

SOUTH ISLAND

# Classical Studies

The iconic Winterhome in Marlborough has been a lifetime labour of love

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The view through the Moon Gate along the Long Canal. Bay standards and clipped box add structure, while Mexican orange blossom (*Choisya ternata*) add flowers and fragrance

Fragrant Chinese wisteria  
(*Wisteria sinensis* 'Alba')

*Bricks are used extensively at Winterhome in walls, patios, pools and pergolas, but are always softened by Sue's clever plant choices*



Sue used to whitewash the trunks of the citrus growing in the parterre – a Mediterranean practice meant to protect against sun damage – although she liked the striking way it looked too!

**P**erching 30m above the coastline at Kekerengu, midway between Blenheim and Kaikoura, is Winterhome; a garden designed along bold, classical lines. Intersecting axes and cross axes take a visitor's eye in unexpected directions so it alights on focal points such as a trickling fountain or the bird bath that forms a centrepiece amid curved hedges. Strong, straight lines are created with both brick and box, although the classic aesthetic is softened with a froth of mainly white, blue and pink flowering plants in spring and early summer. There are dozens of roses here – more than 80 'Margaret Merrill' alone, as well as white 'Sparrishoop', 'Sombreuil Climbing', 'New Dawn', 'Constance Spry' and 'Perdita' – as well as massed agapanthus, salvias, lavender, delphiniums and foxgloves, interspersed with the towering spires of blue *Echium pininana*. The structure and control central to the garden's design somehow make sense in this setting, marrying the scale of the mountains to the west and the vastness of the ocean to the east.

Winterhome has been created by Sue Macfarlane over four decades – and it has been much-loved by New Zealand gardeners over that time (it last featured in *NZ Gardener* in 1995). Sue is now unwell, and while still living at home, is no longer able to garden. However, Winterhome remains a living testament to her plantsmanship, design flair and artistic vision.

Sue's roots here run deep. The first house here was built in the 1930s by her grandfather, retired naval officer Commander Sandford Critchley. The cliff-top site enjoyed sweeping coastal views but was dreadfully exposed to the prevailing southerly. A shelterbelt of pohutukawa, Moreton Bay figs and ngaio was planted and a garden of bougainvillea, hibiscus and jacaranda established on the eastern, frost-free side of the house.

Sue's grandparents lived and gardened here for many years, but in 1975 they asked Sue and her husband Richard, who were farming in Southland at the time, if they'd like to buy the family farm.

So the couple, with one child in tow, shifted to Kekerengu. At first they lived in the original family home, a Heathcote Helmore-designed homestead. But three more children soon arrived, so the Macfarlane family needed more space than the charming-but-cramped cottage provided. They engaged Sir Miles Warren to help plan their home renovations.

Sir Miles is known both as a great architect and a fine gardener, who created the extraordinary Ohinetahi at Governor's Bay. His enthusiasm for formal gardens in turn inspired Sue. Richard commissioned an aerial photograph of the property, and had the section where Sue's garden was to be blown up. On that Sue used a pencil and a ruler to sketch out her dream: an axis running north, with a second axis running parallel. And then she got stuck in and created it.

"Sue is a phenomenally hard-working woman," Richard says. "I would say she probably gardened solidly for 20 years. Her days were very structured: the children would go to school, and she'd start working. She would know every day what she was going to achieve and would keep going until she had done it."

Richard and Sue were both from gardening families, and had read a lot about it – Sue treated Russell Page's *Education of a Gardener* almost as a Bible. "But to be honest I am not sure when Sue 'got' gardening," Richard says. "All I know is once we extended the house, she became more and more interested. When we came here there was a garden that had been created by her grandparents, but Sue has a real flair for design and I think she was keen to make her own mark here too."

*Sue Macfarlane's first attempts at expanding the garden faced a set back when Cyclone Alison struck the Kaikoura coast in 1975*

It's fair to say that Kekerengu is not the easiest place to be a gardener. It is easier perhaps than it once was – the pines and macrocarpas planted to the south by Sue's grandparents now give the site shelter from the prevailing southerly wind – but there are still the extremely dry summer conditions to endure.

While there is adequate water for the stock on the farm, there has never been enough to provide extensive irrigation, even in good years. Which this past year was most certainly not, according to Richard. "Right now we are in a severe drought, as harsh as I have known since I have lived here."

