



tried & tested

Planting in this Mission Bay, Auckland, garden has been slow and steady but it's now in full bloom

Text by **Carol Bucknell**.
Photography by **Helen Bankers**.

This photo A glass balustrade shelters the main terrace area, which steps down to a side path lined with weeping mulberry trees and roses. **Top right** Steps from the rear of the house lead to the side path and sunny front terrace. **Middle right** Astilbe and hellebores are planted in shaded areas. **Right** Mature trees in a neighbouring reserve give the garden a leafy backdrop.



moving from a large section to one less than a third of the size has got to be hard when you're a dedicated gardener like Robin Houliker. But the day we drop in to view her courtyard garden in Auckland's Mission Bay, Robin couldn't be happier.

Thanks to a clever plan drawn up by landscape designer Kirsten Sach, the compact space now accommodates an impressive array of Robin's favourite plants with plenty of room for a paved terrace, outdoor fireplace, alfresco dining and play areas for her four grandchildren.

When Robin and husband Peter bought the new house three years ago the garden was virtually non-existent with a deck that stepped down onto muddy grass. "We lived with it for a bit then met with Kirsten, who had designed part of our last garden on a large section in Remuera. We had to find out what would really work for this garden, so we sat on Kirsten's plan for nearly a year while we visualised how it would look. We are still experimenting with things.

"Originally I wanted to be able to go straight out from the house onto a small piece of grass but Peter won that debate. He was right; the garden is slightly shady so a lawn would be a waste of time.

"The paved terrace Kirsten designed is warm and dry so the grandchildren can use it any time of the year. They have quickly learned that if they fall over it will hurt. They can ride their bikes and wheel toys around and we have added things like a sandpit for them to play in. It's been marvellous: no boggy lawns, no mowing, very functional."

Robin is delighted that her eldest grandchild, 4-year-old Harry, is following in his grandmother's footsteps and showing a keen interest in the garden, closely followed by Toby, 3. "All the kids love the garden. Harry's big things are his spring bulbs, which he planted in March, and Toby planted Anzac poppies. Now we are waiting for them to come up."

Robin grew up with a love of gardening that then became her passion. Her mother, mother-in-law and grandmother were gardeners and many of her friends still

have big gardens like the one she left behind. "I knew I would miss my garden a lot when we moved from Remuera, and I did. We had two big lawns there, although Peter is very happy he doesn't have to mow them any more," she laughs.

Kirsten was more than open to accommodating Robin's love of plants in the landscape plan, creating a range of different areas where she can plant flowers, shrubs and trees to provide seasonal colour. "Kirsten knew when she designed the garden that I would have a big say in what was planted," says Robin. "When you have a garden you have to like it or you won't look after it. I love changing things around. I adore sensory things, colour and scent, but I know the importance of having a sense of structure in the garden."

One of the key structural elements is a row of pleached titoki. Trimming the foliage of the trees into a rectangular shape (pleaching is often described as creating a hedge on stilts) adds an architectural dimension while allowing northern light into the garden and screening neighbours. Camellia hedges and weeping standard mulberries lining the side path contribute more living structure.

Seasonality is a key aspect of this garden with plenty of colour and scent no matter the time of year. In autumn the red-leaved maples pick up the colours of the clay roofs on neighbouring houses while in winter mass-planted clivia reflect the orange flames of the outdoor fireplace. In spring native renga renga lilies, bulbs and magnolias fill the air with scent, followed by roses in summer.

"I was only allowed a few because Peter doesn't get too excited about roses. My favourite is 'Sally Holmes', with its beautiful, big, luminous white blooms. I also love my three standard 'Mutabilis' roses. They are easy to clip, they flower and flower and look beautiful massed."

Another aspect of her new garden that has thrilled Robin is the gas outdoor fireplace, which has extended the family's outdoor living well beyond the summer months. "It's lovely. We use it most on blustery spring evenings and on the cusp of autumn. Peter jokes we are now trying to heat the whole of Mission Bay." ●

Clockwise from right Robin Houlker on her north-facing terrace; the paved terrace directly connects garden and house, providing space for year-round outdoor entertaining and a play area for Robin and Peter's grandchildren; all the family love to sit outside around the fireplace, particularly in the cooler months of spring and autumn.



in a nutshell

Who lives here? Robin Houlker (educational consultant) and Peter Houlker (accountant).

Robin, what would you advise people to do when planning a garden? Try things out before buying in bulk. I have things in pots for a while to see what they need. Part of my garden is set aside for trial plants. Even if you love a plant, you've got to have the right place for it. And you have to accept that there will be certain things you just can't grow.

