

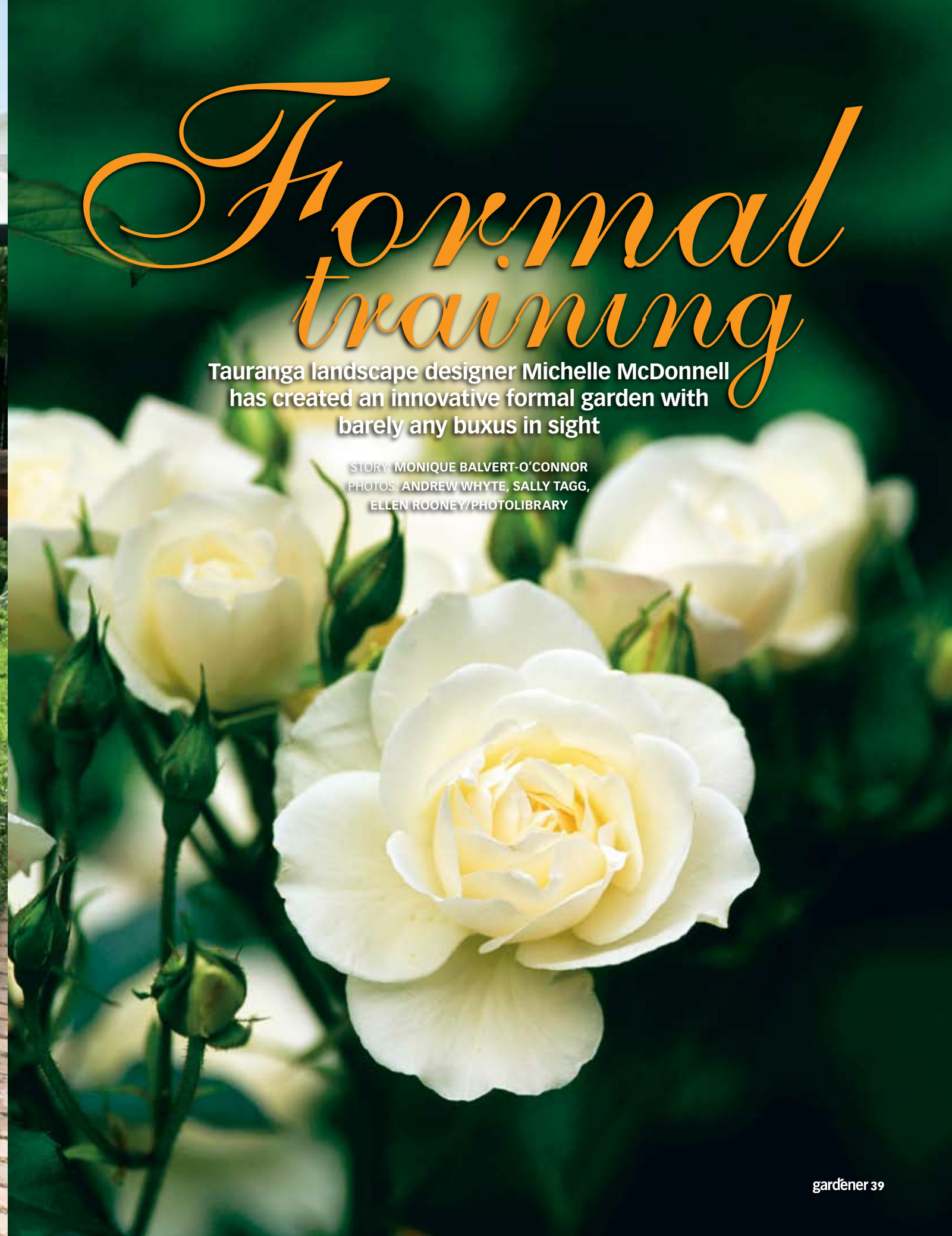


A parterre of clipped *Euonymus japonica* with topiary lilly pillies.  
Opposite: 'Iceberg' roses.

# Formal training

Tauranga landscape designer Michelle McDonnell has created an innovative formal garden with barely any buxus in sight

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## HOW TO PLAY HOSTA

- **Hostas may well be** the perfect foliage perennial, provided you site them in dappled shade. They hate harsh sun and waterlogged feet, but under a tree with some rich damp soil they'll reward you with leafy interest.
- **Mass plant hostas** for a lush effect – select a special variety and buy up large. Remember they die down in winter.
- **Hostas come in many colours:** blue, green, cream, gold and variegated shades. Their leaf texture varies too, from lettuce-leaf thin to thick and deeply fissured.
- **Hostas are catnip** to slugs and snails. Michelle uses slug bait "all the time". You'll need to be especially vigilant in spring when the new foliage is emerging or they'll chew it back down to the ground. Apparently slugs hate sheep dags... why not give it a go?
- **Hostas have pretty flowers**, in shades of white and lilac. "But I remove the flower spikes as I don't like them," says Michelle.

When Michelle McDonnell goes house hunting the backyard is the first thing she checks out. Michelle's a landscape designer and her eponymous landscape design company is run from an office overlooking her Bay of Plenty garden.

When Michelle, her husband David and their three children moved to Tauranga three years ago, she was stoked to find that the house she hankered after came with a sizeable site. While the 860sqm section already had a good garden, it wasn't quite structural enough for Michelle. Plus it featured more plant types than she liked.

This skilful garden designer has a preference for mass planting of selected varieties. She also

enchanted display of cherry and crabapple blossoms. Summer's shining stars are roses, daylilies and hostas.