The dry conditions mean that Sue has had to be clever in her planting choices: especially because the water she had available came from a spring that percolated through deposits of limestone and chalk, emerging very hard – lime-hating azaleas and rhododendrons refuse to grow here at all.

For that reason, water is used only occasionally to keep lawns going or to establish hedges (although Richard admits that the roses, which grow everywhere, are cosseted with hand-watering when necessary). Instead, Sue focused on working out which plants would survive the extremely dry conditions.

"You'll see as you wander round this garden there are a lot of plants repeated," Richard says. "It's survival of the fittest here, and clearly these are the plants that can take the dry Marlborough summer."

When Richard and Sue moved to Winterhome, the coastal property was frost-free. But as the shelter belts have grown up, the microclimate has altered and now winter frosts are not uncommon.

"Take the swimming pool," Richard says. "When we moved here you would never have imagined that would ever freeze over but now there are a few days every winter when it's iced over."

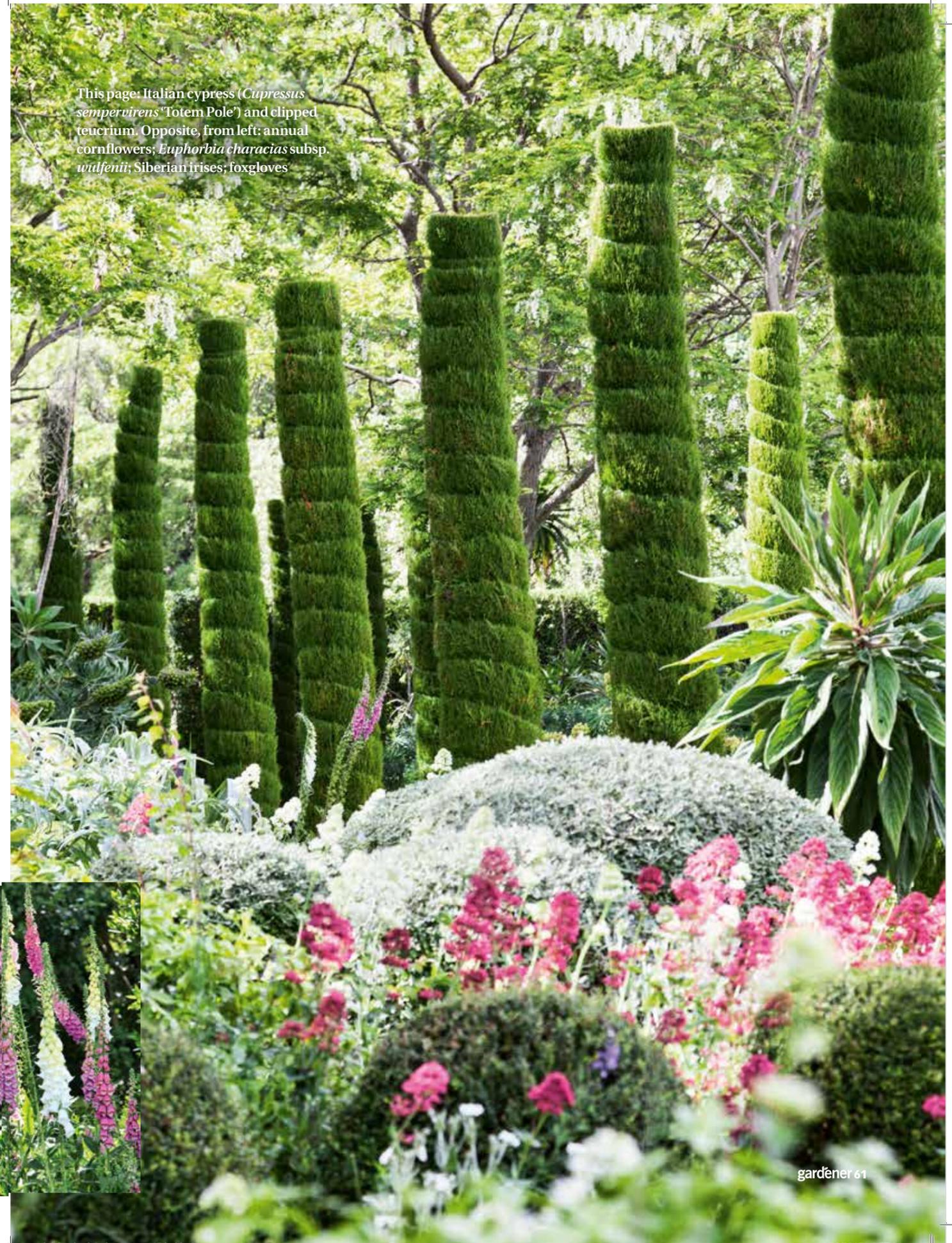
About 25 years ago, however, the couple planted an orchard of avocados – which are usually considered fairly tender. It is accessed via a suspension bridge.

