



THIS PAGE Beside the shade lawn at Kate and Richard Foster's Hororata garden, the lower trunk of a 150-year-old oak is wreathed in comfrey; the garden's founder Sir John Hall, Kate's ancestor, planted 15ha of oaks on the property but he was also fond of fast growers, once telling an agricultural conference that "the best tree for an old man in a hurry is pinus".

OPPOSITE A 19th century battened gate near the old stable yards, with the cottage garden in the background; note the sawdust-covered path, Kate's pick for promoting natural weed control and dry feet.

A PLACE OF REFUGE

During its 150-year history, an atmospheric Canterbury garden has been a delight and solace to generations of family and appreciative visitors

WORDS MATT PHILP / PHOTOGRAPHS JULIET NICHOLAS



AN OLD GARDEN is much like an older person, reckons Kate Foster. It doesn't have to be tidy and it needn't pay any mind to fashion. "There is a certain confidence about it, a strength that's there in its trees and its timelessness. It tells its own story."

In the case of Kate's 1ha garden at Hororata, west of Christchurch, that story spans several generations, back to her illustrious ancestor Sir John Hall, a politician and runholder who was briefly New Zealand premier. It was John who, with his staff, planned the garden at Terrace Station, laying out a traditional formal design of four "rooms" on either side of a long central grassed walk, with many exotic trees. Over 30 years, during which he and his wife Rose also raised five children, 113ha of trees were planted on the greater property and the original pre-cut, three-roomed house was transformed into one of Canterbury's great homesteads, now heritage listed. Though the September 2010 earthquake caused serious internal damage, the wooden structure settled back on its river boulders and wooden piles.

Kate grew up there and shifted back with her husband Richard 40 years ago – a longer tenure than that of John and Rose, or anyone since, but a mere chapter in the 150-year history of the garden. "We're custodians and only for a short time," says Kate. >



THIS PAGE The tiarella edging the shade lawn helps to prevent birds scratching out the straw; in the background, the straight trunk of a horse chestnut can be seen along with the curved limbs of a hornbeam.

OPPOSITE (from top) Looking across the Once Upon a Time lawn; the bluebells are shaded by a massive hornbeam, planted in the 1860s; in the distance you can just see some of the Wellingtonias that are thought to have been planted to commemorate Queen Victoria's 60th jubilee. Kate and Richard Foster.



THIS PAGE Rhododendron with self-sown honesty, forget-me-nots and primroses; old-fashioned rhodos survive well but the modern ones can struggle badly through the droughts common in this part of Canterbury, says Kate.

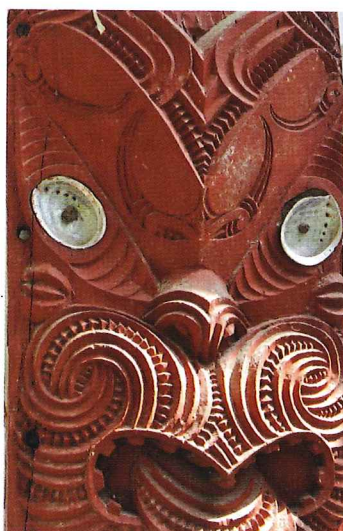
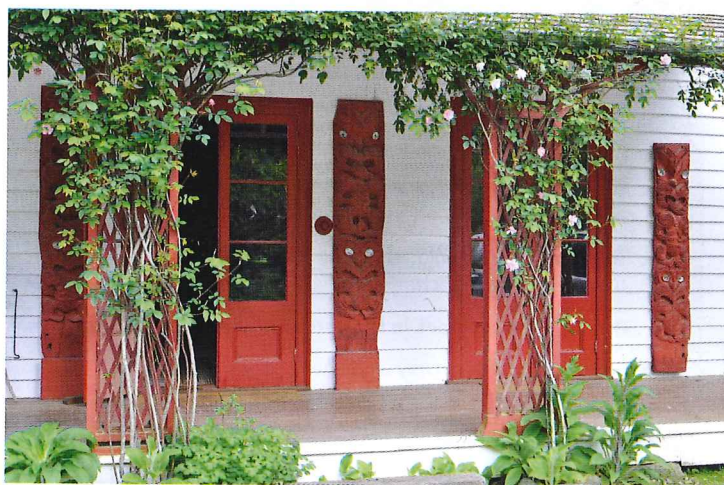
OPPOSITE (clockwise from top) Looking past the elms flanking the shade lawn to the homestead; clipped privet helps to keep the nor'wester at bay. The Maori carvings were bought in 1889 to ornament the front verandah and the facings were coloured to match. Kate planted honeysuckle outside what was known as the Honeysuckle Bedroom, a name that mystified her until she uncovered the original floral wallpaper. A close-up of the carvings.



