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THE CONSTANT GARDENER
HOLLY KERR FORSYTH

GRANDEUR AND GRACE

A historic New Zealand home forms the backdrop to a garden with many stories to tell

There is much to love about New Zealand. It's a land of breathtaking landscapes, deep, natural harbours, a stellar rugby team and marvellous gardens.

And no country does luxury lodges better than New Zealand.

One is Otahuna Lodge, not far from Christchurch, in the Tai Tapu valley in the shadow of the dramatic Port Hills. It's now the subject of a stunning book, *For the Love of a Place*, by its owners, Miles Refo and Hall Cannon.

Once the seat of parliamentarian and philanthropist Heaton Rhodes, the property, then known as Gray Cliffe, was bought by Rhodes as a wedding present for his wife, Jessie. Otahuna was built in 1895 and Rhodes farmed and gardened there, on about 2500ha, until his death in 1956.

Since they bought the property in 2005, Refo and Cannon have restored the house and 12ha of the gardens that had been laid out by Rhodes as a grand English park.

Following your journey down the long drive you arrive at the Dutch garden, established in 1903. Now renovated, its entrance is guarded by a pair of Chinese windmill palms (*Trachycarpus fortunei*), native to far north Queensland but tolerant of New Zealand's se-

vere winters. Protected by an arch of hornbeam, this "garden room" is illuminated by Mexican orange blossom (*Choisya ternata* 'Sundance') with its tiny, scented white flowers.

Leave the Dutch garden along a double avenue of silver birch and you'll arrive at the orchards, with their restored glasshouses.

The apple store, sunk into the ground to ensure a year-round even temperature, still houses the harvest of early and late apples, among them Braeburn, Charles Ross, Egremont Russet and Gravenstein, as well as three varieties of mushroom.

The nearby orchard is the site of an ancient mulberry, along with peach, apricot, fig, pear and quince and hazelnuts, walnuts and almonds.

Among many virtuoso areas at Otahuna, a half-hectare walled vegetable garden has been created to supply the dining room with most of its requirements, the results of which you can read in the recipes in the book.

"We have developed our skills in growing organic produce as we have learned to work with our soils and climate," says head gardener Steve Marcham. "The food miles of our produce consists of walking from the vegie garden to the kitchen."

Divided into four squares, each of which is divided again into four, for crop rotation and for ease of main-



tenance and access, this area hosts more than 100 different vegetables and 25 herbs.

Height is provided by large obelisks constructed from trees felled and milled from the woodland. They support a selection of climbing peas and beans. A central pergola supports table grapes. Asparagus plantings are in their 10th year, mounded to ensure they are straight and white.

The heirloom garlic 'Kakanui' flourishes. "Garlic is very straightforward," Marcham insists. "The rule in New Zealand is to plant out on the shortest day, mid to late June." There are several varieties of onion, and globe artichokes (*Cynara cardunculus*) are grown for their edible stems.

The strawberry *Fragaria x ananassa* 'Seascape' provides reliable cropping throughout warm months, and 'Camarosa' heavy cropping in summer.

"In addition, we also raise pigs and sheep for the kitchen and have created a large cutting garden to supply the house with flowers," says Marcham.

Among several original buildings that have been restored, the melon house, favoured by Victorian gardeners, grows a variety of melons (*Cucumis melo*), as well as red pineapples.

Throughout the garden, clipped hedges enclose important trees, among them a massive strawberry tree (*Arbutus menziesii*), its red bark lit by the setting sun, and a mature weeping cherry (*Prunus subhirtella* 'Pendula').

Paths, softened with fallen oak leaves and edged with periwinkle (*Vinca major*), which acts as a fire retardant, lead to a series of glades. There, among the 130 ferns that are native to New Zealand, is the silver tree fern (*Cyathea deal-*

bata), much loved as the symbol of the New Zealand rugby team, the All Blacks.

"For every path you wander down in the garden, there is at least one veering off in a different direction, and you double back to catch a glimpse of it," writes Refo.

Jessie Rhodes was the sister of Australian daffodil and rose breeder Alister Clark, whose property, Glen-

ara, in Victoria is renowned, so it is not surprising that Otahuna boasts fields of thousands of daffodils that bloom in the first few weeks of September, when the garden is open for charity.

And it is not surprising that Otahuna has been named as a Garden of National Significance by the New Zealand Gardens Trust.

As Cannon writes in his introduction to the book, "These are the moments of life at Ota-

huna; I invite you to explore them here and to create your very own moments at the Lodge. It is our mission that this extraordinary place continues to inspire and captivate ..."

Refo adds, "The mark of a great experience is that you want to return."

PRUNINGS Phone Otahuna Lodge on +64 3 329 6333 or email inquiries@otahuna.co.nz. Visit otahuna.co.nz. *For the Love of a Place*, by Miles Refo and Hall Cannon (Random House, \$79.99) is available in good bookshops.

Holly Kerr Forsyth was guest of Otahuna Lodge.

Holly Kerr Forsyth attained a PhD in 19th and 20th-century gardens. Follow her on Twitter: @hollykerforsyth

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MILES REFO





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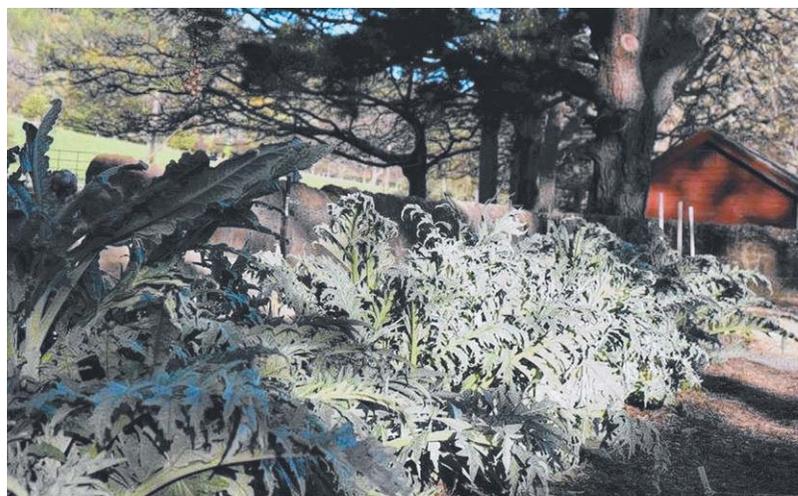
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Otahuna Lodge, main;
its gardens include
woodland walks, top;
areas of globe
artichokes (*Cynara
cardunculus*), above;
and *Prunus subhirtella*
'Pendula', inset left