

A FRESH



These passionate Tauranga gardeners created a heavenly haven following heartbreak

WORDS MONIQUE
BALVERT-O'CONNOR
PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER

START

LEFT The pathway leading to the main lawn at the back of Lara Bui and Isaac Weston's Tauranga house is flanked by a forest pansy tree (*Cercis canadensis*) at left, underplanted with alyssum and lithodora, and a flowering cherry at right, underplanted with big-leafed bergenia; Isaac built the paths and the gazebo in the background.

RIGHT Isaac's trio of sculptures, *Summit*, *Reflection* and *Journey*, and the verdigris copper jellyfish in the orange tree enhance the couple's favourite lunchtime spot, alongside the pizza oven; the tall New South Wales Christmas tree is a riot of colour in summer while Honey the cat is on garden patrol.





TOP ROW The flower spikes of *Acanthus mollis* stand tall amongst the dahlias. An electric blue copper kina made by Isaac emerges from star jasmine near the raised vegetable beds. A cheery sign from design company Lisa.Sarah adds a pop of colour in the gazebo; black taro thrives here. **CENTRE** Isaac and Lara are spoilt for appealing places to sit – this one has an elevated view over a garden full of wildflowers and hydrangeas to the estuary; wisteria grows over another Isaac-constructed pergola. **BOTTOM ROW** The pizza oven, made from recycled materials by Isaac and his dad Alf, disappears into a blanket of *Ficus pumila*. A *Tibouchina* ‘Lasiandra’ with its striking purple flowers was grown from a cutting given to Lara by her dad Cam. The rustic pipe and copper sculptures made by Isaac are big sellers; here they are surrounded by white-flowering hebes and plum trees.

The birth, nurturing and growth of Lara Bui and Isaac Weston’s garden involves a poignant story. The Tauranga couple found gardening and growing plants healing after accepting that children weren’t in their future. “We get to grow life in a different way,” Lara says.

They had moved from Auckland to Bay of Plenty in 2006 to enjoy a simpler life and start a family. The following years were both wonderful, thanks to their new beachside lifestyle in Mt Maunganui, and difficult, due to infertility and unsuccessful rounds of IVF. By 2010, a fresh start was needed.

“Isaac pointed out a property over the bridge in Tauranga that I’d been secretly fantasising about. Huge, with water views. I never dreamed we would actually get to live there. The day after we took over the property, we launched ourselves at it with great vigour fixing problems with the house first and then it was the garden’s turn.”

A passion for gardening developed, at a frenzied pace. “We didn’t stop for three years. Now we do the things we want to do but at a much more relaxed pace. We can’t imagine our lives without it.”

The property was, almost, a blank canvas. “It had a toilet bowl with parsley growing out of it, dead lawn, bromeliads, 80 tree stumps and some spiky plants. It was pretty rugged,” says Lara.

Weeks were spent digging out the tree stumps, then creating garden beds, gazebos, retaining walls and decks, which were built as Lara and Isaac were able to access the resources.

“A lot is reclaimed. We are known to our friends and neighbours as the local Wombles. If anyone is throwing something out that could be repurposed, we’ll get a call. All this made the garden development an affordable project and fun too,” says Lara.

A 1970s deck balustrade, for example, is now painted sunny yellow and used as a frame for star jasmine to climb, and the gazebo’s Japanese-style slats are offcuts from a roofing company. Many hours were spent chipping mortar off recycled bricks that Isaac and his dad Alf used for their pizza oven project, although it’s not exclusively for pizza. Isaac is a former chef so it is used for an array of delicious dishes such as slow-cooked pork, lamb roast, Christmas ham and almond tarts.

Fruit tree planting was an early focus – peach, plum, pear, guava, loquat, apple, lemon, avocado and orange, with the single orange tree producing 280kg of fruit last year. Trees offering “colour and softness” followed, such as forest pansy, maples and a standardised liquidambar, which Lara describes as a

BELOW Isaac and Lara with Honey the cat in the gazebo with its lush curtain of nikau palms, heliconia and stromanthe; pink plastic flamingos are a fun addition.





ABOVE A cobalt blue copper kina made by Isaac is an eye-catching focal point in a sea of flowers, vegetables and herbs; the towering hedge is eugenia and the palm is a nikau. **RIGHT** Vegetables are cherished at this property too, especially given former chef Isaac's culinary skills; the prolific orange tree heralds the arrival to this corner of the garden with its potager beds while star jasmine along the back fence grows up a climbing frame that was an old balustrade.



