

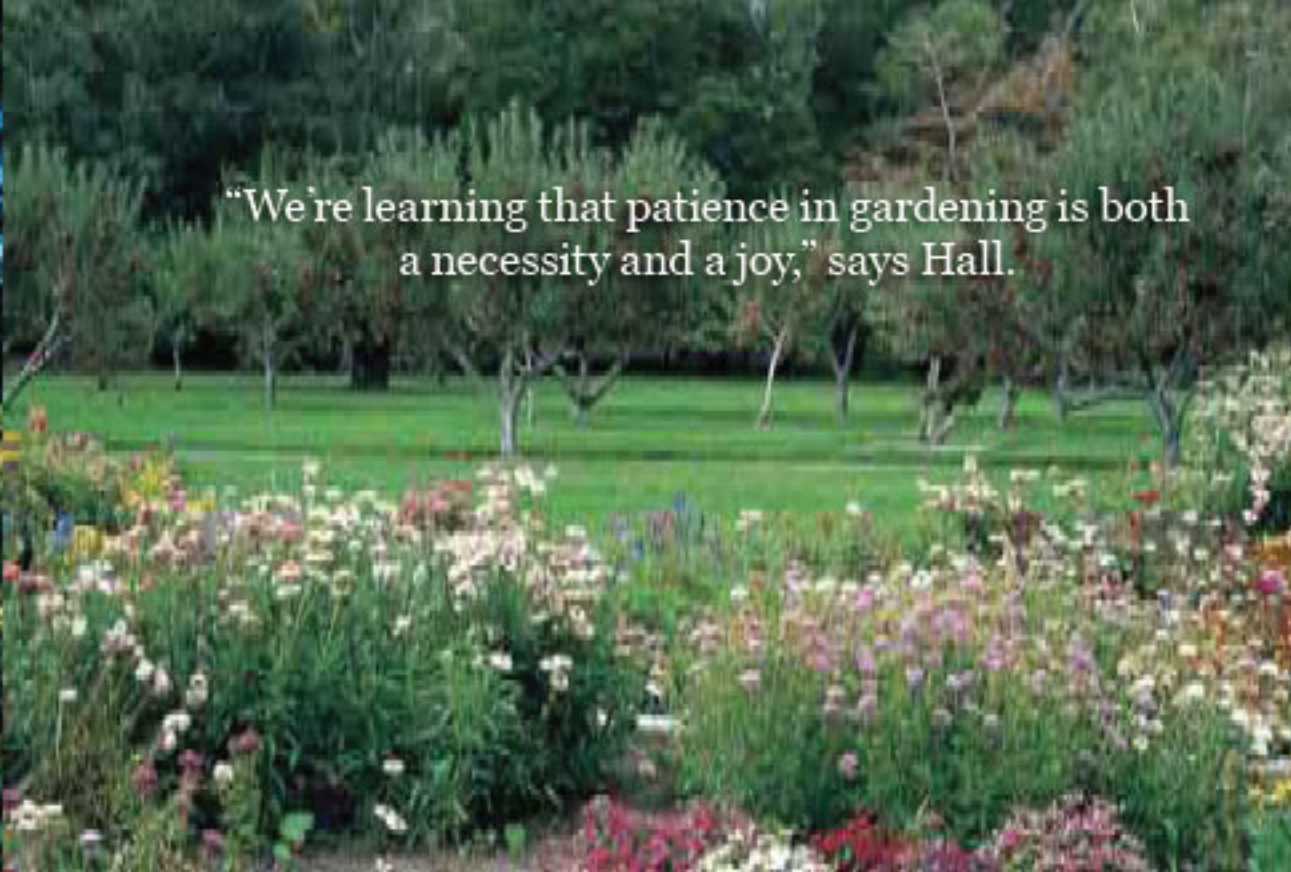
Canterbury's historic Otahuna homestead looks out across a pond to the daffodil lawn.



# field of dreams

Barbara Lea Taylor meets two Manhattan high-flyers who have revived the magic of an extraordinary Canterbury garden

PHOTOS: JULIET NICHOLAS



“We’re learning that patience in gardening is both a necessity and a joy,” says Hall.

**O**n the lower lawn at historic Otahuna in Canterbury, hundreds of thousands of daffodils – some dating back to 1895 – erupt into bloom in spring. “The original bulbs have remained undisturbed for a very long time,” says Miles Refo, who owns Otahuna with his partner Hall Cannon. “There are singles, doubles, splits, yellows, pinks, whites... People ask us to classify them but we can’t because they’ve naturalised over so many years.”

