



THIS PAGE Sheryl Steens stands in the "outdoor pantry" of her home near Tauranga; she plans to extend the vege garden and create a bigger pergola behind it to support her roses; the tall eugenia towers in the background will be folded down to form "picture frames". OPPOSITE Chairs are placed to encourage people to enjoy the panoramic view.

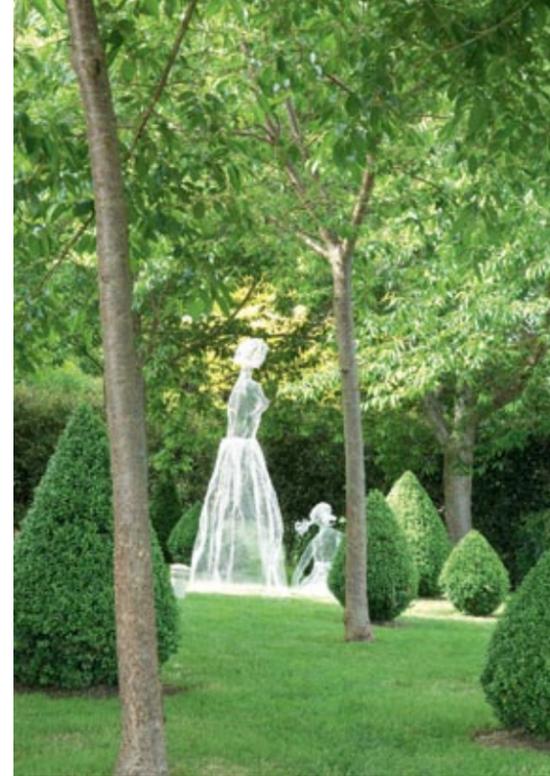


Easy-going gardeners

The owners of this rambling Papamoa garden don't aim for perfection because, they say, there's beauty to be found even in bugs

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THIS PAGE (clockwise from near right) Sheryl painted the blue wooden pyramids for sweet peas to grow among the roses and camellias. The chicken wire mother figure was shaped by Sheryl and “then I felt she needed a purpose – maybe a family – so the next night I made her a daughter”. Many of Sheryl’s favourite old-fashioned flowers, such as Bells of Ireland, can be found in this garden.



SHERYL AND PAUL STEENS look forward to days sitting under their apple trees with grandchildren... and codlin moths. In fact the pest, notorious for its “worm in the apple” larvae, is a major player in this scenario because Sheryl is a firm believer in the Japanese concept of wabi sabi – finding beauty in imperfection. It sits perfectly with her view that life doesn’t have to be about straight lines and perfection. Nature, after all, is crooked.

“To me life isn’t about shiny red apples. My idea is to introduce my grandchildren to codlin moths. They may have to eat three apples to get enough, but my catchphrase will be: If it’s good enough for the bugs, it’s great for us.”

The wabi sabi philosophy blossoms in the Steens’ rambling wonderland, where additions to the garden are often spontaneous, the children

have always been allowed to shape the buxus hedging as they please and bugs and birds share the orchard’s bounty.

Sheryl has channelled much creative energy over many years into this garden high in the Papamoa hills near Tauranga. She’s had help from Paul and – over the last decade or so – from their children Joel, 24, Tamra, 23, Ben, 19, and Abbie, 15.

Their hilltop site, with its views over a valley of pine forest and farmland and out to sea, has been home for 24 years. Before that, as newly-weds, Sheryl and Paul lived in a one-roomed fibrolite bach hugging the Papamoa dunes.

Dubbed “the good-lifers” by their friends, they had chooks, ducks, fruit trees and a milking goat. They even fossicked in the sand dunes for dandelion roots to grind into coffee. >

THIS PAGE (from left) Clipped buxus, which Sheryl adores, is everywhere in the garden, even around the vegetable garden pond behind the curly fronds of the Italian cabbage, cavolo nero; she swears by powdered sheep manure as a fertiliser and mulch and says her box hedging loves it. Sheryl and Paul Steens.

