

# Art & Nature

In a windswept Arrowtown valley, in the shadow of a mountain range, Janet Blair has created a garden that's truly remarkable

STORY: JO MCCARROLL PHOTOS: CLAIRE TAKACS

Janet Blair keeps a path mown through the long grass on the northern slope of her 5.6ha Arrowtown garden. "We call it the North Hill Ride," she says. "From there you can look down at most of the garden."





The autumn colour of a pin oak (*Quercus palustris*).

A great deal has changed since Janet Blair first saw the windswept valley in Arrowtown that has been her home for the last 40-odd years.

The Central Otago region itself has altered almost out of recognition over this time. The thriving local wine industry has developed mainly during this period, tourism to the region has increased exponentially and the number of residents of Arrowtown has grown from just a couple of hundred then, to several thousand today.

But few of the differences wrought by the passage of these years are quite so spectacularly dramatic as the changes Janet has made to this 5.6ha property. Where a working dairy farm had been, there is now a remarkable garden, created by this remarkable woman, in the shadow of the Remarkables mountain range.

Janet and her husband John, an architect, moved to the area in the 1970s and fell in love with the house – a low stone cottage built by an Irish farmer in 1864 and lived in by the same family for two generations more. “It was the first house we bought as a married couple so that was terribly exciting,” Janet says. “And we loved the feeling of living within a sense of history.”

Janet didn’t fall in love with the garden when she arrived however, simply because there wasn’t one. The house stood amidst bare paddocks, on what was, at least until the Blairs moved in, a working farm. Given the extremes of climate this garden is routinely subjected to – Janet has recorded temperatures as low as -19°C in winter and in summer the days hit the mid to high 30°Cs more often than not – simply keeping the farm going had fully occupied the time of the previous inhabitants. “A garden simply hadn’t been viewed as necessary on a working farm,” Janet says.

The couple arrived with two infant daughters Alexandra and Janey in tow, and a third girl, Charlotte, followed, so Janet was “a little occupied” for the first few years. But with Charlotte still small enough to require afternoon sleeps, her mother turned her considerable energies to the garden.

“I knew I wanted to live amongst the beauty of nature,” she says. “It was as simple as that. But there were no trees here, no shelter and no bird song. And of course I wasn’t a gardener. So I simply started digging up the paddocks.”

When you visit this garden today and see the great avenue of horse chestnuts and ash trees, the curving ribbons of box, yew and hornbeam hedges, and the long stone walls edging beds of white roses it is hard to believe that every plant on the property was planted by Janet herself. When the Blairs arrived, there were very few trees on the property, apart from the already ancient poplars on the boundary. With no reliable water source, Janet had to carry water by hand to every new planting too. “It is true that I dug every inch of where there is garden today,” she says. “And all by hand. There was no machinery involved. It was sheer hard physical work. But I was young. And I was someone with a great deal of determination.”

Keen to learn, this then-novice devoured gardening books, and cites legendary twentieth century gardener and landscaper Russell Page’s autobiography *The Education of a Gardener* as a seminal influence, even today.

“It was quite a daunting tome for a beginner,” Janet says. “But I learned so much from his principals of gardening. He believed in using classic plants. So I decided very early on I would use box, yew and beech as the framework. Being a complete novice, I made a lot of mistakes! But the one thing I learned from them all was when in doubt, don’t. I deliberated hugely before I planted anything.”

A long view through the vegetable garden to the remarkable Remarkables.

*“The views we have here are hugely dominant. I wanted the garden to be a foil to all that rawness and strength, to soften the experience of being in such a vast landscape.”*





The golden leaves on the apricot trees contrast with the dazzling red of the ornamental grape. The couple planted the grape long before the region had become famous for its viticulture – John said at the time he suspected grapes might do “rather well” in Central Otago. Below from left: Box, laurel, lavender and *Salvia officinalis* ‘Purpurascens’; *Prunus* ‘Shirotae’; one of Janet’s hornbeam hedges.



Clockwise from top left: *Amelanchiers canadensis*; *Cornus alba* ‘Sibirica’; the leaves of an ornamental cherry; *Viburnum plicatum* ‘Mariesii’.



Janet’s first act was to put in a small productive garden near the house. The Arrowtown of 40 years ago offered considerably less in the way of local amenities than the bustling township boasts today, so the veg garden was created as much out of necessity as desire. Homegrown fruit was an essential menu staple back then too. Janet remembers spending hours hunched over a preserving pan on the hottest days of summer, filling hundreds of jars of apricots to see her family through the winter ahead.

“The only vegetables available at our little local shop back then were cabbage, swedes and silverbeet. Anything else you had to grow. I remember popping in and asking the lovely lady behind the counter if she stocked sour cream. She looked at me, then looked at her husband and then responded, ‘Dear, we only stock fresh cream!’”

Once the veg plot was up and running, Janet created the island bed next to the glasshouse, planting lavender there along with other plants in soft greys and blues. “I wanted to reflect the tints you see in the mountains.”

Once that was done she just “gradually moved on”. “The garden wasn’t made all at once,” she says. “It was done area by area. I wanted a feeling of moving seamlessly between different spaces with different atmospheres.”



