

A photograph of a compact city garden. In the foreground, a swimming pool is partially visible. A stone path leads through a garden bed with lavender plants and a low white wall. A windowed structure is visible on the left, and a large potted plant with white flowers is in the foreground. The background shows a wooden fence and lush greenery.

# TAKE THE PLUNGE

Who would have thought that  
such a compact city garden would  
have room for a pool?

WORDS MONIQUE BALVERT-O'CONNOR / PHOTOGRAPHS SALLY TAGG



**R**ACHEL AND RON SMITH'S sons were pretty impressed with the man their parents employed to add a water feature to their compact Tauranga property. The water feature project hadn't inspired a lot of interest in the then teenage boys; but the ensuing conversation certainly did.

Enthusiasm skyrocketed and smiles were wide when the contractor suggested the Smiths put in a plunge pool, as the water from the planned feature had to go somewhere anyway.

At only 4m x 2m, the resulting pool may be one of the smallest in town, but it is deep, Rachel, a physiotherapist, points out.

"The 2.5m depth is due to having teenage sons at the time and being realistic about the temptation they would feel to jump off something."

It was tricky to build, adds Ron, due to access problems. The concrete was poured using a boom over the house and the bobcat driver got to show off his machine's manoeuvrability.

The Smiths' Tauranga site may not be super-sized but the pool is a fine example of the way they've thoughtfully made the most of the available space. The landscaping has been designed to complement their French/Italian-themed house, which is tucked away down a tree-lined drive.

When Rachel and Ron bought the property 11 years ago, the garden had a tropical feel, with plantings of puka, cabbage trees, flax, grasses and little patches of lawn. They lived with the look for about eight years, but opted for change once the puka grew so tall they became serious sun-blockers.

Once the larger specimens were removed it was time for a new garden plan and the Smiths called in Tauranga landscape designer Michelle McDonnell.

Taking the place of the puka and their companions were the garden's first new inhabitants, the Italian cypress trees that now line the driveway.

"Three years on and they are way taller than the 3-5m the books say, but that's the Bay of Plenty for you," says Ron.

Most plants were replaced and pavers and green baby mondo grass now grow where lawn once was. The only grass remaining is a small strip under the lemon and orange trees near the garage. That grass provides clippings for the compost.

A walled garden along one fence line was elongated and now includes a *Michelia yunnanensis* 'Velvet and Cream' hedge against the fence. Also retained, in front of the michelia, was a row of buxus hedging introduced by Rachel. >



**THIS PAGE** (clockwise from top left) Ron and Rachel Smith. *Dichroa*, a member of the hydrangea family, on the outside table. The rose (also in the background of the previous picture) is 'Clair Matin' (meaning "clear morning"). A section of ficus on the fence around the plunge pool has been cut away to provide hanging space for ceramic art; a visitor to the garden once commented: "Oh, look, I love the ladies swimming in their lanes." **OPPOSITE** Paving stones and mondo grass have replaced grass; Rachel plants 'Champagne Bubbles' Iceland poppies in her garden as she likes the soft hues; the plants on the bedroom balcony are *Corokia* 'Geentys Green'.





**THIS PAGE** This sunny nook alongside the pool is a perfect place to sit and enjoy the afternoon sun; the garden's edible area is in the background. **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top left) Rachel has made a striking pot from a small packing crate. The back fence isn't the garden's sunniest spot, but the repeat-flowering 'Bantry Bay' rose thrives there alongside the tomatoes; a geranium adds another splash of colour amid the spinach and other garden greens. There's no need for a rake with raised beds, but Rachel found a use for this one, to hang the garden tools – an idea she picked up from a blog years ago. Ron made the bamboo and string structure for the beans to clamber up.

An array of colourful Iceland poppies thrives between the rows of planting. Every Anzac Day Rachel plants poppies to bring some brilliant colour to the garden in winter and spring.

Ficus has been encouraged to sprawl on the timber fence behind the pool and a grapevine adds to the Italian ambience.

"It may look a bit staged, but it is the neighbour's grapevine that hangs over the wall. It's just perfect," says Rachel.

Ceramic art featuring two bathers, bought from a gallery on the outskirts of Tauranga, hangs beside the pool, recessed into the ficus.

Behind the house, pavers interspersed with white stone chip lead the way to raised macrocarpa vegetable beds. Rachel finds her raised beds – one of which is dedicated to herbs – drain well in the wet weather.

"The herb and vege gardens are on the south side of the house and things thrive there. Because they get morning and late

afternoon sun and don't get the hotter midday sun, they don't seem to sprout and go to seed so readily."

The garden provides them with greens year-round, especially salad veges in summer. Meals are based around what is ready for picking, says Rachel, and always include their herbs.

"I never use salt, I use herbs. Parsley, thyme, sage, chives, basil, rosemary, dill, mint – all are easy to grow and provide fantastic ground cover, shape, texture, colour and height. Plus they grow quickly."

Both Rachel and Ron love the idea of mixing edibles with ornamental plants. On a recent motorbike trip through France, they were inspired by the gardens. "Even in the tiniest places, villagers still had a vege garden with herbs and some flowers. It was very inspirational," says Rachel.

