



## Sue Linn visits an appealing garden that is also educational.

"If my garden gets waist deep in weeds, I'll ring a garden club", says Graeme Burton, joking that the prospect of a busload of visitors provides all the motivation he needs for a tidy-up.

Graeme is being disingenuous – there's barely a weed in sight when we wander around Rukuhia Homestead, the expansive garden that he has developed, with his wife Val Glenn.

This Waikato garden radiates from all four sides of their character bungalow, which once belonged to Val's grandparents. House and garden look out to picturesque pastoral views, with Mount Pirongia to the west. And from the west come the prevailing winds, the key challenge in a garden blessed with great soil and only light, infrequent frosts.

Graeme is a landscaper who, being also a keen gardener, derives much personal satisfaction and creative outlet from his own garden. And he has another driving force: Graeme finds as much pleasure in his role as teacher as he does in landscaping and wants his garden to showcase ideas for clients and for the enthusiastic garden-clubbers who visit.

"I enjoy showing people what they can do with plants". Indeed, educating and inspiring gardeners is the Rukuhia Homestead's chief raison d'être.

Thus, his garden is a series of theme gardens. Included are a native area, a cottage garden, a formal

garden, a tropical shade garden, a Balinese garden, a Mediterranean garden and a potager. The ideal way to experience these is as a fascinating, two-hour ramble, enthusiastically guided by its knowledgeable owner. It's clear he loves to talk as he enthuses effortlessly about his plants and gardening experiences and he is encouraged by the reaction he gets from his visitors.

"People are hungry for knowledge about gardening. It's something that's hard to find in a garden centre these days, but it takes a long time to learn what makes plants tick".

Although there's no shortage of highly trained and talented landscape designers, not many have the knowledge like his that comes from a lifetime of getting down and dirty with plants.

Graeme has horticulture in his genes. He has been immersed since childhood in the business of growing and selling plants. He credits much to his teachers, two of New Zealand's most respected nurserymen, his father John Burton and Trevor Davies, of Duncan and Davies.

Graeme runs his landscaping business a little differently from most of his peers. If you want an expensive plan on paper he is not your man. He prefers the personal, hands-on approach. He uses actual plant samples to discuss and communicate his planting schemes. When it's time to plant, he insists on placing the plants himself – and the service



Graeme Burton.

continues after planting. A speciality of Graeme's is free coaching for those needing a hand to maintain valuable topiaries. Over all, it's important his gardens are "a joint project between me and my client".

Every spring, he thanks clients by inviting them to a garden party in his own garden, which is also open to garden clubs by arrangement. He loves it that "people are coming to learn" and he uses his garden to experiment with ideas. That means he can tell them about his successes, but also "the things I learn the hard way".

One example of learning the hard way was a textural combination of *Muehlenbeckia* and *Scleranthus* groundcovers. Although attractive, the former was too vigorous and it took too much hard work to keep the two separate.

Recently Graeme has enjoyed working on a garden in coastal Pauanui, on the Coromandel Peninsula. "It's been exciting to push the boundaries with things that won't grow in Waikato." As a dedicated passer-on of gardening know-how, he's constantly striving to discover more.

• To arrange group garden visits, ph 07 825 2620 or 0274 994 019 or email [g.burton@farmside.co.nz](mailto:g.burton@farmside.co.nz)

1. "You don't have to accept what the label tells you about a plant's size. Make it grow how you want it to" says Graeme. For example: *Cedrus deodara* 'Aurea', seen here in a large pot has a 10-year height estimate of 3m. *Podocarpus gracilior* (aka African totara), the topiary to the left is a forest giant were it not for trimming as topiary or hedging. *Loropetalum* 'Firedance', (whose label says 1.5 x 1.5m) are the tall red cones to the rear. At the base of the Queen Palms, and adding to the red theme is *Corydine* 'Red Fountain' with *Alstroemeria* 'Red Baron' peeping over the gate. At right rear is a funky stand of NZ lancewoods under-planted with 'moss plant' (*Scleranthus*), which Graeme says will only carpet right up to the trunk of a plant if allowed plenty of light.
2. Modern *Gerbera* garden hybrids flower almost all year round.
3. Val, an events stylist, created these wire balls. Suspended with very thin wire, they look as if they are floating in mid air.
4. Terry Dowdeswell delphiniums are a perfect partner for Graeme and Val's character bungalow in the cottage garden.
5. Colourful bromeliads are paired here with bronze *Aeonium*.
6. This sculpture was a wedding present. It needs nothing more than a hummocky green carpet of *Scleranthus* to show it to its best advantage.