### When Miles and Hall first arrived at Otahuna, as visitors from Manhattan in 2005, it was “love at first sight”.

Otahuna was once the family home of Sir Heaton Rhodes, a prominent parliamentarian, military officer, land owner, stockman and horticulturist. In 1895, he commissioned architect Frederick Strouts to build the Queen Anne-style mansion on a small hill between the rocky outcrops at the base of Banks Peninsula. He called it Otahuna which, loosely translated, means ‘little hill among the hills’.

A landscape gardener from Kew was brought in to establish a suitably gracious garden, with exotic trees, woodland walks, a lake and sweeping lawns – plus all those thousands of daffodils. These bulbs were such a glorious sight that on the first weekend of September 1925, Sir Heaton opened the gardens to the public for the first official Daffodil Day. The event continued until his death in 1956 and was so popular that on one occasion, more than 5000 visitors were counted.

When Miles and Hall first arrived at Otahuna, as visitors from Manhattan in 2005, it was operating as a lodge. “For us, it was love at first sight,” says Miles, “except it was too much work and too much money!” They fell under its spell anyway and, when they returned about a year later, they “plucked up courage and bought it”. “It’s a rare and beautiful property, the largest privately owned historic house in New Zealand.

#### Daffodil Day

Hall and Miles are hosting their third annual Daffodil Day, in support of the Cancer Society, at Otahuna on Sunday 7 September from 10am-4pm. See [www.otahuna.co.nz](http://www.otahuna.co.nz).

#### Planting a lawn

If you plant bulbs in your lawn, remember to stop mowing as soon as the first shoots appear. Resist the urge to mow off the dying stems after flowering – they need to die back naturally to bolster the bulbs for the next year.

It’s listed by the Historic Places Trust, but over the years the soul and magic had disappeared. We wanted to bring it back,” adds Hall. Reinventing Daffodil Day was one of the pair’s early goals. “We wanted to open the grounds up to the public again in springtime so everyone can enjoy the daffodils and the exceptional history of the grounds.”

Miles and Hall spent four months learning the ropes of the business, working with the existing staff, then they closed the lodge doors and commissioned Auckland-based designer Stephen Cashmore to undertake an extensive interior makeover, while English gardener Steve Marcham and his team of gardeners set about reclaiming and extending the gardens.

By the time the lodge was reopened last year, the homestead offered a superb combination of grandeur, elegance and comfort and the sleeping garden had been reawakened.

Remnants of the original garden include the gnarly old camellias that line the terraces by the house, flagstone paths edged with volcanic stone,

and box hedges. “The smell of box is everywhere and I love it,” says Miles.

The house looks out over the lawns and lake to the snow-covered Southern Alps. This is a grand park-like garden not given to fluffy flower beds, but the yellow ‘Graham Thomas’ roses behind clipped box are a gracious touch each side of the gabled entrance porch. Leafy paths lead through typical Victorian plantings of oaks, viburnums, acacia, bamboo and trachycarpus palms. Miles also points out examples of the Victorian habit of ‘twinning’ where two trees – often conifers – are planted close together to get a quicker effect.

Beyond the iris-edged lake, iced with little white hump-backed bridges, is the famous Daffodil Lawn where 5000 new bulbs have been added to the multitudes already there.

“We’ve been lucky to have both the old areas and also new, cleared areas where we can start afresh,” says Hall. “It took a lot of effort initially but now we’re beginning to see the difference and we’re learning that patience in gardening is both a necessity and a joy.”

Above, from far left: Thousands of daffodils bloom beneath the original oaks; Flowers for the house are grown in the picking garden; Hall Cannon and Miles Refo have reinvented Otahuna House – and its lovely country gardens.

Below, from left to right: “It’s impossible to name all the different daffodils at Otahuna as they’ve naturalised over so many years,” says the estate’s head gardener Steve Marcham, pictured here among the spring blooms.



