



Botanically minded

A couple of conservationists ignored the Otago Peninsula's windswept reputation and created a plant-filled utopia

WORDS BY MARGARET WILSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL HAYES



See more (clockwise from top left) in Peter Cozler and Anna Wilson's Orage Peninsula garden. *Liburn ulmifolium* above white *Geranium magniflorum*. Rows mingle with *negundo*, where *Chusquea* (dark) target rose mites and annual white *Compositae*. The young "Coral Sunset" is part of one of the herbaceous beds. Subtle *antirrhinum* (purple) in the late June garden. The ornamental poppy *Papaver* *Victoria* (lower).

anchors the extended perennial border with its allusion to the foreground and delphiniums, peonies and pale blue geraniums. Peter says the biggest job has been planting but "making" the soil from the deeply rotted leaf-lime.





has been a view of the river/boiler house going back to the foreground, gardens in every hue of blue and the maribou. Pacall, Prince William Fuji stands to the left in the background and on the right is a garden obelisk, the only fence on property when Peter and Anna bought in 1982. *arrans* Mated rows of apricot and birch have replaced white in the second border the splen on the bridge tree at the back harmonize with the foliage of a Japanese, *Zelkova serrata*.

LAST YEAR, Peter Cook and Anna Mason brought in their first macadamia harvest. The couple gathered 20 nuts from a tree they had planted 27 years earlier on a bare clay ridge at the far end of the Otago Peninsula, which has a reputation as a rain and wind-ravaged spot.

Anna, a psychotherapist in Dunedin, and Peter, a GP in Portobello, bought 6.5ha of clay ridges and gullies on the peninsula in 1982 and have since transformed the property into a tropical woodland. With time, dedication and expertise, anything is possible, it seems, when developing a garden.

Gardening brought the couple together as University of Otago students in 1978, when Anna was growing vegetables on a plot of land owned by her professor. Peter got involved in the project and the couple have been digging, weeding and planting together ever since.

Their three sons were given tree names – Roman, Linden and Jorah – and, though daughter Rebecca missed out on a botanical tag, she named her own child Lily.

Back in the days when he wore a pompadour, Peter was the vice-president of New Zealand's Soil and Health Association and, as committed environmentalist, he and his family have always grown a lot more organic food.

"Sustainable practices, caring for the environment, conservation and planting for birds are central to the way we live," says Anna.

In fact, bringing back the native birds has been one of their major achievements. The garden is alive with the call of the shining cuckoo, bellbird and tui and in the last five years the karewa have returned to this little pocket of the Otago Peninsula.

Peter discusses the notion that the peninsula is cold and bleak. He talks of frost-free winters and a unique microclimate.

The garden is managed organically and demands 40 hours a week of their time from September to November. To accommodate it, Peter has pared back his medical practice to three days a week. The rest of the time he can usually be found in the garden. >





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Anna says Peter has a gift for organising farms and structures, her own strength, she says, lie in selecting colours and textures.

"When we first came here, the ridge the house is on was bare clay with a few longhairs and scrub," Peter explains. "There was one ngaihi tree. On the facing ridge there was a stand of rima, the most significant stand of bush on the peninsula. It was grazed and dying back so we put a QEI covenant on it and there are about 70 rima and 10 pohaka (Manosipae kooki-arima) there now."

Peter has planted species trees throughout the property and native bush is regenerating - the garden recently attracted a visit by northern hemisphere members of the exclusive International Dendrology Society, dedicated to the study and conservation of trees and woody plants. But most of the couple's energy has gone into an area of about 1.5ha around the house. Here the garden follows the lie of the land, with paths that run along the contours to level terraces, and Peter has spent decades building a series of dry stone walls.



A prodigious kitchen garden, her rose and orchard take up a north-facing ridge at the back of the house and the front lawn is encircled by a breathtakingly beautiful mixed herbaceous border, nearly 30 years in the making and reminiscent of Vita Sackville-West's at Sissinghurst in Kent.

"The art of gardening is to create a sequence of plants, paying attention to texture and colour," says Anna. "A white garden such as that at Sissinghurst doesn't work in these conditions. Instead I've planted flowers in soft corals, mauves, yellows, apricot and chocolate with the white I've moved from collecting individual plants in the early days to much bigger groupings of the same plant."

Away from the house, the paths descend through shrubs and woodland to Peter's Gondwanan garden where he has planted species from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Lord Howe Island and South America. These include tree ferns, podocarps, conifers, araucarias and a huge African dandelion.

Further down, shaded by a stand of magnolias, lies a valley of bellshells collected by their collectors. It is possibly the most remarkable planting of its kind in New Zealand. And after the bellshells have died away, willows begin here.

Single rose thorns in the lower reaches and at the bottom of the garden the trees are



underplanted with seasonal hydrangeas from different parts of the world.

Peter and Anna run a small plant nursery in their spare time with the help of a part-time worker. Most of the sales are based on mail orders, but it is also open by appointment.

Until now their garden has been one of the best kept secrets on the peninsula but they've recently received planning permission to convert a large shed shed into a self-contained shop. They expect to have it ready for paying guests in September. Call or spring time.

You can contact Peter and Anna on (01) 478 0800 or dp@peterandannas.co.nz or

see more like this from the top left) in a colour with pink. Kelly Thain more aquatic plants. Area with plants from their commercial nursery and from the charitable Labradors. Peter built the steps where self-seeded aquilegias and veronicas flourish, araucaria (from top) the dandelions and a flowering cabbage tree (from bottom) to be established just as commercial. Kaitiaki makes support garden pass, Peter lets the chocolate.