7. *Dasyliro longissimum*, the Mexican Grass Tree, a native to the Chihuahuan Desert, survives extremes of hot and cold and is excellent in a pot. Graeme has used the black panels to accent the drama of this prized plant.
8. Normally bushy, bronze *Loropetalum* 'Firedance' are trimmed here to form cones. Next to them are Queen palms and, on the right, lancewoods.
9. In the Balinese garden, bold and bronze leafed *Ligularia* (left) contrast with the green, natural ball shape of *Buxus microphylla* var. *koreana*, which is quietly accentuated enhanced by a carpet of *Nertera depressa*, a native that grows incredibly flat to the ground. It has tiny orange berries.
10. In the cottage garden, delphiniums are from Terry Dowdeswell (the best according to Graeme) and the rose is 'Burgundy Iceberg', which Graeme reckons is as healthy and long lasting as its famous white parent. He hasn't yet felt the need to spray it, and says if you keep your roses well fed with balanced slow release fertiliser they will stay healthy with less spraying.

## The top trends

ASK Graeme Burton where garden trends are heading and he replies that people want a nice garden but they don't want to be tied to it. He notes, too, that anti-chemical sentiments remain strong.

People are "over yuccas", he says, and he sees a strong swing towards topiary combined with low-maintenance, flowering perennials.

"These (perennials) are long-lasting, improved flowering versions of older plants," Graeme elaborates. As an example, he cites the modern *Gerbera* varieties. While they still need excellent drainage, they leave the old gerberas for dead and were still flowering in his garden in June.

Daisies another example, are improving all the time too. He points to white *Argyranthemum* 'Polly' which he believes to be, because of its fantastic habit, "the biggest-selling daisy in Europe".

"It doesn't need dead-heading to keep flowering. I've only pruned mine once in the last six months."

11. *Cordyline* 'Red Fountain' and a mass planting of *Alstroemeria* 'Red Baron' (a non-invasive modern variety) fill the space under a grove of queen palms. Graeme recommends cutting the cordyline back to near ground level in July ("when it looks tacky anyway and you are mostly indoors"). Lush new growth emerges in spring.
12. Shade-loving groundcover *Sedum* 'Ogon' grows in raised 'platforms' and produces a dazzling splash of lime in the shade. Above it, a yellow flowering Australian frangipani tree has been topped to encourage an umbrella form that gives extra shade and protection from light frosts. To the rear, Graeme has created a see-through fence with the naturally columnar *Buxus* 'Graham Blandy'. It is easy to maintain with minimal trimming.

13. *Sciadopitys* (Japanese umbrella pine), naturally a big tree, is allowed no more space than this in Graeme's garden. It is easily trimmed to shape. Before planting the *Scleranthus* as groundcover, Graeme sculpted the ground underneath to accentuate the natural undulating habit of the plant.
14. A row of clipped *Prunus lucitanica* borders the Mediterranean-themed area. These are pruned hard at the end of July to maximise the shiny lime spring growth. "They sprout beautifully from bare wood," says Graeme. Beneath them is 'Colour Guard', a low clumping yucca and black mondo grass.



## Graeme's tips

- If you really like a plant don't be put off by what the label tells you. We can adapt plants to grow the way we want them to. You can keep a 2m plant at half a metre tall, or train a low-spreading plant to grow tall.
- Topiary is a great way to provide formality and structure without having a big tree. I put topiary in nine out of ten of my gardens. Usually I recommend starting with a 'teenager' grade of plant – the same height as an adult but not quite filled out yet.
- Stay away from fast-growing topiary like lavender. It leads to disappointment.
- Trim topiaries regularly – little and often.
- The most important thing when planting groundcover is weed eradication. Don't plant groundcovers till the weeds are gone. Then keep the area free of all newly germinated weeds for 12 months until the groundcover covers the ground. Once you have cover, you are away. Weeds only grow where there is a gap.
- Trevor Davies taught me to cut mondo to ground level about once every three years. If he did it with the electric trimmers at the end of July, it grew nice and lush again by the end of August.

