

The New Plymouth landscape garden designer whose legacy keeps on growing

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Centuria Taranaki Garden Festival assessor Chris Paul has seen climates and gardens change over his 35 years in the landscape design field.

VANESSA LAURIE / TARANAKI DAILY NEWS

Every time Chris Paul drives past a row of healthy kauri on Courtenay St, he thinks: “Wow, I planted those.”

The six native trees outside TSB’s customer service hub are reflected in its mirror windows and, even in their conical form, the conifers would be tall enough to have a view of Taranaki Maunga.

“They are, believe it or not, one of my proudest achievements,” he says.

That was 33 years ago, when Paul had just got together with his long-term partner, Kevin Wensor, and was two years into running Plan-it Earth Landscape Design.

His business came to life on April 1, 1991, and for 35 years, he has worked on hundreds of gardens around Taranaki – and beyond.

“I do the whole of the North Island, but I do prefer Taranaki because you don’t have to travel.”

His most far-flung job was in Vietnam, which he completed without leaving home.

“It was all from photos and it was a nunnery,” he says.

A Taranaki couple got married there, which led to Paul designing the hard landscaping, while locals filled the gaps with plants suited to the monsoon climate.

At home in Taranaki, Paul and Kevin are back from travelling for real, and both are effusive in their praise of the Melbourne Flower Show, which they regularly attend.

The show reflects plant and design trends.

“Succulents are absolutely the rage, but Melbourne’s got a very dry climate,” says Paul. “So that’s the reason they aren’t quite so appropriate for here.”



Heat loving plants fill the view from the courtyard.

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From their dining table, the windows frame a courtyard garden filled with heat-loving plants, including the Chinese windmill palm.

“Trachycarpus fortunei is the one you can see out the window, but they’re on the noxious weed list now because they seed and come up everywhere.”

We’ll meet them again later.

Paul says he avoids using plants on the naughty list.

In the courtyard, approved favourites include a spoon-leaf bird of paradise, *Salvia confertiflora* and natives such as Poor Knights lilies, renga renga, Marlborough rock daisies and a nikau palm.

“They all do well in Taranaki.”



Birds are drawn to Paul's garden and he is more than happy to encourage them to stay.

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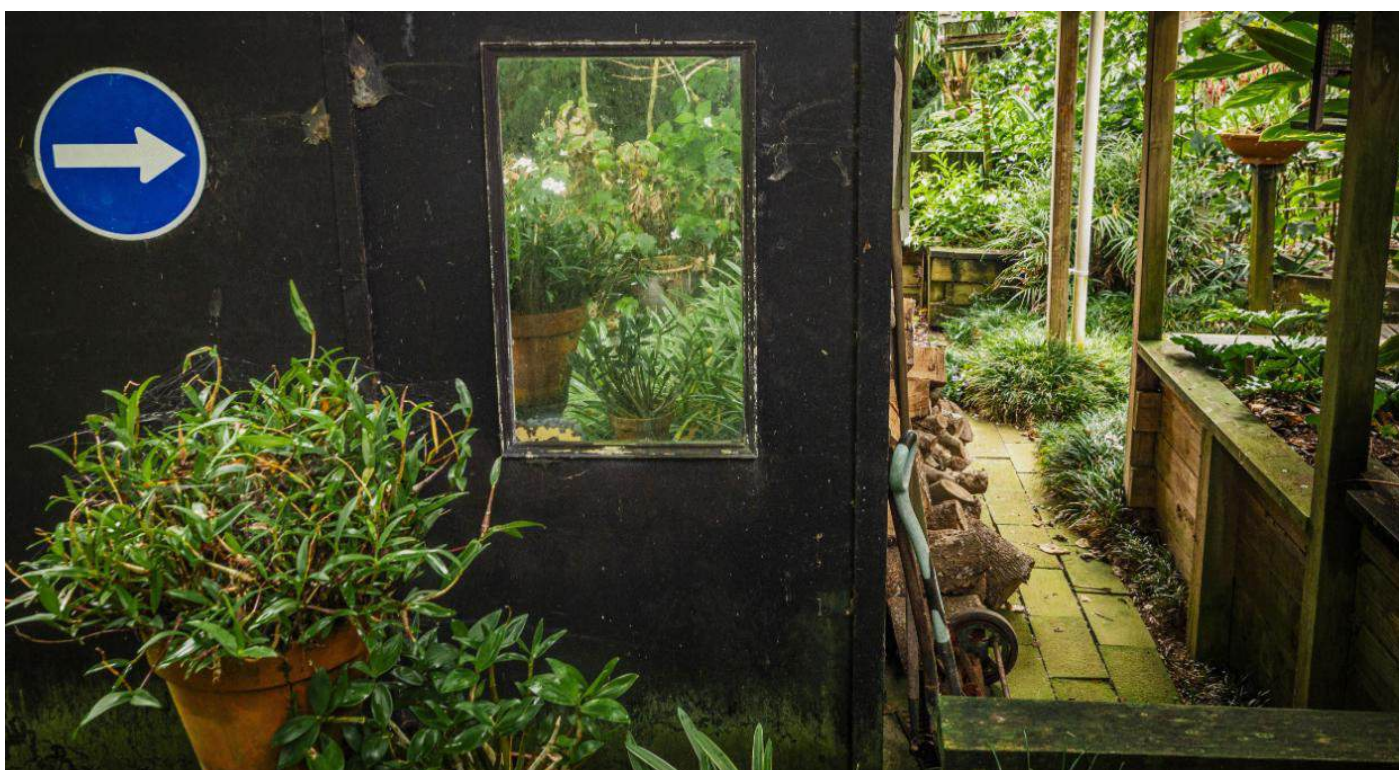
The layered hillside garden lures many birds, helped by Kevin, who regularly feeds them, and Paul, whose plant selection attracts frequent flyers.