However, both Ron and Rachel believe that, when it comes to beauty in a garden, it's hard to beat roses. >



*“It is a low-maintenance garden and it is small, but we are thrilled we can harvest so much from it”*

Their previous home in Te Puke was surrounded by a sprawling garden where about 30 old-fashioned heritage roses thrived. These days they have considerably fewer roses, but they are still an integral part of the garden.

In summer, a climbing pink rose (‘Bantry Bay’) adds pretty colour behind the vegetable plots, and the pink hues of ‘New Dawn’ and ‘Clair Matin’ clamber up the garage wall, keeping company with a green-petalled shrub rose named ‘Greensleeves’.

Another picturesque touch is the white wisteria that frames the front entrance pillars, underplanted with potted lobelia and mondo. A paved outdoor area with pergola, a lavender bed and pots of corokia on the bedroom balconies all add to the home’s Italian air. So too does the metal design detail (Ron’s handiwork) affixed to the courtyard gate that leads to the wood stack.

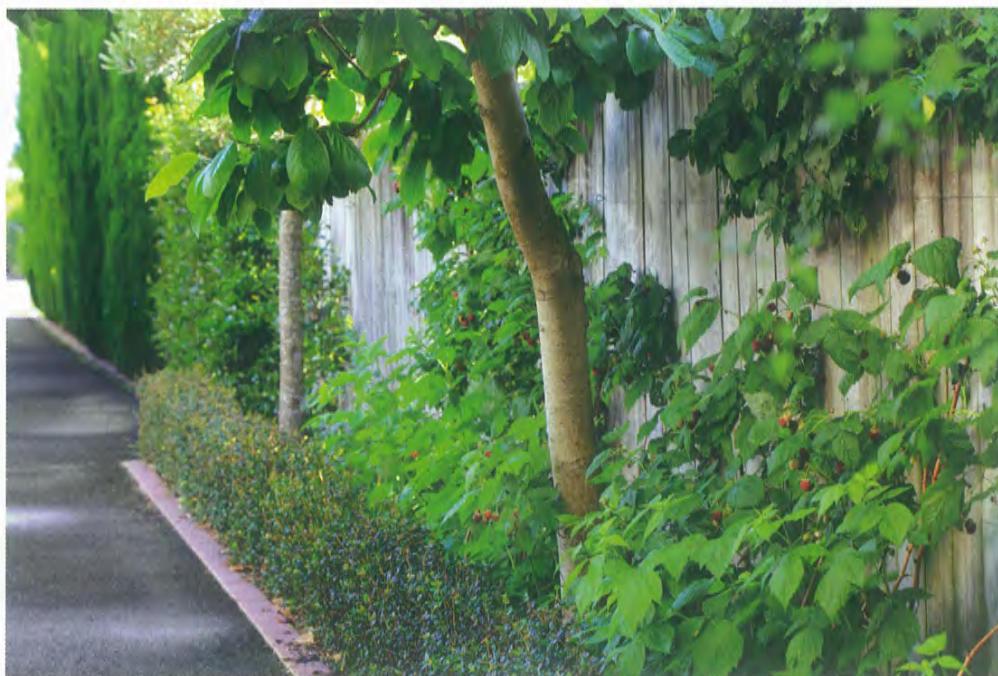
Boundary fences have been put to good use, with one featuring blueberries and raspberries (used in breakfast muffins), a Chilean guava hedge and espaliered plums. *Magnolia* ‘Iolanthe’, *Camellia sasanqua* ‘Setsugekka’ and a banksia tree to attract the tui also thrive in this area.

“It is most certainly a low-maintenance garden and it is small,” says Rachel, “but we are thrilled we can harvest so much from it and we love everything in it.”

*The garden will feature in the Tauranga Garden and Artfest in November 2014; visit [gardenandartfest.co.nz](http://gardenandartfest.co.nz).* ■

**THIS PAGE** (from top) Cypresses mark the way down the drive to the road; Rachel always checks the ties that hold them in shape after storms and heavy rain. The driveway plants are also edible: raspberries (of the ‘Aspiring’ variety) emerge from behind a low hedge of Chilean guava, while a ‘Billington’ plum tree is espaliered on the fence; at front is *Magnolia* ‘Iolanthe’.

**OPPOSITE** ‘Aspiring’ raspberries are eaten straight off the vine or used in Rachel’s muffins.





## Q&A

**Soil type:** Pretty much all the soil was replaced with Daltons Garden Mix when the garden was renovated three years ago – every year we add home-made compost plus pea straw mix and sheep pellets to help with moisture retention. *(Rachel)*

**Most significant plant in the garden:** *Ficus pumila* (creeping fig) has made the most change to the wooden fencing and pool area by creating a green backdrop. *(Rachel)*

**Favourite plant combination:** The layers of Chilean guava hedge, raspberries and blueberry bushes behind that and then plum trees espaliered on the fence. *(Rachel)*

**Most-used tool:** Clippers – during growth periods it is better to clip regularly rather than leave it for a big effort when overgrown. *(Ron)*

**Our biggest gardening mistake:** Not getting a garden plan done earlier. *(Both)*

**My best tip for other gardeners:** Small sections are not an issue. Use the fences for anything and everything. *(Both)*

**We love this part of New Zealand because:** It has ample rain and warmth. *(Ron)*

*Rachel and Ron Smith*

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