‘There are no themes and it wasn’t planted in one hit. There are different rooms offering different views’

BELOW *Acer palmatum* ‘Bloodgood’ and forest pansy trees frame the shady wisteria-covered gazebo which overlooks the estuary.

“ridiculously cute little tree”. She loved the look so much, she has standardised her bay leaf tree too. The leaf fall is left to feed what lies beneath, which includes rosemary, thyme, calendula and other flowering plants. “We have a lot of colour – it brings joy – in our eclectic, ever-evolving garden,” Isaac says. “There are no themes and it wasn’t planned in one hit. There are different rooms offering differing views, which is lovely.”

Isaac has built decks with wraparound seating to act as viewing platforms – the property’s southern boundary overlooks a salt marsh. Says Isaac: “I love digging holes and making structures, while Lara loves choosing trees and working on the garden’s layout and design.”

The couple take gardening so seriously that they have studied horticulture, expanding their knowledge on topics such as companion planting, food forests, soil management and drainage. For Lara, that led to launching an indoor plant business, Cool Plants, six years ago. After a dream run, she closed it last year to work alongside Isaac in his rapidly growing venture.

Burnt out after years as a travel agent, he stepped away in 2017 to create copper art full-time through two businesses, Isaac Weston Artist and Re.Work.It. His pieces include indoor copper patinated wall art and garden sculptures, many of which feature in their home garden and on-site gallery.

One of Isaac’s working stations is atop one of the decks. The estuary views, birdlife and increasingly beautiful gardens are an inspiration. “It’s a pretty amazing place to work,” he says.

Lara is a fan of Isaac’s art and his culinary skills. She loves that her husband knows that excess parsley belongs in falafels, mint has transformational powers when added to Vietnamese salads and spicy pork balls, spinach adds wow to lentil pies, broad beans work well with feta in fritters, that tomatoes are made for kasundi chutney and black doris plums are perfect for sorbet and almond tarts. Never mind the snow peas, she says – devoured on the spot, they never make it to the kitchen.

And when all the creating, in its many forms, is done there’s a garden in which to simply relax.

“Every morning we start with a cuppa in the main gazebo joined by our SPCA specials – cats Carlos and Honey. Lunch we often enjoy on the deck by the pizza oven, shaded by the orange tree. At the end of the day, we relax on our new little deck beneath the camellia tree and enjoy the view as the sun goes down – with the sun behind them, the forest pansy and ‘Bloodgood’ maple trees look as if they are on fire.”

The contentment is well-earned after years of hard work and courageous new beginnings.



ABOVE An *Acer palmatum* ‘Senkaki’ is tipped with colour while a double-grafted pear tree grows on the right in front of the New South Wales Christmas tree.

Q&A

with Isaac Weston & Lara Bui

FAVOURITE TREES: The New South Wales Christmas tree (*Ceratopetalum gummiferum*) teems with birdlife and seems to attract every type of bee and bug, and monarch butterflies. This and the orange tree were here when we bought the property. I also love acers – they are so shady and soft and seasonally transitional, with their tiny buds, fiery autumnal colours and gorgeous new tips in summer. *Acer palmatum* ‘Senkaki’ has fiery red bark in winter so when it loses its leaves it is still an amazing colour and

then the trunk goes back to green in summer. (Lara)

BIRDLIFE INCLUDES: Spoonbills, tūi (there are tūi babies in our trees every year), moreporks, falcons, kingfishers, swallows, rosellas, wax-eyes and fantails. (Lara)

WE PLAN TO: Add paths to link decks and fulfill Lara’s desire to plant more acers. (Isaac)

AN AREA VISITORS OFTEN COMMENT ON: Our cheerful gazebo, with its flamingos in amongst tropical

planting, its cheery yellow Hello Sunshine sign and its bright upholstery. It’s an elevated place to sit and overlook the garden and estuary. (Lara)

A SECRET THING ABOUT OUR PROPERTY: From the road there is no indication of what we consider a wonderland behind our house. (Lara)

THE GARDEN IS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC: During the biennial Bay of Plenty Garden & Art Festival, and by private arrangement. We love sharing it. (Isaac)