"We lost a few trees in the initial years because of the frost," Richard says. "But now we have trees with a bit of height, they seem to survive a cold spell OK. In fact this year they were laden with thousands of fruit."

Perhaps because they are grown in marginal conditions, Winterhome avocados are famous for their intensity of flavour, Richard says. He sells much of the crop to their son Sank who has taken over the running of The Store, the seaside Kekerengu cafe Richard and Sue started 20 years ago. "They are nothing like those watery ones you buy at the supermarket," Richard says. "People seem to love them."

For more than 20 years, Winterhome was an open garden and visitors were welcome between Labour Weekend and Easter. Meeting other gardeners from around New Zealand and the world helped expand self-taught Sue's own knowledge about plants and garden design, as did the trips she and Richard took to see other great gardens all over the world. The Macfarlanes also forged strong friendships with other keen gardeners in the Marlborough region – Richard singles out plantswoman Carolyn Ferraby (who created Barewood Garden in the Awatere Valley) as a "great gardening friend" and a continuing source of advice and inspiration.

This page: Italian cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens* 'Totem Pole') and clipped teucrium. Opposite, from left: annual cornflowers; *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*; Siberian irises; foxgloves





Around the fountain, ivy has been trained up the tree trunks to eye level, creating the sense of a green enclosure



Unsurprisingly, once keen local gardeners started to congregate, talk soon turned to the potential of the region's great gardens to draw visitors to the area. So they formed a committee and founded Gardens Marlborough some 20-odd years ago. Richard and Sue helped run the annual event for 10 years before stepping down for a spell. But a few years ago Richard once again became involved in what is now called Nelmac Garden Marlborough. This year will be the 22nd time Winterhome has been open as part of the festival (it is included on the East Coast & Awatere Valley Tour). While the garden is still featured on a few international tours too, Nelmac Garden Marlborough is now the only time it is open to local gardening visitors.

Over the time this garden has been created and developed, gardening trends have come and gone. And although formal gardens are still as timelessly elegant a style as ever, ones such as Winterhome have become increasingly scarce.

In fact even as Sue was creating Winterhome, formal gardens were falling out of fashion. "Not many property owners in New Zealand are brave enough to install formal gardens any more," Sue was quoted as saying in Derek Fell's 2003 book *Great Gardens of New Zealand*. "They tend to be more expensive because of the structural elements and upkeep needed to keep their lines clean and sharp."

Richard admits there are fewer gardens like this one around now, and he understands why.



This picture: the Kaikoura coast. Below: roses grow everywhere, although they often need hand-watering



Seedheads add decorative interest



*Clematis montana 'Marjorie'*



"The modern trend is for smaller spaces, things you can do in less time. Both parties in a couple are likely to be working and when it comes to the weekend they want to relax and have some fun. The days of spending all Saturday and all Sunday working in the garden – they don't really exist any more. I look at our children, three sons and a daughter, and quite honestly I don't think any of them would take it on. They have seen how hard their mother worked!"

However, the garden is still enjoyed by the wider family – Richard says a particular high point was when their daughter got married there last November, exactly as Sue has always imagined she would.

"Sue knew where the so-called altar would be sited, where the marquee would be," Richard says. "She had planned it for years."

With his wife unable to play the same role in her garden as before, Richard admits his goal now is to simplify things, "to do the least work for the most effect". But he still enjoys living in this magnificent garden, especially in spring, before the summer dry hits, when everything is green or in bloom.

"I enjoy this garden every day," he says. "I think of it as one of the great achievements of Sue's life. And for that reason, I love it." ❀

**How to visit:** Winterhome will be open as part of Nelmac Garden Marlborough, November 5-8. Visit [gardenmarlborough.co.nz](http://gardenmarlborough.co.nz) for more info or to book tickets.