"My absolute favourite tree is Sophora tetraptera – a kōwhai. Tui love it also," says Paul.

Deep within the steep plant-dense section is Plan-it Earth's former design studio.

"It's now storage space. There's old furniture, and old, old (garden) plans."

Paul once kept every plan but has culled the archive back to the past five years.



The former design studio is now storage space.

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Kevin helps keep the business on track.

“He has been doing administration for 13 years after his retirement from Corrections.”

From the slopes of his own garden, Paul has seen the wider landscape shift.

He has watched the climate change, garden styles move from cottage to tropical and subtropical, and plant preferences evolve and revolve.

“The latest garden trends include more wild, less manicured looks, which are good for biodiversity.”



The latest garden trend is for more wild, less manicured planting, which Paul says is good for biodiversity.
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The biggest change he's seen relates to the climate. “It's warmer winters, I find,” he says.

That small increase, about one degree, has meant he gets not many – if any – frosts in his Welbourn garden.

“We get more bugs now, because the frosts aren't killing the bugs, and it's so annoying.”

Plant selection has also changed.

“One plant, the Canton Lace tree, was always used as an indoor plant, and we use it as an outdoor plant all the time now.”

Not only has Paul helped design gardens all over the region, he's also an assessor for the Centuria Taranaki Garden Festival along with Tony Barnes and Jenny Oakley in the south.

Paul and Tony are also assessors for the New Zealand Gardens Trust, and the tall man from Plan-it Earth says he's evaluated gardens throughout Aotearoa.



Paul has spent years judging gardens, looking for those which move him.

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Some of the most well-known are Government House in Auckland, Ayrles Garden and Wetland in Whitford and Wellington Botanic Garden.

Around Taranaki Maunga, Paul has spent the past 10 years visiting existing and potential festival gardens.

He offers guidance, makes sure each property is in top form and helps decide whether potential gardens are a good fit for the Taranaki festival, on this year from October 30 to November 8.

“We give suggestions without being rude. If there’s something wrong, I think they want to know that.”

What he’s looking for is a garden that moves him.

“Feeling and soul are so important. A garden’s got to have a strong framework for me, and a softening with plants... a coherence, a pulling together of the whole thing,” he says.

“A lot of people get me for plants, and then I’m there talking about line, and form, and scale, and proportion.”



A number of gardens Paul has worked with have joined the prestigious Centuria Taranaki Garden Festival.

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Sometimes, gardens he has worked on join the festival. “That’s a good feeling – I’m always pleased.”

His own garden grounding began at home on Mountain Rd, Lepperton.

“That’s where my passion came from. My grandfather had planted the garden and my mother (Patricia) couldn’t cope with it, so I started looking after it.”

While his mother lacked the energy to garden, she encouraged her son to head into horticulture.



Paul’s mother encouraged him to begin a career in horticulture.

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“She didn’t want me to go to university. She said, ‘Paul, go and do an apprenticeship at Duncan and Davies,’ which is just down the road, which means I stayed home longer.”

In the early 1980s, he began his OE, heading to England.

“I worked in London, in the UK, in a (Chelsea) garden centre and absolutely loved it, saw some of the most amazing houses in the world,” he says.

In 1981, while still overseas, he coined the name Plan-it Earth – 10 years before his landscape design business came to life.

Back in New Zealand, Paul worked for David Bruce, founder of the Garden Design Centre in New Plymouth.

“He really was the catalyst for my design passion. We did lots of private gardens.”

For other more-public projects they had to think big, like the garden at the new Motunui synthetic fuel plant, which opened in the mid-1980s.

“Funnily enough, when we put in the plants, they (energy bods) said in 40 years the landscape will be mature and the plant will be defunct, which is actually almost the truth.”

While inspired by David Bruce, Paul always knew he wanted his own business.

Now, with 35 years of designing, making and enhancing gardens, he has built a loyal client base across generations.

For one family, he designed the original garden on a coastal farm, later shaped the owners’ New Plymouth garden, and has since worked on properties for their daughters and grandchildren.

“A lot of the gardens are private – you just never see them again.”

Which is why the kauri on Courtenay St mean so much to him.



Paul isn’t the only one who appreciates the view.

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Other public markers can be found on Devon St West, where six Chinese windmill palms have grown tall outside what used to be Shell Todd's office. Now, it's the headquarters for Worley.

Three palms are as high as the second-storey windows, and the other three are clustered on the corner by Dawson St like shaggy guardians.

He loves the palm trees.

"They're so tough – that's the best thing about them. They stand up to atrocious sorts of winds."

The windmill palms offer Paul a natural fanfare, while the kauri on Courtenay St stand strong – and could do so for 600 years.

This article has been produced in partnership between the Taranaki Daily News and the Taranaki Arts Festival Trust.