



## DOING ITS THING

In Central Otago a novice gardener has produced a picturesque patch with a mind of its own

WORDS MATT PHILP / PHOTOGRAPHS JULIET NICHOLAS



**THIS PAGE** At the top of the section at Heather Gilchrist and Grant Pullar's property near Ranfurly in the Maniototo, the 12m shipping container used to bring all their belongings up from Dunedin has been painted with a landscape mural by their daughter's high school art class; it's a favourite spot for visitors to sit with a drink and watch the sun go down; the purple flower in the foreground is valerian (*Centranthus ruber*), which grows wild up the Cromwell Gorge, says Heather, and has taken off "like a weed" in her garden – in a good way, in this case. **OPPOSITE** Looking towards the new extension to the house, past oriental poppies.



**THIS PAGE** Mixed in with the lupins are pink 'Ispahan' roses and an 'Easlea's Golden Rambler', which is closer to a climbing hybrid tree in character and can grow to almost four metres.

**OPPOSITE** (from top) The garden outside the kitchen extension is dominated by 'Angel Cheeks' peonies, which Heather was given by a friend; the other darker pink peony came from another friend's garden. A wild patch of lupins under silver birch trees.



**I**T WAS A 30-degree day, as Heather Gilchrist remembers it. She and her partner Grant Pullar were up from Dunedin to look at a property at Waipiata, a one-horse ex-railway town in the Maniototo district, near Ranfurly. The sun was at its zenith, the air as clear as you'll find anywhere. Heather sat on a terrace above the 1916 villa, taking in the scene.

"I didn't look at the house," she says. "If I'd looked at the house we wouldn't be here today. I sat there and looked down and thought, 'This could be fun, to create a garden.'"

That was 16 years ago. The house, so ramshackle when they bought it that "the locals all thought we were nuts", is far tidier these days, with a new kitchen built by Grant and various other improvements. And the 4ha property has undergone what is arguably an even larger transformation.

Heather has the image of the place as it was in the 1990s fixed in her mind's eye – a "before" picture to remind her of just how

much she's achieved. A "gnarly old" peach tree, a phalanx of pine trees, some couch grass... that was it really. For a woman who had never seriously gardened before it must have been daunting.

"I dug it all up by spade. I'd be digging away and my father would say, 'You know you're making a rod for your own back, girl.' I didn't know how you were supposed to go about it."

Indeed, the garden today – bright, welcoming, unfussy, a little oasis in a larger landscape of tussock and dry farm paddocks – isn't the product of some thoroughly worked out design. It evolved quite randomly. Heather often buys plants in memory of people or events: "Just find a gap and throw it in there."

Early on, though, she relied on gifts from the gardens of friends and family. Her parents, whose retirement to Ranfurly was the catalyst for Heather and Grant's move to the Maniototo, are both keen gardeners and donated plants and cuttings, along with elbow grease and advice. >

**THIS PAGE** (from top) The entranceway to the garden is dominated by an abundant arch of 'Easlea's Golden Rambler'. The deep pink rose was grafted for Heather by her late father. Grant Pullar and Heather Gilchrist in their garden.

**OPPOSITE** A view of the 1916 villa, with a 'Paul Transon' rose growing up the wall, underplanted with lychnis, peonies and roses.



"There's never been a plan. I've just learned as I've gone along and I visit a lot of gardens. I think gardeners are wonderful people. They're only too happy to share their knowledge or to dig a piece of something out for you. They're salt of the earth."

Many of the pine trees – ugly, windblasted things – went early. "They've kept us warm with firewood," says Heather. She opted not to replace them with anything that would grow too large, so as to preserve the view of the Hawkdun Range. Instead, she concentrated on maintaining colour through much of the year, planting masses of daffodils, roses, poppies and peonies.

The peonies in particular went so well in the frost-prone Maniototo that she and Grant decided to turn their passion for the flowers into a business, exporting to the US market.

"At that stage the US dollar was 43 cents NZ," says Grant, who got the idea for the venture from an episode of *Country Calendar*. "With peonies you don't need a hell of a lot of ground and it was good money for a while – between \$3 and \$5 a stem."

The rise of the dollar and red tape killed off the exports, but they still sell peonies around New Zealand and have a whole new customer base among their guests. Yes, that's right, the homestead locals considered beyond saving is now the Komako B&B, popular with riders on the Central Otago Rail Trail.

As a business venture it earns enough to pay the bills, supplemented by Heather's work as a nurse at the hospital in Ranfurly (plus, when the flag is out, the garden is open, with ice cream sundaes to tempt bikers on the rail trail). Running a B&B can't be beaten as a way to connect with the world beyond Waipiata, reckons Heather: "We've met the most wonderful people doing this, and they're all in holiday mode." When she's not entertaining guests or at the hospital, you'll generally find Heather in the garden. After coming relatively late in life to gardening, she has well and truly got the bug, if not quite the common gardener's penchant for order and control.

"This garden is never the same each year," she says. "Things self-seed and I just let it do its thing. There's still no plan. And it's still a work in progress." ■



## Q&A

**Type of garden:** A large country cottage garden. It's always changing, self-seeding, with a lot of cutting back required.

**Climate:** Extreme. We get hoar frosts in winter and a strong nor'wester in summer that dries everything out. As the climate gets drier I'm planting more hebes and other dry-climate plants.

**Soil:** A clay base, which I keep adding to.

**Watering:** We use a sprinkler system and water as little as possible.

**Most significant or favourite plant:** The gladioli give me colour when everything else is starting to dry out.

**Biggest gardening mistake:** When I started the garden, I wasn't into spraying. I've realised that to have a garden as big as this, and in the country, you have to spray.

**We love Central Otago:** For the wide open spaces, the big sky. You never get sick of the scenery here.

**Best time to visit:** Autumn, for the colour, the gold-and-redness of it.

Heather Gilchrist



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