

Edible Gardening on Great Barrier Island



The Blackwells live just up from Kaitoke Beach, on Great Barrier Island.



Les and Bev Blackwell have deep roots on Great Barrier, a 285km² island just 100km north-east of Auckland in the Hauraki Gulf. Les's (one-legged) great-great-grandfather George arrived here in 1865 and, one presumes, would have met Bev's great-great-grandfather, Benjamin Sanderson, who arrived here in 1863.

Born and raised on the Barrier, Les, now in his mid 80s, remembers the gardens the isolated island's residents used to have – the five Medland brothers, with huge vege patches on their farms along Medlands Valley; the paddock commandeered from Bev's family by the army to grow veges for the 1000-odd servicemen stationed on the Barrier during World War II, where the watermelons and pumpkins grew so rampantly they escaped over the fence and climbed up nearby trees.

"When my father took over the cream run [shipping the cream produced by the island's farmers to Auckland] he would have nothing but full cream cans to take over and empty cream cans to bring back," Les says. "There might be the odd box of groceries brought onto the island but nothing worth talking about."

The Blackwells' property is bisected by the Barrier's main road.



But by the time Les took on a role as the island's carrier, responsible for collecting the imported goods and building materials and delivering them all over the Barrier, he found he was delivering boxes and boxes of fruit and veges that had been grown in Auckland to feed the island's residents.

"Crates of lettuces, bags of potatoes, onions and kumara, even pumpkins," Les says. "And I thought, 'Why are we importing these things from the mainland? We could grow them like our ancestors did.' So in 1995, when my knees gave out on me and I was forced to retire, I thought I'd start a garden and we could be self-sufficient."

It wasn't his first foray into homegrown produce. Years earlier Les had planted fruit trees in what the couple call the orchard, on the other side of the street. (Their property up from Kaitoke Beach is bisected by a public road.) A gardening expert had warned him that the area he planned to plant would be too swampy for fruit trees, so Les scraped out enough dirt, by hand with a garden hoe, to create 30-40cm high mounds in which to house his trees. "I must have shifted acres of dirt," he says.

Once the Blackwells decided to start growing vegetables too, they started a trial garden among the fruit trees. "Everything just grew madly," Bev says. "It was beyond our wildest dreams. We had so many watermelons that we put piles of them by the side of the road with a sign saying, 'Help yourself'."

After a few years, however, Les and Bev realised the orchard was too wet in winter for things to grow well, so Les decided to start another garden on the sandy hill across from the house (which, naturally, Les built himself) they've lived in over their 59-year marriage.

The hill garden now covers three-quarters of an acre: it's entirely fenced, to protect the crops from the exposed coastal situation, and divided into a dozen or so numbered compartments (so that Les can tell Bev where he'll be working and she'll know where to bring his cup of tea). Within it an astonishing range of edible crops flourish in an abundance that can barely be conveyed – suffice to say 850-odd people reside full-time on Great Barrier and you could be forgiven for thinking that Les and Bev wanted to feed all of them.



"The main thing people ask is why do you grow so much," Bev says. "Well, we like growing things and we give crates and crates away. There are so many needy people on the island, many with children."

Establishing the hill-top garden did not mean the lower garden would be neglected, of course. Apples, pears, apricots, feijoas, plums, kiwifruit, citrus, guavas, peaches, persimmons, passionfruit, quinces and avocados all grow there, along with main crops spuds, squash, kumara, tomatoes and more. There are two compartments in the hill garden devoted to tomatoes too: Les has 41 plants altogether – and Bev has a few more toms growing in her glasshouse, just in case. They grow 20-odd varieties, all ones that they know do well under the island's conditions: 'Capri', 'Brandywine Yellow', 'Brandywine Red', 'Black Krim' and 'Whopper' are all firm favourites.

Bev puts any excess tomatoes in a frying pan with some onions, garlic and vinegar and quickly cooks them before storing the resulting paste in her deep freeze. "It's very good in the winter for casseroles," she says. But she doesn't freeze as much as you'd think – with no mains power on the island, the couple rely on a combination of solar and wind power, with a Rayburn wood stove used to heat the hot water in winter when there's not enough sunshine to provide solar power.



(In fact, they've only had 24-hour power in the house since 1995, when a wind turbine was installed.) "Running an extra freezer puts a bit more load on your power system," she says.

She's a keen bottler though: beetroot, chutneys, jams and whole fruit. "The family come with a chilly bin when they visit," she says. "The apricot jam was very popular. They just have to bring the quart bottles and jars back."

Bev gets into the garden too, growing flowers around the house and creating a traffic-stopping tapestry of colour on the hillside between the house and the road (cars often screech to a halt when it looks it's best in spring, so the passengers can leap out to take a picture).

There are geraniums and pelargoniums there, some she bought, others that were given to her by friends and a pale pink one she took as a cutting from one near Shoal Bay Wharf that had been planted by her great-aunt. "Some did have names, but now I have no idea which is which." There's arctotis, poppies and daisies there too.



The Blackwells are strictly organic gardeners and the Barrier's isolation means they have to be pretty canny about making the best of what's available. Les goes over the fence to his brother's farm every April, and shuttles wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow full of cow pats back to enrich the sandy soil in the hill garden.

"I will dig out the top soil down to about 30cm and put that to one side, put half a dozen wheelbarrows full of cow manure in and then pile the topsoil back on."

He does this to half a dozen compartments one year and the rest the next. "I spend days doing nothing else."

Seaweed is another soil enhancer used here. Last Christmas Les and his eldest son carried numerous 10-litre buckets of it up to a wheelbarrow that they'd left on the edge of the soft sand, then took turns pushing the loaded wheelbarrow, 20 steps at a time. Some was dug in where the new potatoes grow, "so they had a good boost", some went into the compost.



Their gardening ancestors made a great deal of use of seaweed, Les says, "and I think that kept the bugs at bay. They never talked about anything getting blight."

"And they lived to a ripe old age too," Bev adds.

Three compartments are covered over with windbreak mesh, which provides a physical barrier against white butterflies and birds, and nature lends a helping hand sometimes too – the citrus in the orchard can be affected by sooty mould but Bev says one good storm and the salt spray blows it all away.

Sugar cane is used throughout the bottom garden as a fast-growing windbreak and, once chipped, as a mulch.

"A chappie who lived down the southern end of the island told me that sugar cane would be a good way to combat the wet in the orchard. He had a small plot at home so he sent his son back with three pieces."

Les now grows it everywhere, and rates it highly. Once debarked (the chipper doesn't like the leaves) and run through the mulcher he layers it thickly on the beds to keep moisture in the soil and the weeds down.



Any wood ash from the Rayburn gets saved too. "I put a lot of it in the beds where I plan to grow my tomatoes. I am sure there is a lot of potash in it to give them a boost."

Newspaper is saved and layered four pages thick on the top of the beds, and the apple cartons from groceries delivered from the mainland are dismantled and used too with grass clippings piled on top.

But the healthy veges owe as much to careful attention as they do to soil amendment. "We keep a close eye on things," Bev says. "The other day I went over the silverbeet leaf by leaf to find out what was eating it."

"I think it's great that we decided to do something like this in our retirement," Bev adds. "We had a very busy life and when we retired people said Les won't cope with nothing to do. But the garden gives us plenty to do. There's been a lot of trial and error. But I think we have just about got it worked out now."

Reproduced with permission from Jo McCarroll, NZ Gardener -

Subject to copyright in its entirety. Neither the photos nor the text may be reproduced in any form of advertising, marketing, newspaper, brochure, leaflet, magazine, other websites or on television without permission.

