



LAY of the LAND

WORDS SUE ALLISON / PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON LARKIN

A majestic garden's formal lines harmonise effortlessly with the rugged Otago landscape it sits within

ABOVE Solid, symmetrical and in sympathy with its environment, this Millbrook garden flows down from the central courtyard of a black-stained cedar and stone house through layered terraces; the formal garden is nestled in a soft bed of native red tussocks (*Chionochloa rubra*) with upright hornbeams (*Carpinus betulus* 'Fastigiata') standing as sentinels in the courtyard and around the lawn.

It took landscape architects and a fleet of earth-moving machines five years to carve out a grand garden in Arrowtown's Millbrook resort. Just a flicker in comparison with the millions of years of seismic upheaval and glacial scouring nature took to create the wider landscape.

But it was never meant to be a competition. The owners sought a garden that showcased some of the best of humankind's designs while acknowledging nature's greater work. "We wanted a garden that blended with rather than imposed itself on the site."

The Kiwi family, based in Asia, sought a semi-rural sanctuary in a place they had long-admired. "We toured the South Island after we got married and stayed at Millbrook," says the husband. "We loved it so much that we came back a few times when the children were little." When the opportunity to buy a hillside section in the resort arose 12 years ago, they snapped it up.

They chose local landscape architects Paddy Baxter and Mark Stallard of Baxter Design Group to transform the rough rolling land into a garden worthy of its surroundings. Their vision was of formality within the wilder landscape; of a garden that was structured without being at odds with its environment.

The garden, which won the Award of Excellence (Residential and Gardens) in the 2022 NZ Institute of Landscape Architects awards, flows down the hillside from a horseshoe-shaped house designed by Francis Whitaker of Mason & Wales Architects. With a set of wide central steps, the garden cascades in a controlled way, pausing on a series of grassed terraces. Secluded spots, some with surprises, spill out to either side of immaculate oval and rectangular lawns – a seating area around a corten steel fire bowl, a giant chessboard, a courtyard flanked by regiments of tall feather grasses. At the end is a tennis court, overlooked by a walled viewing platform shaded by square-topped lime trees.

"Paddy and Mark managed to make seemingly mutually exclusive outcomes possible," says the owner. "Formality but with usability; consistency but with interest and excitement; privacy but capturing all the views; open spaces but with special nooks. It was a challenging assignment and we couldn't be happier with the outcome."

The admiration is mutual. "We were extraordinary lucky to have them as clients," says Mark. "They knew what they wanted and followed everything to the nth degree but also gave us the freedom to indulge ourselves."

The owners started the process by sending images of gardens they liked. They wanted to capture the elegance of classical Italian gardens and the ambience of French village squares while celebrating New Zealand's flora and landscape.

Paddy and Mark sharpened their pencils and got to work.



ABOVE Banks of grasses and informal placement of trees meld the edges of the garden with the landscape on the west side of the house – the bank of red tussocks is punctuated with red maples (*Acer rubrum* 'October Glory'); the house, designed by Francis Whitaker of Mason & Wales Architects, features local schist and mirrors the contours of the hills behind.



ABOVE “The levels and planting are carefully designed to keep the sight lines open while also incorporating intimate spaces,” says landscape architect Paddy Baxter – planting becomes less formal as the garden moves from the house to the tennis court; the horizontal lines of the steps and hedges are balanced with orderly vertical arrangements of pleached and tabletop pruned trees and a striking block of orange-tipped feather grasses. **BELOW** Japanese elms (*Zelkova serrata*), which produce brilliant autumn colours, grow through a bank of red tussock with a low Portuguese laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*) hedge providing a green partition.



ABOVE Landscape architects Mark Stallard, at left, and Paddy Baxter of Baxter Design Group take a break in the raised seating area around a corten steel fire bowl, perfect for fireside chats on cool days; layers of hedging either side rise from bearberry cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster dammeri*) ground cover through to buxus (*Buxus sempervirens*), *Lonicera nitida* and Portuguese laurel, while pleached London planes (*Platanus x acerifolia*) flank the area with the driveway’s lime trees (*Tilia cordata*) rising behind.

‘It’s an alpine environment with extreme temperatures which means we have a fairly limited plant palette’

BELOW A giant chessboard offers an alternative to tennis in a garden which is also a playground for the family; buxus-bordered regiments of feather grasses (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora stricta* ‘Karl Foerster’) and a bank of red tussocks come alive in the wind.

“That crunch of carbon on paper at the start of the process lets us free up the design process and gives us flexibility we can’t get on CAD [computer-aided design],” says Paddy.

Once formalised, a team of specialists and subcontractors cooperated closely to turn the vision into reality. “It’s a garden on a scale not often seen in residential design,” says Paddy. “A project of this size and complexity demands a high level of construction detailing.” Thirty-five pages, in fact, of meticulous plans for walls, steps, terraces, lawns and lighting.

No stone was left unturned in the making of the garden, and those that unexpectedly appeared were put to good use. “It was a bonus when huge boulders were unearthed during the excavation, especially when the tennis court was dug out,” says Paddy. They were artfully re-positioned as powerful visual accents that mirror the surrounding mountain tops.

