

Showcasing New Zealand Native Plants at Chelsea Flower Show®

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INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago our company did a planning session with our business coach to determine our mission statement and vision for our business. Our vision was "to create New Zealand-style gardens and take them to the world," a heady task at the time. However, when the Ellerslie Flower Show initially approached us in 2001 to do just that we didn't hesitate to rise to the challenge. Our original team comprised Kim Jarrett, Tina Hart, Doug, and myself. Kim Jarrett is an art director in the film industry and landscape designer, my husband Doug a landscape manager, Tina Hart a scenic artist and realiser, and myself a landscape designer. We were missing something, however, and it was not until Doug and I heard Lyonel Grant speak at a Landscape Industries Association conference in Rotorua we knew what it was. Lyonel, a Maori master carver and multimedia sculptor who spoke with such passion, eloquence, and mana we knew instantly he was the next person to have on the team. The missing link in our design was the cultural element. We knew in our hearts right away Lyonel was our man. We approached him after his talk and suggested we meet in a few weeks time to talk over the Chelsea Project as we were starting to call it. Under the sponsorship of the Ellerslie Flower Show the first design for Chelsea evolved with Kim, Lyonel, and myself putting together a grand design, which covered nearly 250 m². This design was presented to the Royal Horticultural Society in August 2001 for approval for the 2002 show. The design was accepted and a site allocated to us.

However, world events overtook us with the terrorist attacks on the twin towers and our nervous sponsor decided to withdraw from the project. In retrospect it was just as well that the project at this stage was canned. We had the biggest site at Chelsea that year and without question the least amount of money. Our design was extremely ambitious, far more so than the final garden we were to build. We were totally under-resourced and we more than likely would not have achieved anything near the success we did. A change in leadership and direction at the Ellerslie Flower Show saw them withdraw from the project. Luckily Tourism New Zealand, who had been waiting in the wings stepped in and decided to underwrite the project. It fit in with their marketing strategy. Their target demographic was the same as Chelsea Flower Show and there is a growing market for New Zealand garden tours for international visitors. This project was perfect for their marketing strategy but they were entering into the realms of the unknown. They had never done anything like this before and they did not know who we were, and no one had ever gone to Chelsea from this far away before. It was a huge risk for them that they took on with much enthusiasm. Basically Tourism New Zealand saved the project and the team will always be grateful to them for that. It was at this time Brian Massey joined the team. It was obvious to us all we were going to need extra help building the exhibit. Brian had just completed a project as head greens man on the Lord of the Rings movies and was very experienced with creating natural settings. Brian also was to help Lyonel create the two carvings that were featured in our design.

THE DESIGN

The theme of the garden was to be one of well-being and guardianship — the health and spiritual well-being provided by the land and all it provides. It was a slice of New Zealand from the central plateau of the North Island out to the Chatham Islands. It encompassed elements of Maoridom and indigenous flora and geology that could only be 100% Pure New Zealand. And so “Ora The Garden of Well Being” was conceived. Taken from the word Kia ora meaning “be well.” The garden was inspired by mythical Maori fairies, the Patupaiarehe. These spirits are believed to live under the cover of mist. They are the gardeners and guardians of our native forests and we wanted the garden to be distinctly Aotearoa New Zealand. Much Maori symbolism and lore was incorporated into the design. The essence of kaitiakitanga or guardianship was very important to the garden and as a result we went to great lengths to ensure the cultural correctness of our design. We believed if we got this bit right we would get the rest right as well. Other cultural elements were incorporated into the design, a hui marae (traditional meeting place), moko waiwera (benevolent lizard form) carrying hot water from the Puna (spring) cooling it so the visitor to the garden could bath in the Nga Wha hot mineral pool. A cave or te waha o ruamoko was the dwelling place of the spirits of the garden. The ruamoko was to be the control center for all the special effects Kim had planned for the garden. Sound track birdcalls and the sound of traditional Maori instruments as well as housing pumps, water heaters, ultraviolet filters, smoke machines, and compressors.