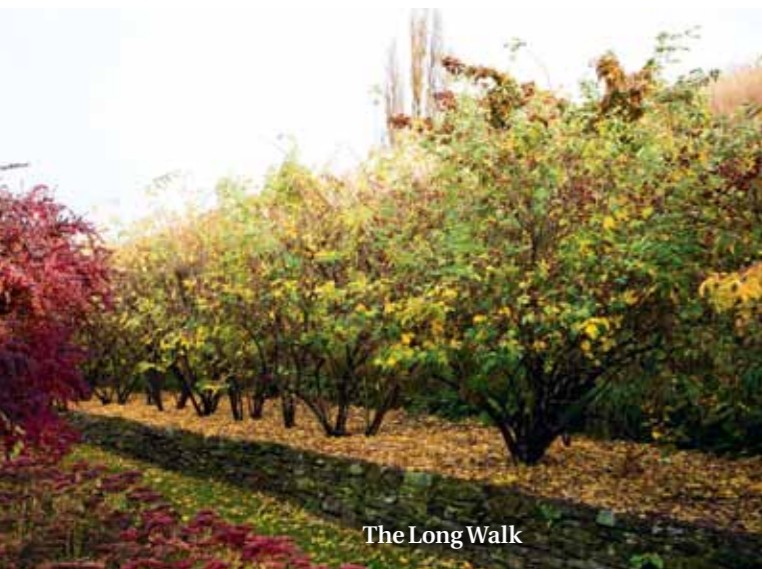


Medlars

Chinese quince

Quince 'Giant of Gascony'

*“Gardeners are true optimists because we are always looking forward with great anticipation.”*



The Long Walk



Janet harvesting quinces. “I make a lot of quince paste and apple and quince pies. I give a lot away too.”

Plants in all these different spaces, and through all four seasons, still reference the distinctive hues of the Central Otago landscape. In spring and summer, this garden is blue, white and green, and notable plants includes the *Iris* ‘Lucy’s Blue Silk’, lofty delphiniums, spiky Mediterranean sea holly (*Eryngium bourgatii*), *Philadelphus* ‘Frosty Morn’, the magnificent white rose ‘Alba Semiplena’ that grows in the stone wall-edged bed that lines the Long Walk and the pale, lacy flowers of the aged elderberry trees. But in autumn, the greens, whites and blues give way to golds, reds and purples, both in this garden and in this vast landscape. Viburnums, berberis and sedums ensure a dazzling autumn display, while the red stems of the dogwoods add colour even in the winter snow.

The plants in the sinuous box hedges, which are such a feature now, were all propagated by Janet from cuttings. “I had a whole paddock which I used expressly for buxus cuttings,” she says. “All the hedges existed in my mind, so I put the gardens in and the buxus came later.”

Janet cuts the hedges herself, once a year toward the end of summer. “It takes weeks,” she admits. “But you need to do it at that time of year so it can harden off. Otherwise it will brown off in the first frost.”

In 2000, Janet says, she had to decide whether to stop planting or to carry on and create the garden she could see in her imagination. “I decided to carry on,” she says blithely. “The fences were pulled out, the donkeys and horses had to be sold. The garden continued.”

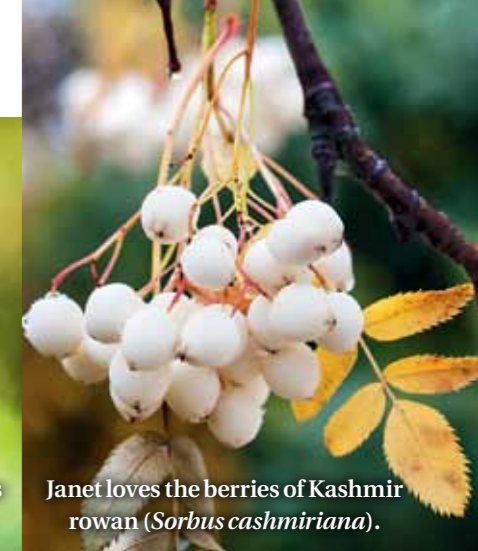
Although she’s not quite sure how big the garden she maintains today is – “I suppose it might take about an hour to walk around it, depending on who was walking with me, and their level of interest” – she admits it’s an enormous commitment keeping up what she has created. For the last six years she has had someone help with weeding once a week, but she also works in the garden herself every day, often for as long as the light allows.

“I remember my father saying to me, and this was many years ago before I’d even started properly, that I must be careful not to make a rod for my own back. His words do echo down the years sometimes! But now every season offers colour and interest and we have wonderful birdsong. I get a sense, often, of what I wanted to achieve.” ❀

**How to visit:** *The Blair Garden is a Garden of National Significance. It is on Lake Hayes Rd and is open by appointment. Admission is \$10 per person. Phone 03 442 1800.*



Oakleaf hydrangea blooms turn soft pink in the cold.



Janet loves the berries of Kashmir rowan (*Sorbus cashmiriana*).



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|--|---|
| 1 Entry driveway                               | 11 Barn and barn border                                 |
| 2 Lawn with specimen trees                     | 12 Implement shed                                       |
| 3 Copse of field maples enclosed by long grass | 13 Elliptical circle of amelanchiers enclosing dogwoods |
| 4 Double beech walk                            | 14 Stone wall   |
| 5 Vegetable garden                             | 15 The long walk  |
| 6 Woodland                                     | 16 Italian alders                                       |
| 7 Water race                                   | 17 Heritage poplar                                      |
| 8 Shelter woodland                             | 18 Lawn   |
| 9 House  | 19 Garage   |
| 10 Formal garden                               |   |

Plan drawn by Renée Davies at Unitec’s Landscape Architecture Department



*Berberis thunbergii f. atropurpurea*



The last flowers of ‘Iceberg’.



The hips of *Rosa* ‘Alba Semiplena’.

*Autumn colour*  
“Seasonality is very important in this garden because of where we live,” Janet says. “I love spring, and seeing the snowdrops, bluebells and trilliums come through, because it’s about renewal, excitement and new life. But autumn is such a magnificent time. There is a breathlessness in the air, a feeling of suspending animation, a certain quality of light at that time of year which is quite wonderful.”



*Cornus alba* ‘Sibirica’



*Hosta fortunei*