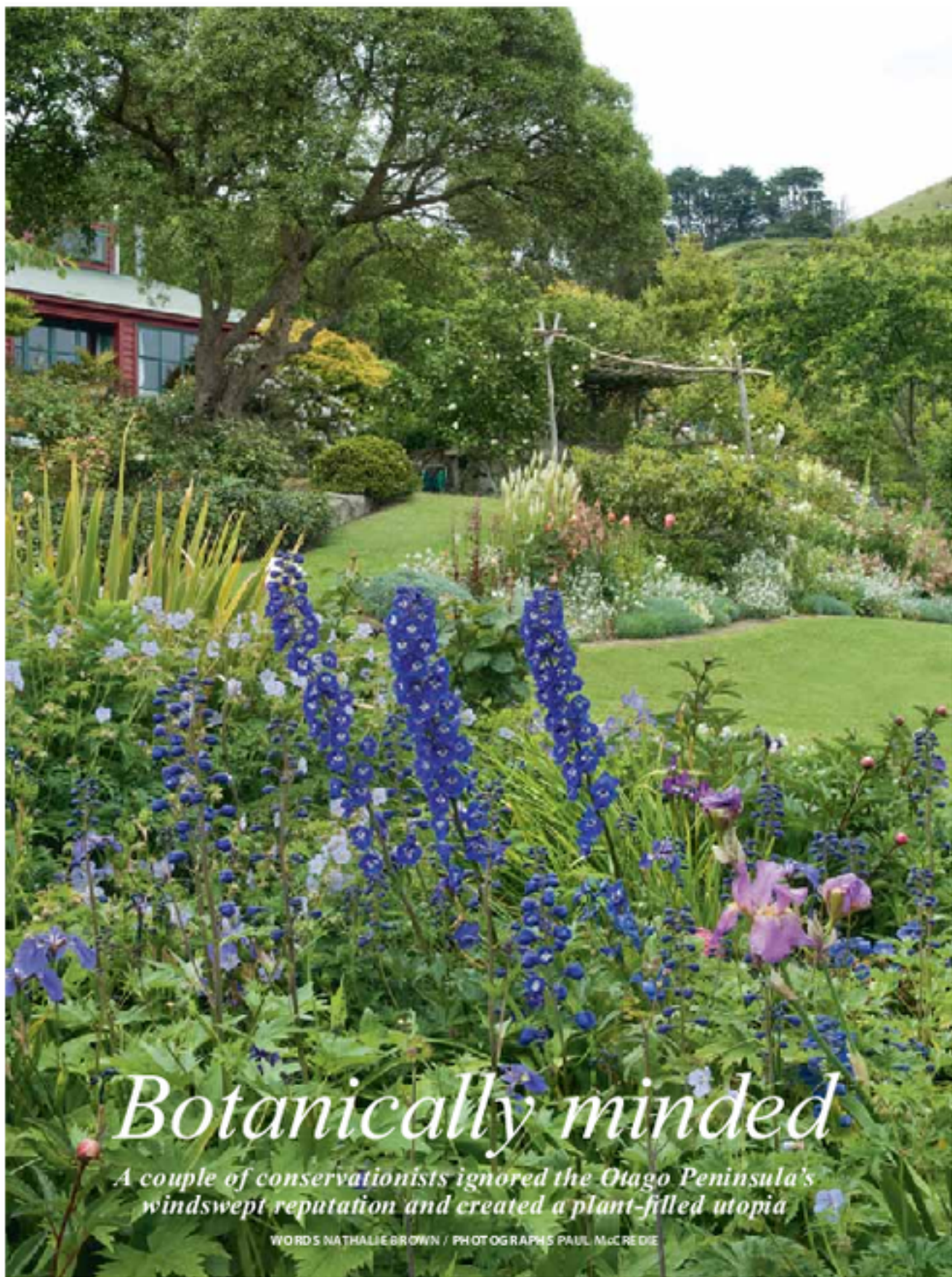




Botanically minded

A couple of conservationists ignored the Otago Peninsula's windswept reputation and created a plant-filled utopia

WORDS NATHALIE BROWN / PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL McCREDIE



THIS PAGE (clockwise from top left) In Peter Cooke and Anna Moore's Otago Peninsula garden, *Allium christophii* rises above a blue *Geranium x magnificum*. Roses mingle with mignonette, white Chatham Island forget-me-nots and annual white *Omphalodes*. The peony 'Coral Sunset' is part of one of the herbaceous beds. Edible artichokes flourish in the kitchen garden. The oriental poppy 'Princess Victoria Louise'.

OPPOSITE The extended perennial border with *Iris sibirica* in the foreground and delphiniums, peonies and pale blue geraniums; Peter says the biggest job hasn't been planting but "making" the soil from the deep clay natural to the area.





