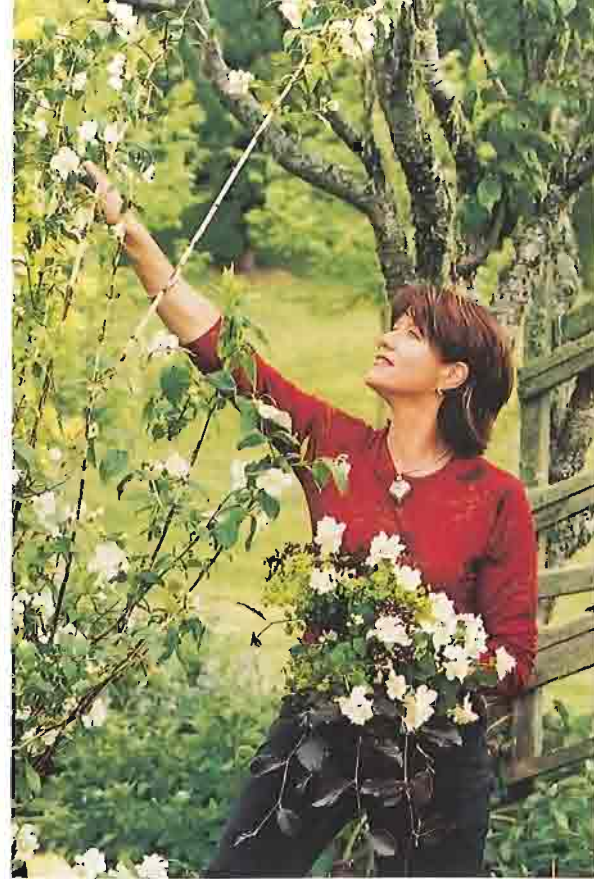




# Formal Education

Celia Laity's Taupo garden reflects her love of order. Gordon Collier calls in  
PHOTOGRAPHS: PAUL MCCREDIE





“Monday morning will be fine,” Celia Laity assures me when I phone at breakfast time to arrange to talk with her. “Come for coffee, I’ve only got forty people for dinner that night.”

She must be joking, I confide to my grapefruit. But Monday proves me wrong. Providing food for large numbers of people is nothing out of the ordinary for this entrepreneur – caterer, cooking demonstrator, floral decorator, garden designer and innovative gardener. Between all these pursuits she and husband Hugh run a spacious home inhabited on and off by their four teenagers, Cassie the golden retriever and Gingernut, the cat with attitude.

But Celia is well organised and at the appointed time she pours coffee and serves freshly baked chocolate brownies on her front terrace. The lawn, she observes, is exactly large enough for a marquee where soon 120 guests will enjoy the garden and a wedding breakfast she herself will prepare.

Lake Taupo spreads its waters in the distance. They didn’t have this view in the beginning, Celia says. When they bought the land six years ago Hugh recontoured the site and raised the building platform until they could see the lake. Building the house was no sweat for Hugh, a building contractor.

From their former property just along the road they were able to bring some mature sugar maples, a big english oak and a few other fine trees. These started the new garden.

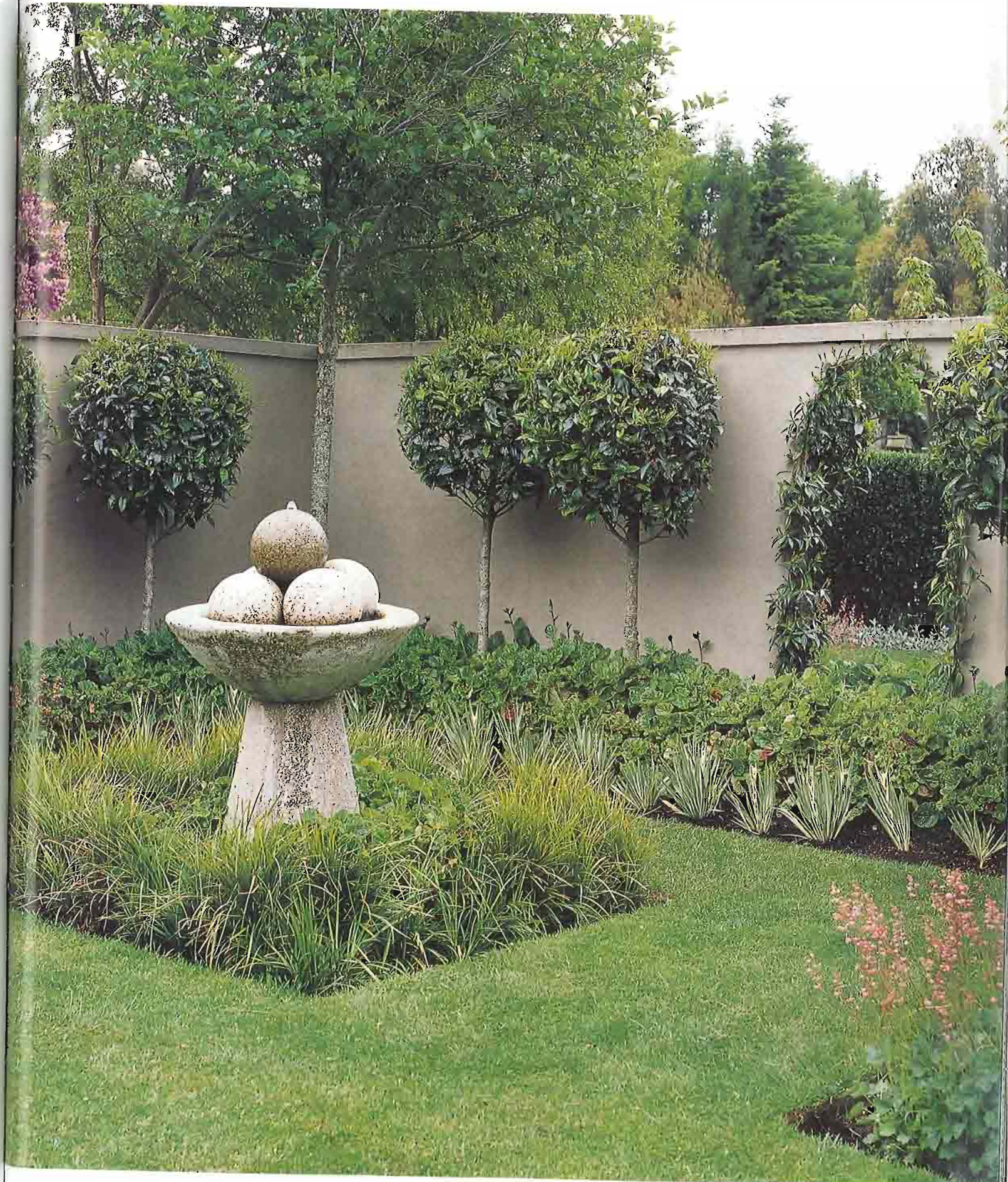
Celia, a trained teacher, smilingly admits that in her younger days she was not into gardening or cooking. Rather she was crazy about sewing and other creative handcrafts.

