic and knowledgeable people on all aspects of gardening".
- **The late Trevor Davies**, of Duncan and Davies, was a cherished mentor. "I was extremely fortunate to learn from him."
- **There's no right or wrong** in garden design, says Graeme. Many people have a creative urge. "It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. If it gives you pleasure, that's the important thing!"