THE SEARCH FOR NEW ZEALAND PLANTS FOR CHELSEA

It was my responsibility to design and source the plants for the garden, to liaise with nurseries to have these plants grown on, arrange delivery to the site, and to place the plants. The planting design was based on a slice of New Zealand from the Rotorua area of the central North Island out to the Chatham Islands. We studied as many Chelsea gardens as possible to figure out a point of difference to English-style gardens and made the decision to use mainly lush, green-foliaged plants, ferns, and palms most typical of our northern and outer island coastal regions. It was important to select plants that fit the design brief. As many as possible had to be traditional medicinal plants or edible. They also had to be plants that would normally be found in the areas of New Zealand that our garden was a slice of. The plants also had to have a horticultural relationship with each other. We were well aware that many of these plants are frost tender so we included some species that fitted within our theme but were also hardier to the English climate. Our first step was to log on to the Royal Horticultural Society plant finder website which is a huge resource of information. We researched for plants on the internet and spent many late nights making phone calls and sending faxes to source the more than 1000 plants that fulfilled our design brief. Generally we were surprised at the extensive range of New Zealand native plants available in the United Kingdom. Many species were grown in small specialist nurseries so it took some time to narrow down the key nurseries. We found the largest quantities of the plants we were after in the more temperate southwest of England where the climate is warmer. Nurseries such as Trevena Cross, Hardy Exotics, and Burncoose. London also proved to have some of the softer species especially tree ferns, as there tends to be a warmer microclimate there brought about by the huge generation of heat from the city. Another determining factor was being able to contact these nurseries readily. Faxed communications

tended to be preferred by many nurseries but I found that I tended to favour the nurseries with more up-to-date communication systems. Sometimes it would take several weeks to get a response. One nursery when we emailed our wish list of plants replied "in your dreams." As it turned out they were to supply us with the most extensive range of plants. After exhaustive crosschecking we came up with a shortlist of United Kingdom nurseries, including one in Ireland that could supply us with about 1000 plants.

We then worked out the balance of the plants that we wanted to send from New Zealand, about 300 in total. Every possible lead was followed up in New Zealand. We were given many contacts by Mark Dean, Paul Turner, David King, and Gil Ellis. We called on plant brokers Ayley Horticulture based in Essex and I liaised with Mark Sylvester there. It was Mark who negotiated for a garden center north of Brighton to grow on the plants we were planning to export from New Zealand. South Downs Nurseries in West Sussex offered to care for and grow on the selection of plants we wanted to send from New Zealand. We especially wanted to use a proportion of plants that weren't available in England, so among other things we sent *Tecomanthe speciosa*, *Gunnera prorepens* (syn. *G. repens*), rimu (*Dacrydium cupressinum*), titoki (*Alectryon excelsus*), *Corokia* 'Silver Ghost', *Elatostema* 'Parataniwha', *Metrosideros* 'Red Carpet', *Machaerena sinclairii*, *Astelia* 'Alpine Ruby', *Xeronema callistemon*, *Macropiper melchior*, *Carex trifida*, and *Dracophyllum*. I had designed the planting to use as many potentially flowering or seeding plants as possible as one of the rules at Chelsea states that all plants used in the display are to be in flower. I thought long and hard about how to force some plants to flower out of season. Many Chelsea exhibitors have long established relationships with some of the larger growers such as Notcutts who artificially force plants on. However, I couldn't find anyone who was prepared to force New Zealand natives, as they were such an unknown. I reasoned that since flowering is triggered by day length, if I could get our spring-flowering New Zealand-grown plants over to the United Kingdom by the United Kingdom autumn (New Zealand spring) prior to the show we should trick the plants into flowering twice in six months. One of the import regulations into United Kingdom is that no plants shall have any flower buds or seed heads present so we had to reluctantly strip the *Gunnera prorepens* among other things of its beautiful berries. It was a gamble and responsible for many sleepless nights on my part. We sent the plants in two shipments one in November 2003 and the other in January 2004. It was then a matter of establishing an on-going relationship with the nurseries to ensure that they cared well for our plants over the next 6 to 8 months. In November 2003 I set off to England to visit all of these nurseries and scout around for extras, to establish what the quality of the plants was like, and to establish some sort of relationship with the people we were dealing with. It was my first visit to England and I visited many nurseries from the London area to Southwest Cornwall, from high-tech well presented nurseries such as Tendercare in Essex where one 40-cm *Hebe* can cost £36.00 to small back yard operations such as County Park, where untold treasures were to be found. I was surprised at the range of New Zealand natives available but disappointed at the quality. The English climate is not only cold but also very damp and it takes its toll on some of our more sun-loving species. The short day length and winter snows necessitate growing of plants in huge artificially lit tunnel houses. For example no *Phormium cookianum*, mountain flax, or hybrids were to be found in England, as it was just

