

# FLAXMERE ART IN A GARDEN



**WHEN PENNY ZINO** was a young bride surveying her new home, she spotted a small, spring-fed creek lined with willows. "Wow!" she exclaimed. "What a lot of fun I could have with that." And so began an ongoing journey of more than 40 years – the extraordinary South Island garden that is Flaxmere.

Recently named a Garden of National Significance by the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture, the 2.8 hectare garden comprises just part of the original 263ha property bought by Penny and her late husband John Zino in 1966.

John was born on the island of Madeira to a New Zealand-born mother. When the elder Mrs Zino returned for a recuperative holiday, her son was captivated by his parent's travel photos and eventually attended Christchurch's Lincoln University before buying the Hawarden farm, Flaxmere.

The house was "a two eyes and a nose house" built in 1890'. Surrounded by a veritable jungle of noxious weeds and nuisance plants planted so close the house received a scant hour of sunshine a day.

"It was a thicket of macrocarpa, prunus, ivy, periwinkle and twitch," Penny recalls. The twitch was to become a blessing in disguise. "A very dear friend was visiting from Auckland. When she saw the twitch she exclaimed 'I don't know how you can live like this, Penny!' so she took up the fork and began to dig it out. Well, I took up where she left off, and I haven't stopped since."

The early settlers had planted, albeit too closely, in an effort to stave off the effects of the dreaded Norwest wind that whips across North Canterbury with such terrible force it can tear the limbs off trees as if for kindling. "The wind can be horrendous. It's an extreme climate; the summers are hot and dry and the winters cold. There's nothing between us and the Southern Alps...plants have to be tough."

Penny completely cleared the site of the overgrown trees - willows, pines as tall as Lombardy poplars and the ever-present macrocarpa; all except a few spindly oak trees and a lawsonia. The macrocarpa was milled for fencing. "I planted three more distant layers and now I'm taking them out again, one at a time," she muses. In went more poplars, oregons, pines, pin oaks and cedars. >



OPPOSITE PAGE: *Rose* Sam Harrison  
TOP LEFT: *Mother and Baby Bird* Sam Genet;  
TOP RIGHT: *Lady Hook art 2* Anna Korver;  
ABOVE: *Firedance* Grant Palliser



These were followed by ashes, including the spectacular claret ash; maples, cherry trees, Amelanchiar, ritus cotinus and nylssa silvatica. "I took my mother's advice. She is an artist and I have been very influenced by her. She suggested I begin by planting things that would give a show in spring and again in autumn."

One of her abiding favourites is Viburnum Burkwoodii. "Half the leaves turn red in autumn. It's an extraordinary plant." Penny also recommends azalaeas, spirea and dogwood cornus.

In contrast to the inherited garden, Penny planted well back from the house, leaving a large lawn to be enjoyed by her three children, now adults who remain in the district where they grew up, as Penny herself did.

The original house was remodeled in 1973 to add an upper story and more living rooms at either end. The farm, meanwhile, has more than doubled in size and these days her seven grandsons are regular visitors. "I'm very blessed that my children live so close; and I'm adoring being a grandmother," she exclaims.

Ponds are a dramatic feature of Flaxmere. There are five in all, plus a rill beside the house. Many are a

