

Heather Loughlin, under the watchful eye of her boxer, Romeo.



Woodland WONDERLAND

Heather Loughlin's Tauranga garden has been a source of joy in the best of times and respite in the worst

STORY: MONIQUE BALVERT-O'CONNOR PHOTOS: SALLY TAGG



Heather created the koru swirl using mondo grass. The potted maple behind the *Betula utilis jacquemontii* tree is an *Acer palmatum* 'Shindeshojo'. Inset, from top: A lizard by Tauranga artist Alec Roy, amid *Pratia angulata*; An owl set amongst *Aucuba japonica*; Birds peep out from the massive branch structure of a ficus.

Heather Loughlin's garden was a lifesaver when her nearest and dearest were dying. Within five months, her mother, husband and stepfather all passed away. Heather, formerly a charge nurse, cared for them all. She nursed her husband Murray, a retired orthopaedic surgeon and medical superintendent, at home throughout the course of a long mentally and physically disabling illness.

"Illness is very hard to look at. It's extremely difficult to watch someone you love lose all their wonderful attributes. Long, serious illness is not pretty," says Heather.

But the garden she and Murray both loved provided solace. "What I found

"It prevented him from living an internal existence when he was so ill. He was carried out through the garden after he died, which seemed right."

The woodland-themed Tauranga garden that played such a key role in this couple's life made its first appearance in *NZ Gardener* in the summer of 2005, but its genesis dates back to 1998, when the Loughlins called upon David Clayton-Greene from landscaping company CGC to help transform an essentially uninspiring residential lot of 708sqm. The brief was to create a special, secluded garden that had strong links to the living areas of the house.

Abandon any ideas involving flower beds, he told them. "David said if we had

Left to right: The duckling Juliet (name later changed to Julius!); The pink-flowered plant by the pond is an old-fashioned variety named geum; The tree to the left of the dovecote bird-feeding station is *Betula utilis jacquemontii*, the plant front right is a *Mahonia japonica*.

especially given her British roots. "I love all the seasons and their dramatic differences," she says. "I'm used to a climate in the UK where most things disappear in the winter and the ground is left to rest, and that feels right."

And so the creation of the woodland began, and the property gained a name – Amberwood, after Heather's grandfather's home in England. The area at the front of the house was targeted first, with mass plantings of *Hedera colchica* (Persian ivy), which created a blanket beneath *Betula papyrifera*, paper birch trees.

"This created an amazing contrast of beautiful white trunks rising out of dark green leaves," says Heather. "It really has impact as there are no other plantings in that area to detract from the scene."

More birches are planted in the heart of the property and that follow-through gives the impression that the house dwells within a woodland, she says.

The bones of the garden features 50-year-old *Mikawa yatsubusa*, which is a large, potted bonsai. Years after they were planted, these maples are absolutely thriving.

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with this garden was that I could rest my eyes on something beautiful – even something simple like the red maple against the blue sky – and be left with a sense of wonder. It was a spiritual feeling that helped me appreciate that the hard time I was going through would pass. It made me feel less alone. If I didn't have that, then that whole caring era would have been very, very difficult."

Murray took pleasure from their garden too, right up to his last days. Heather had a bedroom wall replaced with a glass sliding door so he could look out from dawn to dusk and have access to the patio. He enjoyed its peace and shade and its "absolute beauty", she says.

them we would never be out of the garden, and while I love gardens, I didn't want to be a slave to one," says Heather.

A subtropical theme was suggested, then abandoned as it wouldn't work well with the tall brick walls surrounding the property. David's third suggestion hit the jackpot: a woodland with a canopy of deciduous trees, water features, and mass under-planting of shade-loving species.

"He asked if we were brave enough for this concept because the trees had to be deciduous. Murray's reply was 'bloody good' as the bare branches would let the sun in over winter," says Heather.

