

# avant GARDEN

TAKE A STROLL AROUND YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD AND YOU MAY DISCOVER, AS PETA STAVELLI DID, AN EXTRAORDINARY GARDEN RIGHT UNDER YOUR NOSE.

Photographs: MIKE JAMES Words: PETA STAVELLI



**WALKING TO WORK** can have its advantages; especially for anyone designing a garden. A slower pace along the lanes and thoroughfares offers the ambler a close-up view of gardens that may not rate a second look when glimpsed from a vehicle.

Such was the case with a Pakuranga garden which had many surprises in store for this unwary writer.

For a start, both the house and garden appeared to have been recently contrived. Probably in the last decade, I thought. Sure, there were some large specimen trees, including an Illawarra flame tree, (now a mass of seed pods resembling fruit bats) that might have told a different story, but I made the wrongful assumption that the section had been subdivided. After all, the sharkskin black and contrasting white joinery of the hip-roofed house had a modern look, and the garden was contemporary, comprising mostly bromeliads in mass plantings.

"I have often admired your garden," I said to the owner when I encountered her at the end of the driveway one morning. I was clutching an armful of blooms plundered from the roadside. Lest she should take me for a common thief, I introduced myself and Judy told me the garden had been designed in the 50s by the legendary environmentalist and landscape gardener Odo Strewe (see sidebar). It is maintained by her husband, Ron.

When Judy offered to show me around I was wowed by the rest of the garden, much of which is hidden from the road by a neatly clipped mature hedge of mixed plants.

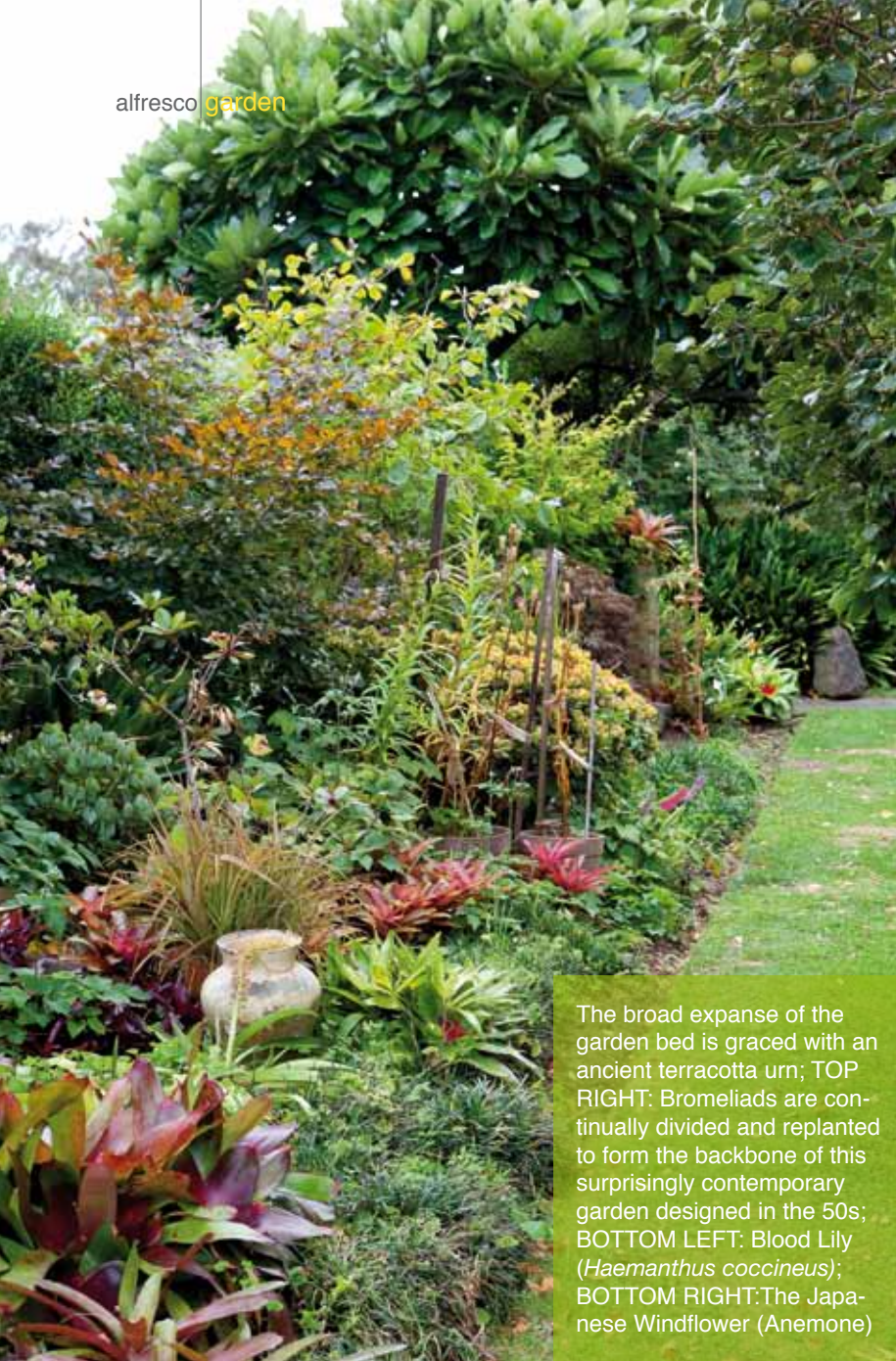
Behind the hedge, with its wrought-iron gate lending an air of mystery, the first row of bromeliads hunker down, squat and hardy. Great swathes of them, all types and colours, attractively grouped. The urn by which I was at first attracted lends a striking vertical element, echoed by a frangipani in flower and several sculptural groupings of hard-edged bluestone rock. Another stunning piece of oriental-inspired artwork shelters beside a weeping maple, under the umbrella of a mature puka. ➤