All is not lost in the colder months as the formal hedging – the dark green of *Euonymus japonica* and silvery hues of *Teucrium fruticans* – retains the structure. There are also mop-top pohutukawas, clipped port wine magnolias (*Michelia figo*), silvery olives, star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) and standardised lilly pillies (acmena) to take centre stage. (Lilly pillies, also known as monkey apples, have fallen from grace as their prolific berries are eaten by birds and deposited in native bush, but regular clipping ensures they don't set any seed.)

**Above: When you have clipped and groomed your topiary to perfection on the eve of an open day and the kids' trampoline blows over, taking one of your prized topiaries with it, what do you do? Buy a sundial to fill the gap!**  
**Above left: Michelle and David McDonnell share their garden with three children and cat Spook.**

## Michelle confesses to a special fondness for star jasmine. "Every garden needs about 100 of them. It's a must."

likes to plant in layers and loves the contrast of serene green and white. Along the back fence, for example, you'll find massed plantings of green mondo grass, hostas and the stunning white hydrangea 'Trophy'. Behind these are different plantings of green to create a screen.

This area is also home to the garden's large ornamental cherry tree. Underneath its wide branches, there's a Hinuera stone sculpture representing a family cuddle. It was created by Dave McPhail from Okoroire, South Waikato and came from the McDonnells' previous home.

This is a formal garden that's designed to look stunning all year round. Visit Michelle's garden in spring and prepare to be captivated by the

The formal look of standardised lilly pillies draws the eye from the lounge to the back garden. A diamond-patterned parterre is always immaculate, with white lime chip covering the soil. Other all-season highlights include fringes of mondo grass and star jasmine trained in a star pattern along the fence-line.

Michelle confesses to a special fondness for star jasmine. It looks fabulous not only espaliered but as groundcover, hedging, or as a fragrant climber. "Every garden needs about 100 of them. It's a must," she advises with a laugh.

She also makes special mention of her favourite plant for hedging – *Euonymus japonica*. At first glance many visitors confuse it with English box

## Design speak

To create drama with mass planting under the ornamental cherry, Michelle opted for a mix of hydrangeas and grey and cream-splotched hostas. Both do well in filtered shade beneath deciduous trees. Pride of place goes to the massive Hinuera stone sculpture that came with them when they moved. It had to be hauled in with a tractor!



(*Buxus sempervirens*), but Michelle says it seems to do better in Tauranga than this more common formal choice.

Hedging dominates this garden, with not only the euonymus and teucrium playing their part but also michelias and corokias, with a little buxus at the front.

Fast plant growth in Tauranga means Michelle spends more time regularly clipping her hedges than she did in her previous gardens in Waikato. Regular clipping, plus feeding twice or three times a year with a top notch garden fertiliser, helps all the hedges retain their healthy appearance.

When the McDonnells bought the property it already had a productive fig tree, which they married up with other plantings to create a fruit garden. Their fruity patch – Michelle likes to group things together – now includes kaffir limes (*Citrus hystrix*), guavas and lemon trees. These enjoy a sunny position in front of espaliered passionfruit vines behind a low-lying border of Chilean guava (*Myrtus ugni*). “Eating them is like experiencing a little explosion in your mouth. The kids love them.”

Another favourite is orangeberry, *Rubus pentalobus*, with its ivy-like leaf and fruit that tastes like orange cordial. From Incredible Edibles, it’s notoriously slow to fruit and must be rootbound.

Around the front of the house is Michelle’s kitchen garden, packed with herbs, cherry tomatoes and standardised mandarins and limes. Her veterinarian husband David has his own vege patch out the back, tucked behind the shed.

Perfume is important in the garden too, especially below the dining room windows. From there the delightful aroma of roses, star jasmine, gardenias and *Michelia figo* waft indoors.

Meanwhile, when the season’s right, lavenders, ‘Iceberg’ roses, alstroemerias, clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*) and purple cherrypie (*Heliotropium peruvianum*) fill the picking garden. And, during the festive season, the immaculate, 4m-tall, cone-shaped lilly pilly by the front gate is given the magical Christmas tree treatment.

Michelle modestly describes her garden as a family garden. “I allow half a day a week to tend to it. If it took any more time, it wouldn’t work for me.” Instead, Michelle’s time is spent weaving her magic on other people’s gardens. 🌿

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## In an orderly fashion

From Michelle McDonnell, Tauranga

### Rank & file

Michelle likes to ring the changes in this decorative urn she keeps on the verandah table, here planted with a healthy white petunia. By keeping her colours to a limited palette she’s generated an elegant yet restful vibe.

### BIG AND LITTLE

Choosing shapes for your trees and shrubs is a lot of fun. This mature silver pear is clipped into a wide umbrella at the edge of the lawn, while a standard pohutukawa (below) is lollipop-shaped by the house.

“I allow half a day a week to tend to it. If it took any more it wouldn’t work for me.”



*‘Abraham Darby’*

Michelle can see these three roses from her dining room. Fragrant ‘Abraham Darby’ can climb up to 1.5m.



*‘Graham Thomas’*

For such an unromantic name this rose has a wonderful fragrance and stunning soft yellow petals.



*‘Iceberg’*

A popular classic because it’s so reliable, ‘Iceberg’ is a tough Floribunda that keeps flowering for a long season.

### THE CLIPPING FILE

- **When to clip?** You don’t have to follow a specific timeline such as “prune in June”. Clip all year round – when you feel your plants need to be brought into line.
- **Keep on top of it.** Clip regularly so it doesn’t become an arduous job.
- **Use a string line** to keep everything at the same height.
- **Use hand clippers** rather than an electric trimmer for fewer mistakes.
- **Clip the top first** and then the sides.
- **Keeping your hedges** clipped and orderly is a good way to ensure your garden looks tidy – even if you haven’t time to deal with what’s planted behind.
- **Make sure the top** is narrower than the bottom to let light in down there.