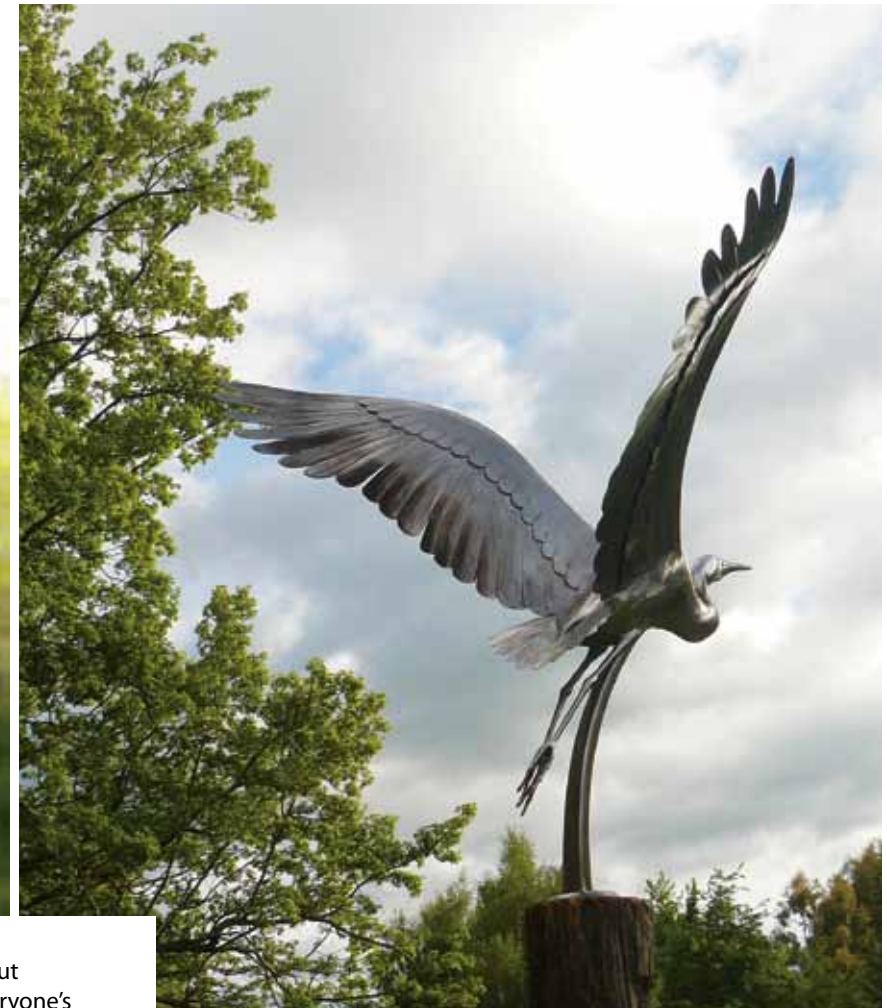
home to wildlife which provides another dimension to the garden. Penny plants shrubs like grevillia to attract them. She has one black swan but would love more and is also hoping to encourage more breeding pairs of South Island grey teal.

A formal swimming pool adds a striking dash of turquoise contrasting sharply, yet seductively with the verdant sweep of lawn and neatly clipped topiary balls when viewed from the gentle terraces above it. Beyond the pool, the eye is drawn to rest momentarily upon the middle-distance where a copper-coloured spire sculpture sits, artfully-placed, against the awesome backdrop of the planted landscape.

Sculpture placement has become a well-developed skill of Penny's since she and her friend Alison Meyer came up with the idea of creating a showcase for the district's many artists and sculptors. The original concept, Art in Gardens began six years ago.

"We simply hoped to help put the district on the map," Penny explains. Initially the art was displayed in three gardens, of which Flaxmere was one. By the second year, Art in a Garden, as the annual show is now called, had found its permanent home. >

“The tranquil gardens of Flaxmere provide a perfect backdrop for sculpture placement during Art in a Garden”



"It's a huge undertaking. Every year I say it's my last; but I always feel so humble when it's all set up and I see everyone's creativity. And all too soon I find myself back into planning for the next year."

While the sculpture is placed to maximum effect throughout the manicured grounds, paintings can be viewed inside the property's restored barn with loft, also C1890s.

"Before John died we bought the neighbouring farm which had a newish woolshed. The barn had been used for drying flowers. When we began Art in a Garden we cleared 40 years of accumulated rubbish. That was fun. Then we put in some proper lighting. I'd always wanted to hold weddings here, but didn't have the energy to do it all on my own. Eventually a young couple married here and asked if they could take over that side of things..."

Penny's vitality is contagious. She credits the garden with keeping her fit. Last year she fulfilled a long-held ambition to visit Nepal where she trekked for 28 days. As we speak, she's preparing to head off for 10 days in Fiordland.

"A lot of people my age head to the towns and cities and they are unhappy there. I don't know what I would do with myself. The garden is hard work, but a real joy every day."

Looking for solace after John's death, Penny moved away to live for three years in Rotorua. "Losing John was the hardest thing I have ever experienced. It was a very low time in my life and I eventually missed the garden. I returned here after having neuro-surgery to let the garden heal me."

A favourite view of the garden is from her verandah where Penny sits happily looking down to the little arched bridge over the pond and back towards the mountains. "There's always something new coming out and someone around to share it with. I am very happy here. I feel as if I am a part of the land."

Dates for Art in a Garden 2009

October 29 4.30-7-30pm; October 30, 31 - November 1; 10-5pm [www.flaxmeregarden.co.nz](http://www.flaxmeregarden.co.nz)



TOP LEFT: *The wild wind of Nazareth* Peter Laszlo; TOP RIGHT: *Heron* by Raymond Herber; ABOVE: *Droplet* Rebecca Rose; OPPOSITE PAGE: *Terns* Jim Instone