too wet and cool. *Phormium tenax* hybrids do much better in this climate. At South Downs Nursery, where our recent imports were housed, we were lucky many could be grown on in a naturally lit glasshouse as the artificial lights tended to slightly etiolate and dull the foliage. I unfortunately had to cut the *Euphorbia glauca* back hard as it had etiolated badly in the 5 to 6 days in transit, as had the Chatham Island forget me nots (*Myosotidium hortensia*). On average the plants we sent over by air cost us \$NZ60.00 each, so every plant was very precious.

Cordyline australis, also known as Torbay palm in England, does exceptionally well and is not stripped by the insects we get in New Zealand. We sourced one key specimen for the forefront of the garden for a princely sum of £750.00 and no discount, not even for Kiwis a long way from home. A palm specialist in London proved very helpful (The Palm Centre), Toby Shobrook. They import a lot of tree ferns from New Zealand although they find the Australian *Dicksonia antarctica* to be the hardiest, with *D. fibrosa* and *D. squarrosa* the hardiest of the New Zealand tree ferns. The *Cyathea* species however don't respond well to the damp cold in England, and the same applies to many of our ground ferns. The best finds were to be had in south Cornwall. Trevena Cross is a nursery that specialises in South African, Australian, and New Zealand plants. I found many unexpected things there such as *Scleranthus*, southern beech (*Nothofagus*), and many ground ferns such as *Blechnum*, *Asplenium*, and *Polystichum*, they had ponga (*Cyathea dealbata*) trunks with self-seeded ferns and a lot of the detail plants needed in a display such as this. The *Scleranthus* was grown in a shaded tunnel house and was badly etiolated so I arranged for it to be shifted. The second find was a nursery at Penzance called Hardy Exotics. This is owned by an eccentric ex-shoe designer who has a passion for exotic plants. His three huge glasshouses are crammed with plants in varying stages of maturity and it was like walking into a jungle, but among other things he had enormous *Astelia*, flaxes (*Phormium*), *Cordyline* 'Green Goddess', nikau (*Rhopalostylis sapida*), puka (*Meryta sinclairii*), and many *Pseudopanax lessonii* hybrids that I hadn't seen before. On my return home I had mixed feelings about our plant selection but this was to prove unfounded in the end.

Doug and I set off in late April a week earlier than the rest of the team as we needed to check on the plants we had ordered, look around for anything new, and check on the plants we had sent over. Although there were plenty of plants to choose from they had gone through a very tough winter and were not in good condition. There had been heavy snow falls in Cornwall and Devon and plants such as ren-garenga lilies (*Arthropodium*), puka (*Meryta sinclairii*), and Chatham Island forget me nots (*Myosotidium hortensia*) had been damaged even in tunnel houses. Plants that seemed to thrive in the climate included *Cordyline indivisa* and *Astelia* cultivars 'Westland' and 'Alpine Ruby'. We realized we really had our work cut out for us and there would be quite a lot of grooming to do. The day after everyone else arrived we were all assembled at Clanden House at Guilford. This is the ancestral home of Lord Onslow, once governor of New Zealand. When in New Zealand he purchased a meeting house wharenui, which had survived the Mt. Tarawera volcanic eruption, and had taken it to his English estate and reassembled it as a boat shed. During the Second World War the estate was used as a hospital for convalescing soldiers. Two Maori soldiers saw the boat shed and realized what it was. They knew people had sheltered in this house to survive the eruption. They got permission to relocate the wharenui and restore it in this very Jacobian garden. Here Ngati Ranana, one of

the Iwi (tribal group) present in London, gave us a formal welcome. We then went to the Chelsea site for a blessing and cleansing of the area and a small piece of Aotearoa New Zealand had arrived at Chelsea. Now we had expected something like a nice grassy slope and a warm sunny day, but the Royal Horticultural Society had stripped off all the grass and left us with this very muddy site we were to wallow around in for the next few weeks. The rest of the team was jet lagged but I think all of us were wondering what lay ahead. More sheds were to be moved onto the site, including a British Broadcasting Corporation outside broadcasting semi trailer, but we did not know this for another 2 weeks. Looking at the Chelsea site plan shows how very crammed in everyone is. Our site was next to the main entry but due to there being a one-way system for vehicles we were right at the end of the system for delivery of plants and materials.