ABOVE: A pink and blue mosaic seat is set beneath a candy pink camellia hedge LEFT: Kentia palm seeds create visual impact in the side garden; OPPOSITE PAGE: A Barry Brickell bird bath forms a striking centrepiece

## DESIGNER ODO STREWE

Strewe fled from Germany in 1937, narrowly escaping a Nazi raid on the flat where he produced anti-fascist literature at night. He settled in Waitakere, where he once again took up the peoples' baton, this time in his capacity as secretary of the New Zealand Rationalist Society. Strewe was also a poet and author of some repute, a contemporary of Frank Sargeson and as such is deserving of a place in Victoria University's course on New Zealand Literature.



The broad expanse of the garden bed is graced with an ancient terracotta urn; TOP RIGHT: Bromeliads are continually divided and replanted to form the backbone of this surprisingly contemporary garden designed in the 50s; BOTTOM LEFT: Blood Lily (*Haemanthus coccineus*); BOTTOM RIGHT: The Japanese Windflower (*Anemone*)



### ODE TO ODO

In his official tribute to the late Bill Moller, Waitakere Mayor, Bob Harvey, contextualises Moller's relationship with Odo Strewe during the 50s and 60s: "Strewe was recently married and living in a small house on Waikumete Hill. He was secretary of the New Zealand Rationalist Society and a socialist of no mean repute.

"For a living he worked as a landscape gardener and he and Moller and a number of other radical students of the day who later went on to be half the English Department at Auckland University, scraped together a living putting down gardens and lawns on the other side of town. Strewe and Moller were really the ringleaders of social and political change at that time. They would rage through Auckland parties and university pubs joined by people like Charlie McPhee, Dennis Knight-Turner, Albert Henry and later Bruno Lawrence. It was good rabble-rousing stuff.

"In the late 50s there weren't too many original thoughts to rub together in Auckland.

"Art, architecture and politics were dormant. Moller and Strewe worked together during the day landscaping the gardens of the eastern suburbs and raved into the night planning peoples' takeovers and the swift execution of the people who were paying their gardening bills."

Artwork is a feature of this garden. The collection includes a Barry Brickell birdbath with a chequered history, having been once used by summer guests (unaware of its pedigree) as a cricket wicket. The owners came home to find it in several pieces and tactfully declined the guest's offer to pop down to the local pipeworks for a replacement.

This is truly a designer's garden. Beyond a weeping cherry is a moss-covered seat which provides a quiet place to rest in this serenely verdant landscape. It is mirrored by a twin, the other set against the wall of the house, where one might linger in a patch of sun.

Underfoot, a lush carpet of Mercury Bay Grass arcs away to a rare spot of vibrant colour: a mature candy-pink camellia spilling its small blooms over a pink and blue mosaic-tiled bench. Soon the Camellia Sasanqua hedge bordering this part of the garden will be a mass of blooms.

Wandering further, a giant staghorn dominates the air above a shady corner, while below and opposite, the bromeliad theme is continued both on the ground and in the trees where baskets of maroon bromeliads hang.

There is so much interest in this compact suburban garden; it's easy to forget it occupies an area of less than 900m<sup>2</sup>. Surprising elements abound. Longevity and pedigree for a start, but also a classical simplicity.

It may have started trends back in the 50s, but it has also survived them and remains a living testament to its designer; truly an ode to Odo. ■



"The house was designed by architect Tom Haughey and built in 1953. It featured in the Women's pages of the *Auckland Star* in the early 60s.

An Illawarra flame tree resplendent with seed pods dominates a tranquil corner of this walled garden