The notion of enjoying the seasonal changes sounded fine to Heather too,



A dogwood and another variety of paper birch add to the height of the garden. Heather has introduced the ‘Jacquemontii’ birch with its “exquisite” white trunks. “These are stunning and a hot favourite of mine. The way the bark curls off is striking and the trunks feel like velvet so there’s a lovely tactile thing going on.”

These towering beauties combine to create a cool canopy under which various plants in muted colours thrive in their own little microclimate in true woodland style. These shade lovers include a variety of hostas, toad lilies with their baby orchid-like flowers, ajuga, grasses, *Pulmonaria* ‘Ice Ballet’, hellebore (winter rose), and ferns

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including maidenhair and hen and chicken. There’s also a plant not so commonly seen in gardens these days – a spiky woodland edging shrub called *Mahonia japonica*.

While there are plants aplenty and a garden path that meanders around the house, the entire site isn’t planted up. “That would be too oppressive,” says Heather. “This way you come out into lawn and sunlight and feel as if you’ve been on a little journey through the wood and ended up in a glade.”

Amberwood has been refined over the years as a result of combined wisdom. A key player in this process has been the father of a friend of Heather’s. Eminent

horticulturist and author Colin Hutchinson visited one day to praise the couple’s early endeavours and make a few suggestions. On his advice, the water features have been given more prominence. Ideally, a woodland includes more than one water feature, creating a feeling of coolness and a sense of calm and serenity.

Heather made the pond bigger and added a fool pool. It’s a clever idea made of plastic, with a bucket of water and a plughole hidden by a strategically placed rock, and it’s set among ferns to disguise its edges. “It’s a very easy-to-create water feature that looks like a small woodland pool that has occurred naturally.”

It certainly does its job – tadpoles have been reared in it, and the frog that now lives on the island in the middle of the big pond is living proof.

Colin also suggested softening the garden by including plants that wave in the wind. *Corydalis flexuosa*, with blue blooms, and thalictrum, with white and pale mauve flowers, were among the candidates drafted to fulfil that remit. Plants offering a touch of silver, such as *Pulmonaria majeste* and round-leafed ligularia, were also added on Colin’s recommendation.

There’s plenty of seating in the garden, and that’s important, says Heather. “Without them you just walk

Left to right: The *Scleranthus uniflorus*-topped *Sentinels* by Morris & James add a splash of red and act as “formal bow ties” for the garden, says Heather; Murray designed the cantilevered pergola. Nikau palms add height in the background; Heather trims her ficus to form a scalloped edge that softens the wall.

through and work in your garden, rather than stop to enjoy it.”

And there’s plenty that she enjoys. “I love the way the wind plays in the leaves and the effect of sun after rain when the woodland is dripping. I love the dappled shade and the play of light through the trees. It really is a peaceful place.”

She also treasures the way the garden has naturally evolved. “It has developed a little nature of its own. For example, there are busy lizzies growing out of an enormous staghorn in the crown of one of the maples. The birds must have dropped the flower seeds in there. I like the haphazardness of that.”

It’s not just the happy owner and her human visitors who find the garden a totally pleasing place where they’re keen to linger. Heather and her large, attentive boxer dog named Romeo recently nurtured a near-dead baby paradise duckling back to life and through to adulthood in her garden. The feathered creature was first of all called Juliet – but as it grew it became clear that a name change was required! Julius has recently been released to a new home on farmland. 🐣