BUILDING THE DESIGN

Day 1 of build up it was raining again and we were up to our ankles in mud, but do remember the Patupaiarehe like it when it is wet and misty. In fact it didn't just rain, it hailed and was freezing cold with thunder and lightning. We also had our first delivery of the large *Cordyline australis*, in fact this was the first plant on site at Chelsea for 2004. The next day and still it rained, however we dug the hole for the spa pool. Patupaiarehe liking it or not we were ready for it to stop raining. Digging holes was the worst part with 82 years of accumulated Chelsea gardens buried and just waiting to be dug up: rocks, bricks, stones, concrete, you name it we dug it up. About 4 days later, it had finally stopped raining. The cabbage tree was settling in, the silica terraces were in place on the liner, and the rock structures were going in with the cave being built behind. I think the reason it stopped raining was because we had built the cave and the Patupaiarehe had somewhere else they could hide. Day 6 and the spa pool was in and we were starting to lay out the paving. Lyonel designed the paving in a patiki design with hinuera stone; some natural and some oven baked which created a very three-dimensional effect.

The Australians were also there, sponsored by Fleming's Nurseries who grow 5 million units per year; it was designed by Jim Fogherty and built by Marty Semkin and his crew. They were a good fun team and they were well researched, having had done a reconnaissance the year before during the build up and the show. They had selected a site that had easy access, was not too crowded and they were able to have a container on site for a week or more. They impressed us as being very professional and a well-oiled machine.

While all of this was going on I had to contend with plants being delivered and not having anywhere to put them. We had deliveries coming in every day and we had to ensure everything was watered. The water proved to have a deposit in it so we had to laboriously wipe each leaf of the larger leaved species with soft cloths. We were also foliar feeding plants as many were quite yellow from the harsh winter, not like the rich greens we are used to. Some plants just didn't come through, such as the *Jovellana*, which showed no sign of flowering, and the *Clianthus* was well past flowering, which in England occurs in winter, as does the Kowhai (*Sophora*). The plants sent from Hardy Exotics in Penzance were a sorry looking lot and I could see a lot of the other exhibitors looking at us pityingly. Undaunted I set about removing all the diseased and frost-damaged foliage. There are many tricks of the trade and we were not above painting leaves green to cover blemishes. One of the worst was

a purple cabbage tree (*Cordyline*) from Burncoose Nursery in Devon. The owner Charles Williams had been very hospitable on our two visits, entertaining us in his centuries-old stone manor. He was well experienced in shows and when his selection of show-grade plants turned up I thought he was taking the micky. The purple cabbage tree was so motley and spotted but it did have an extraordinary flower about to open. We trimmed and trimmed for hours reshaping the leaves so that the brown edges and yellow spots were removed. This plant proved to be a showstopper. We were very fortunate to have a crew of Kiwis who turned up to help including Dan King and partner Marie who had a lot of experience working on film sets including *Lord of the Rings*. Also Teena Petit and Pam Russ who both came over from New Zealand especially to help out. Lyonel's wife Vicki Grant put in a huge amount of work on and off the site.

