



meet...
accidental gardener
KIRSTEN SACH

Who would throw in a glamorous job creating costumes for the movie industry in favour of mucking about in gumboots? Kirsten Sach would – and did!

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Opposite Kirsten's son Billy and his feline friend Squirrel are always keen to lend a hand in the garden. **This photo** An outdoor table designed by Kirsten is flanked by two Cape Cod chairs to create an inviting outdoor relaxation area.

Moving from making costumes for warrior princesses and hobbits to creating award-winning gardens seems like a major career shift, but five years ago landscape designer Kirsten Sach made that leap without a backward glance.

Giving up a successful career in the film industry to study landscape design at Auckland's Unitec turned out to be the right move for Kirsten. In her final year of study, she and fellow students Zoe Carafice and Jamie Douglas won gold at the Ellerslie Flower Show for their eco-friendly Rain Garden, designed to collect and purify stormwater. Last year at the Auckland Flower Show she won again, this time silver for a garden designed along the same principles but using raised planter boxes. The Auckland Regional Council sponsored both gardens.

She now runs her business, Kirsten Sach Landscape Design, working mainly on

residential gardens in the Auckland area. But when she's not creating gardens for other people, she is outside in the garden of her Waitakere home with seven-year-old son Billy, also a keen gardener.

Thanks to her clever eye for plant combinations, the garden is a leafy paradise in the midst of suburbia, overflowing with a diverse mix of native and subtropical plants. Contrasting with the different shades of green foliage are the blooms of sedum, cannas and orchids. When you take in all this lush loveliness it's hard to believe the garden was almost bare when Kirsten bought the Oratia property five years ago.

Kirsten: "When I got here the only things in the garden were a kauri, kowhai and an old plum tree. The plum is amazing. In summer its spreading branches shade the deck and it produces great fruit. Then when it loses its leaves

in winter, you have more light in the garden. I like that seasonality thing.

I used to live in Ponsonby but I bought out west because it was close to the film studios. This place is a bit of a stepping stone; I want to eventually move closer to town. But I couldn't live in an apartment, I have to be able to get out in the garden.

My garden is bursting with plants because I keep buying more and more. I've had lots of fun experimenting in this garden. Some things are really surprising, the way they will grow in wet clay in the winter, then in summer it dries out.

I've planted mainly natives and subtropicals such as ligularia, various species of taro, ferns, libertia, the Three Kings Island kawakawa (*Macropiper melchior*), muehlenbeckia, grasses, coprosmas. I love packing in the plants.

Among my favourites are the divaricating natives like muehlenbeckia

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and some of the coprosmas. I also love all those soft tussocks. I don't really have a particular favourite, but I do have a native leaning. Having said that, I love to mix subtropicals with natives.

I think every plant can work if it's in the right place, and the right combination. I think it's really sad when a plant becomes subject to fashion, like yuccas and agaves. Then they fall out of fashion and no one will plant them.

I am continually playing around with plants, moving them, trying different effects. I actually love overcrowding, as it gives you a relaxed look in the garden and you can create lots of foliage textures.

I play with light a lot. This garden completely transforms at the end of the day, when the light is low, through the foliage. I don't have enough money to do much hardscaping so I use plants to give my garden structure.

My vegetable garden is just past its best. I've pulled out all the tomato plants



Left Dahlias bloom in Billy's own garden. **Below** Kirsten and Billy harvest salad greens from the thriving kitchen garden. **Below left** Kirsten enjoys combining shades of green foliage with the blooms of cannas, sedum and orchids.



and we've had some great spuds. I'm still picking herbs, salad greens, peppers and pumpkin, and I've planted winter vegetables like broccoli, spinach, silverbeet and red cabbage.

I'm going to create a rain garden here by putting a water tank by the side of the house to track the overflow from the roof gutters into the pond. Unfortunately none of my residential clients wants to install a rain garden.

People are reluctant to install one because they are scared of having sitting water in their gardens. I understand that. But with rain gardens there's no sitting water. And if you do have a pond, all you need to do is put fish in it to eat the mosquitoes.

Exhibiting at the flower shows is not only about gaining recognition and work, it enables me to educate people about certain storm water issues. When there is a heavy downpour, all manner of contaminants rush straight into our waterways, which drain into the sea. This causes erosion, killing important eco systems and polluting our beautiful beaches.

I mainly design residential gardens. At the moment I'm designing a fabulous subtropical garden in Devonport and also two native gardens for holiday homes on Rakino Island in the Hauraki Gulf.

It will be a challenge building a garden on an island with no running water – it all comes from rainwater tanks. That's why I'm predominantly using natives to

cope with the conditions. I'm taking 30 square metres of mulch over on a barge, and truckloads of plants. It's a logistical nightmare as there's only a two-hour turn-around between tides.

Mum and Dad are good gardeners so I guess it was instilled in me from a young age. And now I'm seeing the same thing happening with Billy. We drive around pointing out plants we like to each other.

Before Billy came along I worked for around 15 years in the film industry on films like *Lord of the Rings* and (popular TV3 comedy drama) *Outrageous Fortune*. Sometimes I was working 14-16 hour days. It drained all my energy. I got to the point where I realised I couldn't do it any more so I thought there's got to be something else I can do.

Then one day I was on the internet and saw the Unitec landscaping course and knew that was it. I guess it was a brave thing to do but I never questioned it. It was the right thing to do. The fact is that I am doing something I really like and am very passionate about. And I have more time to be a mum.”