38 gardener



gardener 39

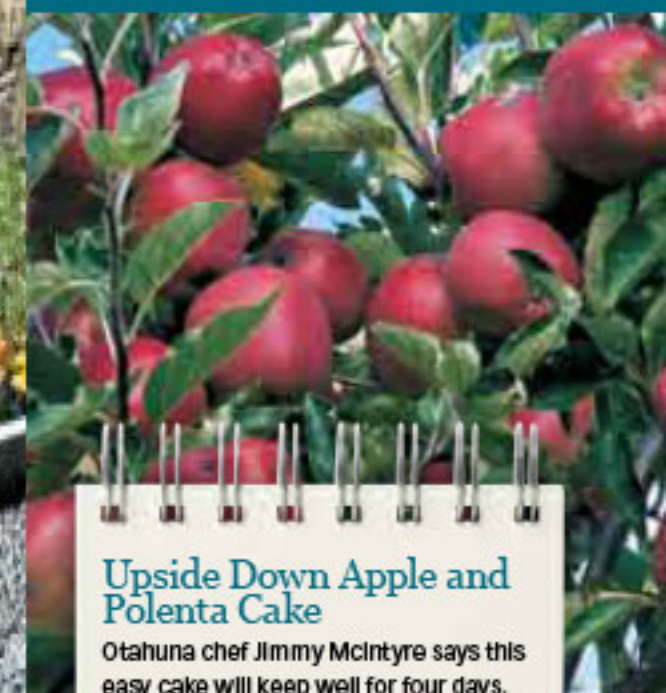


## Plant profiles from Otahuna Lodge, Canterbury



### PLAYING CHICKEN

The 12 resident brown Shavers at Otahuna lay around 10 eggs daily. They range free during the day but are kept safe from predators at night.



### Go for gold

Planted around the edges of the potager, marigolds do a great job of warding off nematodes and other vegetable-munching nasties. They add a splash of colour to the predominantly green patch and relish the reflected heat from the stone walls.

### Upside Down Apple and Polenta Cake

Otahuna chef Jimmy McIntyre says this easy cake will keep well for four days.

**Ingredients:** 4 apples • 380g demerara sugar, plus 50g for sprinkling • 4 eggs • 1 tsp natural vanilla extract • 1 cup extra virgin olive oil • 100ml apple juice • 150ml sweet white wine • 300g flour • 3 tsp baking powder • 120g polenta

**Preheat oven to 180°C.** Sprinkle 50g sugar on the base of a lined springform cake tin. Peel apples, cut in half, remove cores and place cut side down in tin.

Beat remaining sugar, eggs and vanilla for 2 minutes. Beat in oil, juice and wine. Sieve flour, baking powder and polenta and mix in well. Pour batter over apples and bake for 30 minutes. Cover tin with foil and bake until a skewer inserted comes out clean – about 30 minutes.

Cool for 30 minutes then invert on to a plate. Serve with whipped cream.

Every imaginable vegetable and herb is organically grown here to supply the kitchen with fresh produce.



### Tomatoes

Many tomato varieties are grown including the round red 'MoneyMaker', 'Carlton Victory' and 'American Beauty', the oval 'Roma', striped 'Green Zebra' and small yellow 'Gold Nugget'.



### Melons

Rockmelons need a long hot summer to ripen fully, but at Otahuna the gardeners help to speed up the process by sliding terracotta tiles under the ripening melons to soak up the sun's radiated heat.



### Banana peppers

'Yellow Banana' is a sweet, long Hungarian pepper with thick flesh and lots of flavour. This heirloom variety is an early, heavy cropper, taking just over two months after transplanting to start fruiting.

Fruit trees to supply the kitchen all year round were another of Sir Heaton's interests and his original orchard, behind the house, is being restored. There's an ancient mulberry which still supplies fruit for preserves, a cider apple tree and a pear tree with huge brown inedible fruit weighing up to a kilogram each – they were grown only for the show bench.

Not far from the old stables, the huge rock-walled potager was once the secure paddock for Sir Heaton's stallions. Karen Hann, the gardener in charge of the potager, says many of the other fruit trees – quinces, 'Blackboy' peaches, 'Moorpark' apricots, 'Gravenstein', 'Delicious' and 'Granny Smith' apples – probably date from the 1960s and 70s. The original tiled-roof storehouse is full of 'Granny Smiths' at the moment. "They keep beautifully and are the only variety we bother to store," Karen says.

Karen has a passion for old English kitchen gardens and has brought her knowledge, along with many of her own

**Clockwise from top left: Assistant chef Jeremy Schelblauer picks fresh herbs and salad greens for the lodge kitchen; 'Pukekohe Long Keeper' and 'Californian Early Red' onions are harvested in late summer; Colourful rainbow chard; 'Florida Supersweet' corn.**

heritage vegetables, to Otahuna. Every imaginable vegetable and herb has been planted and they're all organically grown to supply the head chef, Jimmy McIntyre.

"To keep the soil well nourished, I plant mustard and lupins and cut them down when they're about a metre tall," Karen says. "I let them rot, turn them under the soil and leave them for about two weeks before planting another crop." She also alternates leafy and root vegetables and plants little and often.

Karen also makes leaf mulch compost, and, for a liquid manure pick-me-up for ailing plants, she scavenges crayfish shells from the kitchen and brews them up with seaweed. 🌱