“In my first garden – I was about nineteen years old – I grew oxalis, the pink-flowered, highly invasive variety. That’s how naive I was!”

A visit to Sissinghurst in Kent inspired her and she went on to make a classic cottage garden around a house in Auckland’s One Tree Hill. ▷

**PREVIOUS PAGES:** Form combined with foliage and flowers are Celia Laity’s hallmark. Her plantings included bearded iris, clipped box and formal standards, globe artichokes and iceland poppies. The house opens to the garden for easy entertaining. The borders contain standard alders, the rose ‘Graham Thomas’, clipped box and cornflowers.

**THESE PAGES:** The garden behind the formal areas is delightfully informal by contrast. Celia loves to decorate the house with flowers when she entertains. Hugh’s wall is complemented by a formal design.





THESE PAGES: Hugh and Celia's house is lit up for an evening's fun. The garden is illuminated at night, displaying Celia's sense of theatre.

"With four young kids to raise I found gardening restored my sanity but it was a family garden, enjoyed by all – nothing too precious. I got into garden design quite by accident when I met a landscape designer; I worked with her for a year and she taught me the basics."

Celia soon launched her own business which she called Garden Schemes and Themes – she had just had her fourth baby so it was a great challenge. A hundred or so garden plans later she is still active in this field she loves.

Before their children became teenagers, the Laitys left Auckland for the good life in Taupo. Now they are all passionate about the place.

"This garden is not one of the m.n.o. variety – money no object," Celia says. "I prefer not to buy plants and I use what I can grow from cuttings or division." This frugal use of plants is evident all over her garden – the hedges

have grown from her own cuttings and the borders are filled with perennials she has acquired from generous friends and gardeners all over the country. Indeed the Laity garden style is characterised by a formal layout, overlaid by a sparing plant palette.

Celia enjoys order and the garden reflects this in the formal structure of its hedged courtyard and other areas. She uses pairs of plants, often on standards, to emphasise entrance points.

Two black alders on tall standards stand watch near the terrace table. Many of the borders feature standard trees – hollies (variegated and green), *Photinia* 'Red Robin', olives and portuguese laurels. Celia uses their foliage in her decorations. Some larger standard trees are confined in bonsai bags which contain the roots and help dwarf the tree. Celia says they still need occasional clipping but it's a great concept. *Buxus* clipped into tight shapes provide

emphasis and strength while tiny *Buxus* 'Suffruticosa' hedges line the borders.

Behind these deft touches Celia lines out the platoons of plants she has multiplied and nurtured. One of these is the mountain cornflower, *Centaurea montana*, a particular favourite for the violet blue flowers it produces over almost seven months.

"I cut them back and away they go again; aren't they neat? I got them as cuttings – that's the story of my life!"

Another plant she has split up and multiplied is *Sisyrinchium striatum*. This favourite, known as 'Aunt May', has spiky green and white striped leaves and lines a wide border. A standby is lamb's ear, used as a ground cover beneath an escallonia hedge. Nothing else would grow there, Celia says.

Backing the garden on the sunny side is an impressive wall that stretches along the boundary and contrives garden rooms with definite edges. A mirror attracts visitors like a magnet.

"This is my favourite spot," she says, "and I really love the mirror."

Celia is justly proud of the wall; Hugh built it, erecting first a timber frame which he covered with wire netting before applying many coats of plaster. The cost was a quarter of that quoted for one using traditional blocks and plaster.

"My husband has been marvellous," Celia says. "I couldn't have done this without him – and the kids, who help with the lawns and mulching.

"It's a family garden and we love to share it." □