Te Ihi. When the carved ponga arrived their fronds were not in good enough condition to exhibit at Chelsea which was a bit of a break down for the team but we were determined to use them. We had put so much into them and getting them here we were not prepared to give up on them. We decided to work late that night and have the problem solved and the ihi looking sharp before we went home. It had been a major worry for us and we felt we couldn't go on with out having the problem solved. Ponga pieces went in and out; new ones went in and were spliced, to join alongside the carved ones. A few extra touches were made to the carving and a few hours later we had some compositions we were really happy with as we snuggled them up to the scenic. During the last few days of the build up the Tourism New Zealand public relations machine kicked in. Sloane Square Tube station was decked out with posters saying "New Zealand now growing in the United Kingdom" and the New Zealand native plants put in during the week of the show looked great. When we saw the London double-decker buses with the New Zealand publicity splashed all over them we really felt like we had arrived. Tina had to do the touch ups to the scenic and then we had to bring it into the garden using the plant material we had. The scenic was a representation of Mt. Tarawera and Lake Rotomahana where the pink and white terraces once existed. Three days out we looked as though we were cutting it a bit fine but felt it was completely manageable, until the film crews started appearing on the scene. We spent the next 3 days working around each other. The other thing we had to contend with was the guys in the orange vests, the Stewards. They were there for safety reasons, armed with megaphone loud hailer and they yelled at people every time a vehicle approached "watch your backs!!!" "Stand to one side!!!" During the show they would yell at the visitors "move along," like herding cattle. Security in general was extreme and we needed a pass for everything. The TV cameras were everywhere and in particular at the New Zealand exhibit. While it was quite nice to have the attention it was very frustrating, as we always had to stop work or work out of shot.

COMPLETION AND CONCLUSION

Completely unannounced and without even so much as a "how do you do," four judges walked onto the garden taking us all by surprise. This was the preliminary judging and stern, poker-faced they sat down with our technical brief. They were giving nothing away and would make recommendations to the rest of the judges later that day. The next day the final judging took place with the same protocol. These guys have a bit to learn about garden-side manner. Luckily we were onto it and

finished with a small amount of time to spare. Only one other exhibitor has won gold first time up at Chelsea, made even more remarkable by the fact our team had traveled 20,000 km to do it. Our exhibit cost £100,000 to construct where the Sheik who won best of show spent £1,000,000. Two doors down were boasting £280,000 but only a silver award. All up there was approximately £60,000,000 spent on exhibits at Chelsea that year. Four Golds were awarded in our category and with New Zealand being one of them. It felt pretty damn good, and we beat the Aussies.

The garden had exceeded everyone's expectations and we had achieved what we thought was the impossible. New Zealand had not received so much TV publicity in the United Kingdom since the Americas Cup. Coupled with the success of Lord of the Rings and Whale Rider movies we were on a roll.

Winning Gold was great but the best part was the overwhelming appreciation we received from the public. Ex pat kiwis felt home sick, the Canterbury garden group was the first on the scene and they cheered, the British public was genuinely overwhelmed by the uniqueness of the garden. People queued for up to 1½ h to see the garden. We have no doubt that we were different at Chelsea. They had never seen anything like this before and we are sure this originality was what gave us the edge. There were many lessons to be learnt from this experience. One in particular was to do guardianship or kaitiakitanga and respect for our flora. Our flora is a priceless treasure that deserves our respect. I felt very privileged to be able to present such a wealth of unique flora to so many gardening enthusiasts. We are in an enviable position in New Zealand in that we have such a large number of indigenous plants not found anywhere else in the world. When these plants are used in a way that is sensitive to their natural habitats and associations they resonate. We created a sense of place in the heart of London that could only be Aotearoa New Zealand. At Chelsea they glowed and as we had linked them inextricably with our geology and our indigenous culture, the English public couldn't help but be touched. It was by far the most visited garden at the show and I am convinced it was because of the spirit or wairua with which we created it. It says it all Turangawaewaea a place to be, a place to call home. Lyonel wrote a small piece in our technical brief that always springs to mind:

“He toi whakairo
He mana Tangata”
“From artistic excellence
Comes human dignity”

For the team this garden was a celebration of who we are as a people. A journey that transcends culture, the land, and all it has to offer. It was a journey that touched millions of people and we are all very grateful and proud to have been part of it. We are a country that has only had significant populations of man for 500 years. We have done a lot of damage in that time, but we still have the most unique culture, geography, and plants in the world. We have a landscape and a culture that are intertwined. It is the essence of who we are as a people and that deserves celebrating, but it also deserves looking after. The world is changing at an ever-increasing pace and conservation now is about managing that change. I will leave you with one last thought; it is something that we said to ourselves when things got really tough. “We are all in the same waka (canoe); we just need to paddle in the same direction.”