*“I think gardens give a house a sense of home
and health and well-being and deliciousness”*

The then butcher (Paul) and schoolteacher (Sheryl) moved to their current home to launch a bee-keeping enterprise producing honey onsite, then ran out of room. Today their manuka honey business, Steens NZ, has about 7000 hives and the processing side is Wairarapa based, but in those early days the desire to divide the business off from the rest of the property inspired one of the planting projects at this 0.7-hectare property.

“We needed a physical barrier,” says Paul, “otherwise we would feel as if we never left work, so we planted trees as a screen. The garden has been a work in progress ever since.”

Sheryl was eager to get planting. “I think gardens give a house a sense of home and health and well-being and deliciousness. They are magical places and children need them. Ask anyone about a fantastic childhood memory and the answer’s bound to be about time spent with nature. It’s an innate thing.”

The garden was close to a clean slate. There were a few fine trees, such as a plane tree perfect for a tree house and a puriri the wood pigeons call home. Other than that, there was mostly pampas grass and comfrey.

Sheryl believes in planting to suit the environment, so hers is very much a country garden with big hedges, perennial gardens, old-fashioned blooms and big trees. Maples, camellias, magnolias, macadamias, hydrangeas, crab apple trees, viburnum, clivia, old-fashioned roses, buxus hedging, sweet peas, old-world flowers – Bells of Ireland and *Ammi majus* – and native trees are among the mix.

“Many of them I adore, like the *Viburnum plicatum* with its white flowers that are almost luminous at dusk, and the 20 or so *Malus ioensis* ‘Plena’ ornamental crab apples, with their big fat juicy buds that are even more delicious than their open flowers.” >

THIS PAGE Ben Steens plays with boxers JK Baxter and Gracie (Fields) on the lawn; Sheryl is a firm believer in spaces for children in the garden – “nature inspires curiosity, creativity and a sense of freedom”. **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top left) The dogs mooch outside Sheryl’s whimsical striped tent. A former school toilet building has a new life as a garden shed and a place to relax in the garden. The Steens produce both macadamia nuts and chestnuts. The chook house was once the children’s playhouse. Joel Steens began the buxus topiary trend when he decided to shape these plants under the washing line.





THIS PAGE Ben and Tamra Steens (on the recliners) join Sheryl around the family's infinity swimming pool with staff members and friends Dominic Rejthar and Julie Cox; home is a favourite place and all the children spend plenty of time there.

The Steens have a plentiful orchard and vegetable patch. The tall Italian cabbage, cavolo nero, with its curly leaves that taste like a sweet spinach, is one of the garden's more unusual edibles.

"It's a neat feeling coming up from the garden with a pinny full of onions – I am a fresh onion freak – peppers, garlic, tomatoes, eggplant and herbs. I can go to the garden and think, 'What's for dinner?'"

"In fact, not so long ago, Joel came home and stated there was no food in the house – nothing in the fridge or pantry. I said, 'Yes, there is. I just haven't picked it yet.'"

Sheryl admits her garden is a lot of work. It's a family effort that even ropes in friends of the Steens' children. Sheryl boosts their education funds by employing them to prune roses, dead-head flowers, clip buxus, add bark to gardens, make weak tea fertiliser from comfrey leaves, feed the chooks and dig new vegetable beds.

But she doesn't let the garden absorb her time all year round. "In autumn the plants have been beautiful and just want to be left alone to go to seed and be dormant. I am a tired gardener in

autumn. When everything starts to wane, I wane too."

When Sheryl's not waning, she's sure to have a creative project on the go. A spot of lawn above the vegetable garden was missing something – needing an ethereal addition, she says. So she fashioned a mother and daughter out of chicken wire. Little children were coming to visit, so Sheryl constructed a fabric tent reminiscent of those at an English village fair. And when the local convent school was getting rid of its boys' toilet she saved it from demolition.

The whare paku (toilet) became first a stable for Abbie's horse and now a garden shed where Paul and Sheryl sometimes sit, he with cigar and she with a glass of bubbles – in among the swallows' nests, hay bales, drying onions and butternuts – to shell their macadamia nuts.

Sheryl has more plans for the garden but even this bundle of creative energy admits it's good sometimes to stop, rest a while and enjoy.

The Steens' garden will feature in the Tauranga Garden and Artfest from November 8-14, 2010. gardenandartfest.co.nz. ■