

THESE PAGES A weeping silver pear tree takes centre stage in the Tauranga garden of landscape designer Michelle McDonnell and her family; behind it, to the right, is a trimmed pohutukawa underplanted with *Ligustrum rotundifolium* and to its left is a shaped camellia.



A photograph of a light blue house with a white porch and a large green tree in the foreground. The house has a white window and a white door. The porch has white railings. A large green tree is on the left, and a smaller, rounded green tree is in the center. A hedge is in the foreground, and a lawn is at the bottom.

HEDGING HER BETS

A Tauranga landscape designer's European-inspired garden revamp is a model of bloom and balance

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“Gardening is never done. Just when you get on top of things, Mother Nature gives you a short, sharp lesson in patience”

Green and white, and green on green still have a place. Michelle has recently moved her standardised ‘Iceberg’ roses closer to the house so they can be viewed through the dining room’s white-shuttered windows. Welcoming these newcomers to the patch are intertwining white, pink and yellow climbing roses and star jasmine along the fence line.

Michelle confesses to a special fondness for the latter, whether it is espaliered, hedging, ground cover or a climber. “Everyone needs about 100 of these. Star jasmine is a must.”

Michelle also displays her love of layering in the green and white garden that hugs the back boundary. A variety of plants, including pittosporum, pseudopanax and michelia create a green backdrop, with hostas, green mondo grass and the white hydrangea ‘Trophy’ in front. This area is also home to a big cherry tree and a cuddling family immortalised in Hinuera stone.

It is a garden that has been designed to look stunning all year round. Visit in spring to be captivated by cherry and crab apple tree blossoms. Summer’s shining stars are the roses, daylilies and hostas. And in the colder months, the hedging – the dark green

of euonymous species and silvery hues of *Teucrium fruticans* – and bones of this well-designed garden remain. Other evergreen stalwarts include pohutukawa, olives and michelia.

Michelle prefers to use euonymous rather than buxus for her hedging. One prominent arrangement features euonymous planted in a diamond shape with white lime chip at its base. At a glance many people confuse it with buxus, says Michelle, but it seems to do better in Tauranga than its more common relative. To keep things neat, the hedging is clipped at least twice a year and fed once a year with a general garden fertiliser.

Teucrium, michelia and corokia add to the hedging mix and Michelle is also trialling ligustrum, a hedging that sports curly leaves. Her garden also includes examples of pleaching, which she describes as “hedges on stilts”.

But it’s not just visual delights that are given consideration at this address. The family’s fruit-growing patch includes fig, kaffir lime, guava and lemon trees, which enjoy a sunny position in front of blueberries and behind a low-lying border of Chilean guava fruit. “Eating these [the Chilean guava] is like





HALF A DAY a week is all the time landscape designer Michelle McDonnell can spare to work in her own Tauranga garden. A schedule jam-packed with clients seeking Michelle's own special brand of garden magic fills the rest of the week.

But those few hours are clearly time well spent, as the property that Michelle shares with her husband David and their three teenage children is far from shabby. In fact, says Michelle, her garden is looking even better of late, thanks to a revamp inspired by a recent overseas trip, soaking up stunning English and French gardens.

The front of the McDonnells' 860sqm site has seen the most change. Here a small, secluded area has for years been the domain of herbs, flourishing at the feet of standardised mandarin trees, with lawn surrounding the garden patch. The edibles have remained, but an inspired Michelle decided the grass had to go. Pebbles are now underfoot, topped by cane baskets filled with thriving strawberry and lavender plants. Rising sporadically from the bed of pebbles are *Buxus microphylla* shapes irreverently known to friends and family as "random buxus balls".

The look, enthuses Michelle, is reminiscent of gardens she saw in France, specifically at Chaumont sur Loire, where artistically minded designers have permanent garden displays.

Boston ivy and sweet peas provide a pleasant backdrop to Michelle's new-look garden, accessed off the kitchen and dining

room. "We use this area now. It's a great place for morning coffee or if it's too hot or windy around the back of the house. I call it my little French room."

Visits to English gardens such as Sissinghurst as well as the Chelsea Garden Show are directly responsible for changes to her garden's colour palette. "I left there keen to add deep, dark colours together in my garden."

Until then her garden had concentrated heavily on the contrast between green and white plants. Purples and red now feature, with that colour injection coming courtesy of irises, catmint (*Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant'), penstemons, hellebores, alstroemeria, clary sage, cornflowers, stock and foxgloves, for example. Michelle is pleased to note that all add a more English cottagey aspect to the garden, both in the backyard and flanking the new path of old, red bricks leading up to the front door. >

THIS PAGE Brick paving frames this backyard garden, which has lime chip at its base; euonymus creates the structure, with *Liriope muscari* 'Monroe White' filling in the triangles and buxus balls in the diamonds; *Prunus lusitanica* are pleached in the background.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) Ivy has staked its claim over the years, clambering up the orb garden feature. *Teucrium fruticans* hedging and mondo share this garden with a standard camellia. Michelle's new French-inspired area features *Buxus microphylla* balls and strawberries positioned amid the pebbles. Michelle on the balcony at the side of the house.

THIS PAGE (from top) Curved edging contains daylilies and nepeta in among the standard white 'Iceberg' roses, with star jasmine and climbing roses of different hues along the fence line; a chestnut tree can be seen in the background. The *Prunus* 'Awanui' tree adds majesty at the back of the property; Michelle says the Hinuera stone carving depicting a family has come with her from garden to garden: "I love the simplicity and restfulness of this garden. It also requires the least amount of maintenance."

OPPOSITE A weeping cherry tree provides some shade above a concrete bowl, made by Bay of Plenty company Kilarney Stone, which is home to two fish; after rain, the little urns at left are used as drinking goblets by the family cat.

Q&A

Favourite new plant: 'Thornless Jewel' from Incredible Edibles. It's a berry fruit, part boysenberry, and has lovely, big, dark fruit.

I keep my lawns looking perfect by: Feeding them every six weeks with general lawn fertiliser. They are trimmed high and watered every day – we have a watering system, which is essential for a good lawn in the Bay of Plenty. Weed spray is applied in autumn.

Best tip for other gardeners: Employ a landscape designer early in the process.

The thing I've learned about gardening over the years is: It is never done. Just when you get on top of things, Mother Nature gives you a short, sharp lesson in patience. A storm once blew our trampoline into a row of three standards – there's an orb there now!

If you're creating your own brickwork: I recommend gloves. David, the kids and I just about lost our fingerprints when doing the brick edging around the lawn one school holidays.

Favourite season in the garden: Spring, with all the promise of summer to come.

Michelle McDonnell

experiencing a little taste explosion in your mouth. The kids love them," says Michelle.

Orangeberry spreads as a ground cover and a recent addition is a hybrid berry plant named 'Thornless Jewel', which the children say tastes like a cross between a boysenberry and a raspberry. Michelle's veterinarian husband has extended his nurturing skills to include the horticultural front. David is the man in charge of the raised, macrocarpa-surrounded vege beds, which produce a year-round supply of vitamin-rich produce.

The sense of smell is also catered for, especially below the dining room windows. From there the aroma of roses, star jasmine, daylilies and port wine magnolias wafts indoors.

Although the general consensus is that Michelle's new garden look is a great success, more changes could be afoot. It will depend, she says, upon whether she is again struck by an epiphany of the Gardening Goddess kind when she returns to France this year.

Michelle is a trustee of the Tauranga Garden and Art Festival, which will be held in November. ■