Hen and Chicken Fern



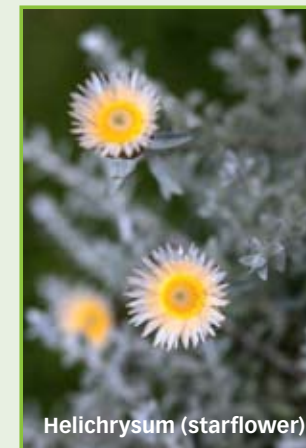
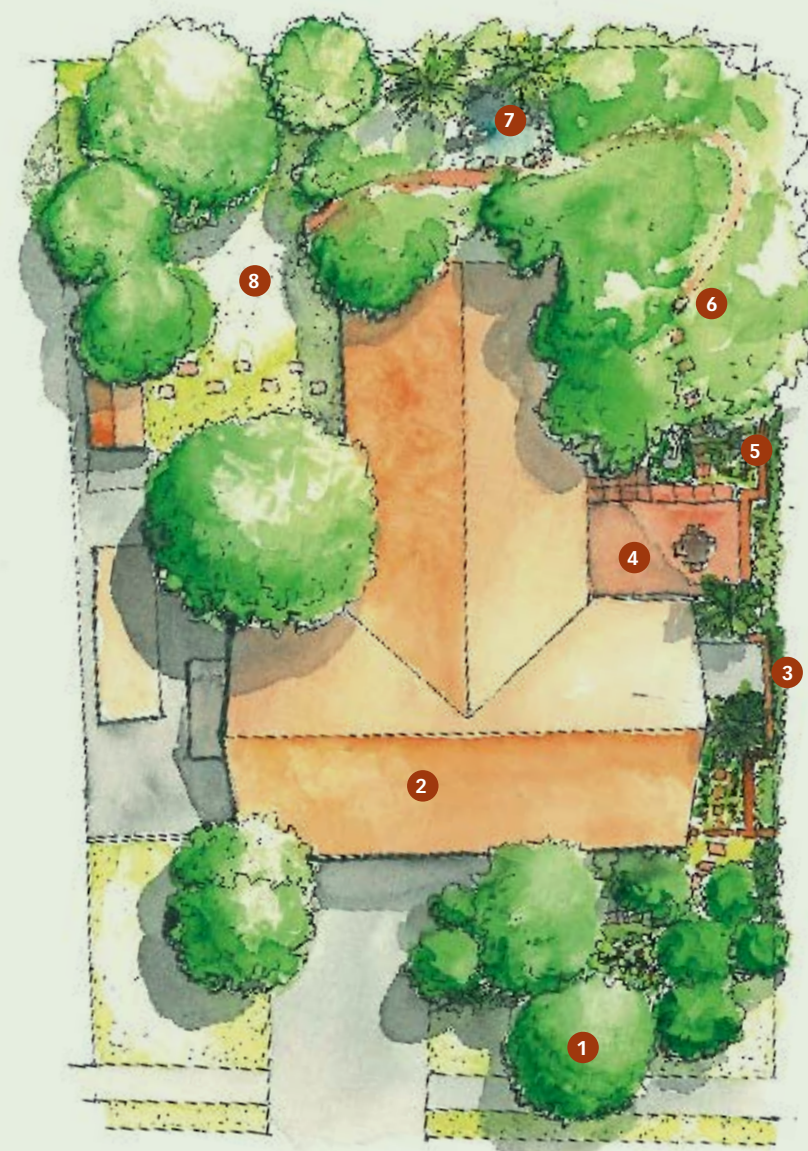
Brunnera macrophylla
‘Jack Frost’



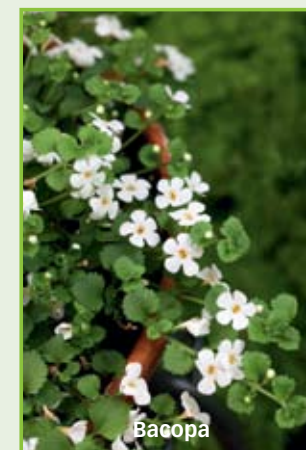
Staghorn fern



Thalictrum delavayi



Helichrysum (starflower)



Bacopa



Ring the changes

Save old issues? Compare Heather’s garden with when it appeared in NZG in 2005. It’s been developed and extended with new plants and features.

Garden plan

- 1 Grove of silver birch with ivy underplanting
- 2 House
- 3 Feature brick wall boundary
- 4 Covered & paved seating area

- 5 Dovecote
- 6 Stepping stone pathway through garden
- 7 Pond feature with tree ferns
- 8 Lawn

Plan drawn by Renée Davies at Unitec’s Landscape Architecture Department