The local conditions aren’t to be trifled with. “It’s an alpine environment with extreme temperatures which means we have a fairly limited plant palette down here,” says Mark. Just 15 plant types are used in the garden, a blend of exotics and natives chosen primarily for their texture and form. But there are more than 3000 individual plants altogether.

The garden is more formal near the house, with layers of clipped hedging in buxus, lonicera and laurel, and formal lines of pleached planes, limes and hornbeams. “Further out, things soften up a bit,” says Mark. Informal groves of Japanese elms (*Zelkova serrata*) and red maples provide flaming autumn colour, while mass-planted red tussocks, feather grasses (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’) and toetoe catch the wind. “When the wind blows, the garden sways,” says the owner.

As well as limitations imposed by the climate and terrain, everything had to comply with Millbrook’s stringent design covenants. Paddy and Mark were familiar with these as their company wrote the rules. “Strong guidelines are necessary to get some continuity in the village,” says Paddy. One requirement is that hard elements are restricted to local schist and Shotover gravels and walls must be built using stone from Millbrook’s own quarry.

The young garden is still settling into the landscape. It is currently being nurtured by the landscapers who installed it, but most maintenance in the long term will be clipping, pruning and leaf-blowing.

“We enjoy rolling up our sleeves and helping out when we’re in town,” says the owner, whose praise extends to the whole team. “This is a great story of Kiwi can-do attitude, professionalism and teamwork, from Paddy and Mark to the architect, interior designer, builders, landscapers, project managers and nurseries who supplied the plants. Without one of them, it wouldn’t be the same.”



ABOVE Horizontal green layers of buxus, *Lonicera nitida* and Portuguese laurel mirror the slope of Coronet Peak which forms a powerful backdrop to the garden, particularly striking when snow-covered in winter; folded steel pots were specially designed for the garden and are topped with balled buxus. **BELOW** Upright hornbeams, green in summer and golden in autumn, stand along the black-stained cedar house wall, softening the hard lines and flanking an immaculate lawn set like a carpet square in lime chip; the sheltered north-facing courtyard has clear views over the long garden and beyond.





LEFT The four lime trees on the viewing platform above the tennis court will be pruned to form a square canopy when mature.
ABOVE A curved powder-coated steel handrail fulfilled safety requirements as well as adding artistic interest to steep concrete steps connecting the tennis court with the higher tiers; the raised viewing platform at right sits atop a schist wall covered with a light coat of mortar for a bagged look reminiscent of early Central Otago buildings.



ABOVE A massive bolder, fortuitously unearthed during the excavation, makes a striking garden ornament amongst Lonicera hedging on the west side of the house. **RIGHT** Formal planting near the house softens as the garden flows down the hill ending with toetoe (*Cortaderia richardii*), red tussock and *Carex secta* grasses which tie the garden seamlessly to naturalistic plantings along Mill Stream at the bottom of the section.





LEFT *Calamagrostis x acutiflora stricta* 'Karl Foerster' grasses grow 1.5m high every summer and are topped with fiery heads that are all the more dramatic when mass-planted. **BELOW LEFT** Paddy and Mark walk towards the bedroom courtyard where lavender (*Lavendula x intermedia* 'Grosso') adds fragrance and picks up the soft purples of the surrounding hillsides in summer. **RIGHT** The driveway is lined with pleached limes underplanted with bearberry cotoneaster; bespoke steel supports will be used to create structured managed form when the trees mature.

Q&A

with landscape architect Paddy Baxter

FAVOURITE PLANT COMBINATION: The juxtaposition of the clipped and formal gardens in the spine of the project and the surrounding blanket of grasses that wraps it.

MOST SIGNIFICANT PLANTS: The entrance avenue of pleached limes and the continuation of that theme to pleached planes.

BEST SEAT IN THE GARDEN: In the evening, by the outdoor fire, glass in hand, looking across the variety of levels and forms within the project and outwards to the surrounding high country landscape.

GREATEST CHALLENGE: The site levels and degree of detail required to make it all work.

BEST ADVICE FOR PEOPLE ESTABLISHING GARDENS: Have a realistic budget.

WATERING THE GARDEN: Absolutely necessary in our environment and a great plant insurance policy. An in-ground watering system (although most plants will survive without it eventually) is critical for the first three to five years of establishment and to ensure green lawns.

FAVOURITE SEASON: Early, mid and late autumn (plus the fishing season, ski season and All Blacks fixtures).

CLIMATE: Classic Central Otago – dry as a chip with seasonal temperature variations from -15C to 30C. It can be 2C in the morning and 27C by afternoon.

SOIL TYPE: Skinny glacial stuff and gravel. Topsoil needed to be brought in.

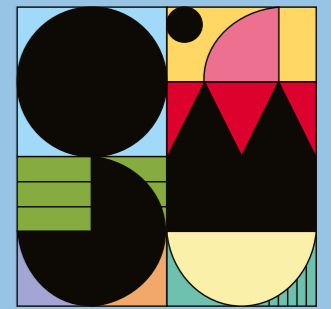
THE THING I'VE LEARNED ABOUT GARDENING OVER THE YEARS IS: Plant for a place not place for a plant.

I LOVE THIS PART OF NEW ZEALAND BECAUSE: There aren't many of us here.



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