

New Zealand Natives in Smaller Scale Planting

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First published on www.landscapedesign.co.nz

Now is the time to re-invent native planting. The 1980s saw what I like to call the 'early period' of native planting design. It was based on the 'DoC Visitor Centre' idiom - a bushy thicket of mixed vigorous shrubs and trees with a scattering of sedges or grasses at the edges - oh, and plenty of flax. This would be 'leaning' against the building or neatly bordering the garden lawn as if it were a visitor centre picnic area. This kind of planting has its value, without a doubt, but unfortunately became a little jaded and, like all trends was overtaken by other ideas in garden design. In the 90s we brought a little more scientific knowledge to bear and did authentic replanting of bush and wetland and alpine gardens and tried out our natives in traditional garden roles like clipped hedges and topiary. Although recent books and magazines have often shown New Zealand plants superbly, we need to re-invent native planting in the garden - to find way to make it exciting again.



A good example of 1990s native planting at Te Papa

I am convinced that there is much that we can do with the extraordinary range of foliage, colour, form, fruit and flower that is our botanical heritage. Gardeners and garden designers have barely started to tap the full potential of native plants in gardens and amenity landscape.

There are good examples of different approaches to be seen. A few years ago, while doing a research project on planting design, I came across three memorable plantings. One was a rock garden at Victoria University with some rarities and some common but handsome species. This expressed the character of our distinctive alpine vegetation very convincingly in a small space. I also remember the much-photographed glade in Otari Native Plant Museum at Wellington in which various *Dracophyllum* (grass tree) emerged from a broad carpet of glistening, *Myosotidium* (Chatham Island forget-me-not). The simplicity of this combination emphasised its drama. But please note that neither of these are particularly easy to grow. Near the Forestry Department at Canterbury University was a 'meadow' of *Anemthele lessoniana* (rainbow tussock or gossamer grass). The mass effect, shimmering in the sun and wavering in the breeze, was simple and superb.

So, there are encouraging precedents, but how can we push back the frontiers of native planting? I will suggest some ideas, but I must emphasise that I am talking about gardens and small-scale urban landscapes, not about re-vegetation and ecological planting.

Combining natives and exotics

There has been a tendency to isolate native plants in special areas. The reasons for this were probably 1. their distinctive character and 2. a belief that they need special conditions. However, in the garden, *mixing* with exotics them can lead to some exciting harmonies.

In the wild, manuka and kanuka naturally act as a nurse for native trees. The excellent growing conditions that a group of these native pioneers create can also be a home for all sorts of exotics that appreciate shelter and shade - ferns, woodland perennials such as *Geranium*, *Iris*, *Helleborus*, *Ligularia*, *Clivia* and bromeliads; shrubs such as *Rhododendron* vireyas, *Daphne* and *Viburnum*. The best species will depend on the region of New Zealand and microclimate. Not only manuka but also other native trees could provide these conditions. The most suitable would provide light shade, eg. *Fuchsia excorticata* (kotukutuku), ribbonwood, and, when more widely spaced, *Pseudopanax* species and titoki. Although this idea harks back to the traditional woodland gardens of northern Europe but would have a quite different character in our southern, pacific home.

Natives and exotics can be combined in a quite different way in a variation of the 'sub-tropical' planting style. *Hebe speciosa* (napuka) and *brevifolia*, puka (*Meryta sinclairii*) tree ferns, *Macropiper* 'Melchoir' and *psittacorum* (kawakawa varieties) and *Pseudopanax laetus* all co-habit harmoniously with 'sub tropicals' like *Hibiscus*, vireya rhododendrons and the more elegant palms.



Native *Astelia* combines well with *Alcateria imperialis rubra*, cannas and other subtropicals

Plant signatures

If I moved away from Titirangi and wanted to remind myself of my former bush home I would plant a group of nikau, close by a swathe of parataniwha (given moist enough shade) and a single mapou.



Typical Titirangi bush on a rainy day

Each time I wandered in their shade I would be transported in my imagination to the luxuriant bush of this area. This kind of typical grouping could be called a plant signature - a combination of plants that is particularly memorable and identifies a particular place. A group of west coast kowhai, *Astelia banksii* and *Corokia cotoneaster* would remind me of dramatic cliff walks around the Manukau Heads



Natives used in traditional garden roles (note how the white wall displays the shadow of ti kouka cabbage trees)

When you are amongst native plants keep an eye out for simple groupings that are attractive and typical of the area and try reproducing suitable ones on a smaller scale in the garden where you have the right growing conditions.

Combinations of colour and form

Lastly, there is still a great deal of scope for combining native species and good cultivars to make the most of their attractive and unusual qualities. The wonderful foliage colours and striking forms of many natives deserve to feature in carefully composed plantings. The rich oranges, ruddy browns and warm purples which suffuse the foliage and flowers of sedges, coprosmas, hebes, piripiris and flaxes such as 'Jack Sprat', 'Chocolate Fingers' and 'Thumbellina' (amongst many other cultivars) contrast sweetly with the rich greens and olives of much native foliage and are quite startling against the silvers and greys of plants such as *Brachyglottis* 'Otari Cloud', *Raoulia* 'Makara' and many *Astelia* species.



Good juxtaposition brings out the best in native form and colour at Landsend Nursery

These thoughts are inspired by the unique character of New Zealand plants – these plants that are so familiar to us are collector's items in many parts of the world and gardeners who live in less favourable climates go to great trouble to grow them. By using them imaginatively in gardens here we can not only continue to do our bit for conservation but also help to develop a distinctive New Zealand garden style.