Nevertheless, Kate and Richard have made changes. Particularly during the last decade, after the children left home and farm responsibilities eased, Kate has devoted herself to improving on what she inherited. “Everyone has left their mark on this garden, so I don’t feel I have to be true to any one period. I’ve added to it by opening it up. We’ve taken out a lot of the laurel hedges, for example. You can go from room to room more easily now and yet still see the original form.”

Sir John Hall was a great tree man – as a parliamentarian he introduced a bill to provide incentives for farmers to plant shelter belts on the Canterbury Plains. On purchasing the property at wind-prone Hororata in 1862, he immediately began planting poplars for shelter, followed by a variety of other exotics. The homestead is set in a woodland of sycamores, elms, oaks and horse chestnuts, all with wonderful trunks. Over the years they had become obscured by hedges and low plantings and one of Kate’s most effective gardening moves has been to clear out that foreground clutter. “Operation Tree Trunks, I called it, and it’s about clearing the way so you can really see the trunks.”

One “room” was totally abandoned and couldn’t be accessed until Richard brought in the bulldozer. “We’ve ended up with what we call the shade lawn,” says Kate. “In midsummer on the hottest days it’s just glorious. Impossible to get the grass to grow, of course, but so what – a lawn is only something you walk on to get to another part of the garden.” >





Q&A

Climate: Harsh – we experience prolonged droughts, snow storms, gale force winds, severe frosts and occasional floods.

Soil type: Free-draining silty loam enriched with more than 100 years of leaf mulch.

Hours spent per week in the garden: I've lost count.

I water my garden: Only when necessary with hoses and sprinklers and try to grow plants suited to the climate.

My favourite plants are: Snowdrops being harbingers of spring; hellebores for their variety and year-long beauty; massive trees for their gnarled trunks and limbs.

My least-used tool is: The hoe as it can totally destroy the free seedlings that spread themselves everywhere.

My biggest gardening mistake was: Having paths too narrow for two people to walk side by side.

The best time of year to visit this area is: August for the snowdrops; September for the violets and primroses; October for the bluebells and always the wonderful trees, beautiful in their winter nakedness as well as in their summer splendour.

Do you open your garden to the public? Yes, I see no point in all the work and all the beauty if it is not shared with whoever wants to visit. Go to terracestation.org.nz for opening times.

Kate Foster

Another project involved felling a row of macrocarpa that overhung one end of the homestead. "A friend of ours made a lovely comment after we took them out. He said, 'Kate, I knew the house ended somewhere, I just didn't know where'. It was completely overgrown." Richard planted natives and now in summer ribbonwood seedlings fill the space "like an ocean".

The harsh Canterbury climate also tends to clear spaces – not always for the better. The week after the macrocarpa went, a major wind blew down a further 10 trees. Most winters, snowfall does some damage – our wander around the garden is scented by snow-flattened flax being burned on a bonfire – and the modern rhododendrons, in particular, struggle to survive in the summertime heat. Kate is certain it's getting drier and hotter, but is loath to change her approach. "I'm prepared to do a little watering, but for me a garden has to fit the climate."

We arrive at what Kate calls her "Once Upon a Time" lawn, which is used in summer for garden fetes or church events. Once upon a time, says Kate, it was tussock land, then once upon another time it was a berry-fruit garden, then a tennis court.

That knowledge of the garden's history enhances her enjoyment. Fortunately, Sir John Hall was an assiduous record keeper and his papers include planting plans and letters to nurserymen, memos to his gardeners, photographs of the garden's evolution – even a gardening book with his copious red pencil marginalia. "People say you shouldn't scribble in books, but it's so wonderful more than 100 years later that you can see what he thought was important."



Though not quite gardening in the shadow of her ancestor, Kate increasingly sees the parallels.

“This was a place for him of refuge and regeneration of energy and it’s been the same for me. I think back to the many disasters we’ve had here – the snowstorms, winds, droughts – and the house was always my refuge. But the earthquake, the September one, was shattering and the garden became my refuge then. Each day I could go out into it and think, ‘Yes, life’s all right’.”

Since the quakes, Kate has opened her garden to the public more often than previously. “People say they just like to be in my garden – it’s not tidy, maybe, but it has got atmosphere. So I like to think that a place of refuge has been created – not only for people but also for bees and many species of bird – even perhaps without our planning it.”

Terrace Station is administered as a charitable trust, established to protect and maintain the homestead, associated farm buildings and land; terracestation.org.nz. ■

THESE PAGES (from left) Garden and homestead visits are common at Terrace Station, particularly with U3A (University of the Third Age) parties and heritage groups. The Old Smithy, one of 30 farm sheds on the property, defines the southern boundary of the garden; note the name on the wall: Nick was one of several dogs whose final resting place is beneath the foxgloves.