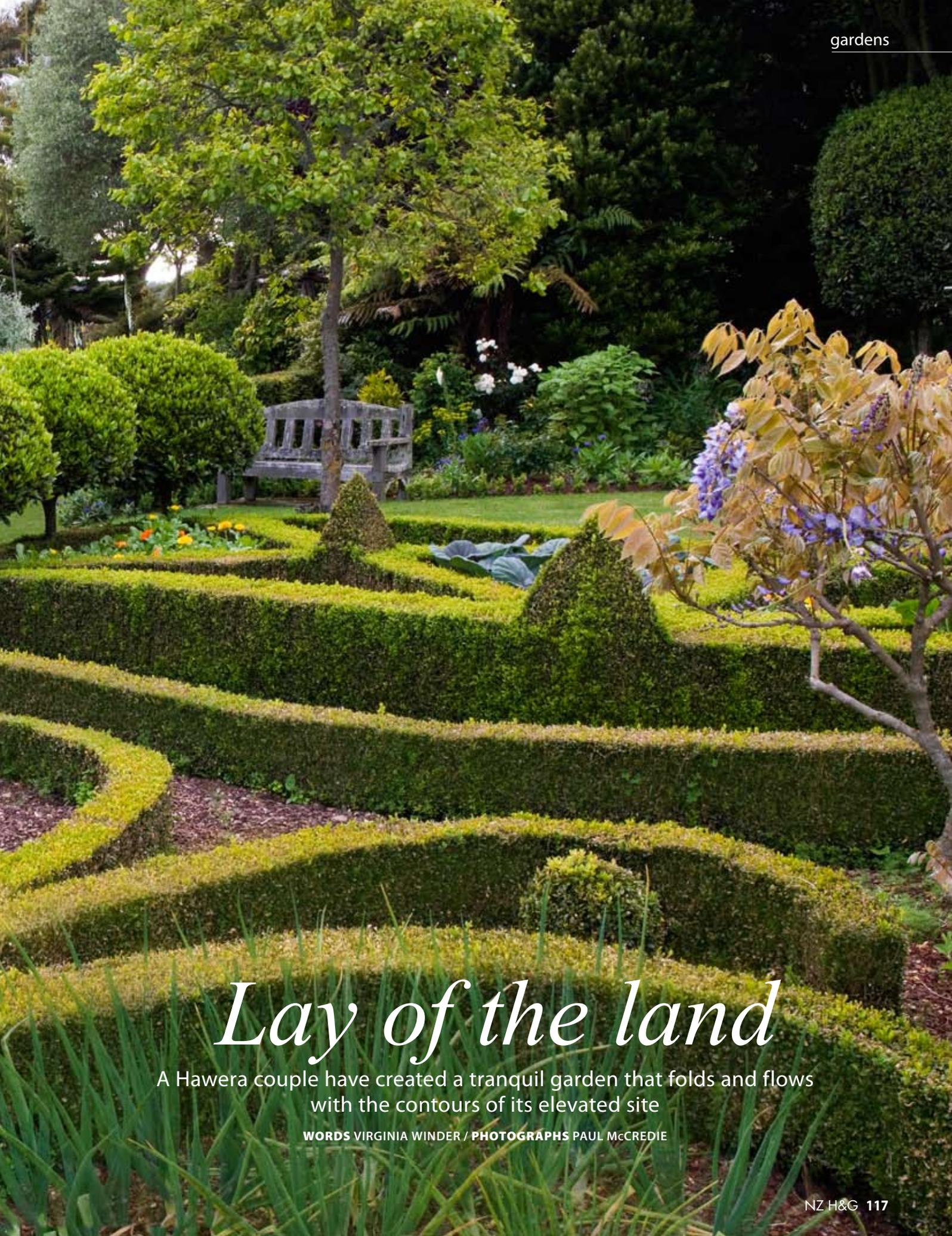




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A photograph of a formal garden. In the foreground, there are tall green irises. A winding, multi-tiered hedge made of yellow-green shrubs leads the eye into the garden. In the middle ground, a stone bench sits on a grassy area. To the right, a tree with yellow leaves and purple flowers is in bloom. The background is filled with lush green trees and foliage.

Lay of the land

A Hawera couple have created a tranquil garden that folds and flows with the contours of its elevated site

WORDS VIRGINIA WINDER / PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL MCCREDIE





OVERLOOKING A RIVER valley of regenerated native bush near Hawera, Jennifer and Ken Horner have pieced together a 1.5-acre (0.6ha) jigsaw of a garden called Puketarata, “named after the 16th century pa that’s part of the property,” says Ken.

Across the valley, tree limbs writhe in the wind like seaweed in a wild west coast sea, but at the Horners’ everything is tranquil. And at the heart of this oasis of warmth and calm is the garden that flows around the brick and sawn-timber house. Formed during the big-dig effort to establish a building platform for the house, it’s studded with dramatic, sculptural specimens such as nikau, ponga, cabbage trees and lancewood.

“We love native plants and I try to use them where I can in the planting,” says Jennifer. “It fits in with the landscape.”

From there, the lawns and gardens on the hill were cut and filled to form a series of level terraces facing north-east. The couple designed the lay of the land together. “We are both quite good at visualising things,” says Ken.

“We wanted a big lawn for the kids and a fence round the bottom of the bank,” adds Jennifer. “Later the kids wanted a tennis court and so we landscaped the area to fit into the contours.”

In all this, the house has been pivotal. Designed by Hawke’s Bay architect Paul Seton, it appears to have grown organically out of the earth. >

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The Horners bought 20,000 building bricks from the Patea Town Hall and had enough left over to use as outside paving, so the house looks as if it is spreading across the grass.

"I planned a lot of the garden from the house," says Jennifer. "I would position the plants and come inside to see if they were in balance with the landscape; with my view."

Ken thinks his wife has worked wonders. "It's beautiful to live in and you see it from all around the house. You walk through the garden as you walk through the house."

Amid all this natural beauty, space has been left for man-made works of art. A Jeff Thomson corrugated iron cow grazes to the west of the house and a gate of metal ferns by the same artist leads to the brick terrace.

Nearer the house, a sculpted metal heron soars through the sky. It could almost be the real thing, and it certainly represents many hard-won battles against

possums, rats and stoats to clear a sanctuary for the area's feathered locals.

"The bird life has exploded," says Ken. "We have several resident pairs of tui, bellbirds, native wood pigeons and many others. There was a morepork just outside the door last night."

They have spotted thrushes, shining cuckoos, starlings, goldfinches and chaffinches flitting through. "With the elevated site of the house we see the hawks riding the thermals," says Jennifer.

Adding to this effect of blended land and sky is the property's ha-ha, which creates the illusion that the lawn falls off into space. "Stand here and look over the ha-ha," directs Jennifer. "You don't see any of the fences and it looks straight into the landscape."

All this careful design is complemented by careful planting for shape, colour and texture. Down by the tennis court, a curved bed bordered by lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*) is plump with blue hydrangeas, the rose 'Buff

Beauty' and white foxgloves (Jennifer ruthlessly pulls out any foxgloves that aren't white).

The couple banter good-naturedly about her efforts. "I enjoy Jennifer's enthusiasm," says Ken. "He thinks I have an addiction to plant shops," responds Jennifer. "Well it's true, isn't it?" he says.

Jennifer may be always on the lookout for new plants, but she's not one to follow fashion. She chooses the best plants for the best place. The winners just off the tennis court are 10 'Iceberg' roses, a deciduous *Hydrangea paniculata* and an old-fashioned rose strung out on the wire-mesh cage erected to contain stray tennis balls.

Below, in the gully, is a tract of towering trees planted 30 years ago, just after the Horners bought the property. From on high, the kauri, beech, rimu and kawaka, rhododendrons, forest pansy, red maples, oaks and magnolias look like a child's landscape picture, brushed with thick, wild daubs of paint. >



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Jennifer has used bronze and mizuna lettuce to help form a leafy picture around a sundial and added an espaliered japonica to an uneven ponga wall reminiscent of a palisade pa.

And every year her creative efforts are oohed and aahed over by visitors to the Taranaki Rhododendron and Garden Festival. They traipse up steps guarded by ponga poles entwined with four different types of clematis, check out the berry house and the raised vegetable gardens. They may also wander through an orchard fresh with spring growth, imagining the peaches, plums and pomegranates to come. And they will linger over the intricate buxus design near the house and wonder at Jennifer's imagination and patience. "I just planted to fit the shape of the garden. I wanted a knot, but didn't achieve it," she says, downplaying her efforts.

This quiet, private woman finds the 10-day festival quite difficult, but she gets some gregarious help. "I love it when

my father-in-law is here and he says hello to everyone. For me, it feels a bit funny having people in my garden."

On the other hand, Jennifer enjoys visiting other gardens. "So I think it's only fair that I open my garden."

At festival time, Puketarata has been the backdrop for a jazz and wine event; at other times, family and friends have gathered in the garden for celebrations, including daughter Louise's wedding.

The garden always looks pristine for these occasions, and Jennifer gets help to keep it that way. Ken, a solicitor, is her occasional weekend sidekick and she employs someone to mow the lawn and do odd jobs, plus a couple of gardeners to work with her every fortnight.

But this serene space is Jennifer's domain. "It's my artistic expression," she says. "But I don't think all the planting is right. It's a work in progress."

Puketarata has been named as a Garden of National Significance.

See more at nzhouseandgarden.co.nz ■