THIS PAGE A view of the mixed border shows peony leaves in the foreground, geraniums in every hue of blue and the rose bush 'Pascali'; *Prunus* 'Mount Fuji' stands to the left in the background and on the right is a gnarled old ngalo, the only tree on the property when Peter and Anna bought it in 1982. **OPPOSITE** Muted tones of apricot and tan have replaced white in the mixed border; the spikes on the cabbage tree at the back harmonise with the foliage of a Japanese elm, *Zelkova serrata*.

LAST YEAR, PETER Cooke and Anna Moore brought in their first macadamia harvest. The couple gathered 20 nuts from a tree they had planted 27 years earlier on a bare clay ridge at the far end of the Otago Peninsula, which has a reputation as a rain and wind-ravaged spot.

Anna, a psychotherapist in Dunedin, and Peter, a GP in Portobello, bought 4.5ha of clay ridges and gullies on the peninsula in 1982 and have since transformed the property into a botanical wonderland. With time, dedication and expertise, anything is possible, it seems, when developing a garden.

Gardening brought the couple together as University of Otago students in 1974, when Anna was growing vegetables on a plot of land owned by her professor. Peter got involved in the project and the couple have been digging, mulching and planting together ever since.

Their three sons were given tree names – Rowan, Linden and Jarrah – and, though daughter Rebecca missed out on a botanical tag, she named her own child Lily.

Back in the days when he wore a ponytail, Peter was the youngest member of New Zealand's Soil and Health Association and, as committed environmentalists, he and his family have always grown and eaten organic food.

"Sustainable practices, caring for the environment, conservation and planting for birds are central to the way we live," says Anna.

In fact, bringing back the native birds has been one of their major achievements. The garden is alive with the call of the shining cuckoo, bellbird and tui and in the last five years the kereru have returned to this little pocket of the Otago Peninsula.

Peter dismisses the notion that the peninsula is cold and bleak. He talks of frost-free winters and a unique microclimate.

The garden is managed organically and demands 40 hours a week of their time from September to November. To accommodate it, Peter has pared back his medical practice to three days a week. The rest of the time he can usually be found in the garden. >





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Anna says Peter has a gift for organising form and structures; her own strengths, she says, lie in selecting colours and textures.

"When we first came here, the ridge the house is on was bare clay with a few fongloves and scrub," Peter explains. "There was one ngaio tree. On the facing ridge there was a stand of rimu, the most significant stand of bush on the peninsula. It was grazed and dying back so we put a QEII covenant on it and there are about 70 rimu and 10 pokaka (*Elacocarpus hookerianus*) there now."

Peter has planted specimen trees throughout the property and native bush is regenerating – the garden recently attracted a visit by northern hemisphere members of the exclusive International Dendrology Society, dedicated to the study and conservation of trees and woody plants. But most of the couple's energy has gone into an area of about 1.5ha around the house. Here the garden follows the lie of the land, with paths that run along the contours to form terraces, and Peter has spent decades building a series of dry stone walls.



A prodigious kitchen garden, hen run and orchard take up a north-facing ridge at the back of the house and the front lawn is encircled by a breathtakingly beautiful mixed herbaceous border, nearly 30 years in the making and reminiscent of Vita Sackville-West's at Sissinghurst in Kent.

"The art of gardening is to create a sequence of plants, paying attention to texture and colour," says Anna. "A white garden such as that at Sissinghurst doesn't work in these conditions. Instead I've planted flowers in soft coffee, mushroom, salmon, apricot and chocolate with the white. I've moved from collecting individual plants in the early days to much bigger groupings of the same plant."

Away from the house, the paths descend through shrubs and woodland to Peter's Gondwanagarden where he has planted species from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Lord Howe Island and South America. These include tree ferns, podocarps, cordylines, araucarias and a huge African dandelion.

Further down, shaded by a stand of magnolias, lies a valley of hellebores selected for their colours. It is possibly the most remarkable planting of its kind in New Zealand. And after the hellebores have died away, trilliums burgeon here.

Maple trees thrive in the lower reaches and at the bottom of the garden the trees are



underplanted with unusual hydrangeas from different parts of the world.

Peter and Anna run a small plant nursery in their spare time with the help of a part-time worker. Most of the sales are based on mail orders, but it is also open by appointment.

Until now their garden has been one of the best-kept secrets on the peninsula but they've recently received planning permission to convert a large garden shed into a self-contained chalet. They expect to have it ready for paying guests in September. Roll on spring time.

You can contact Peter and Anna on (03) 478 0880 or drpetercooke@xtra.co.nz ■

THIS PAGE (clockwise from top left) *Iris sibirica* with pink fluffy *Thalictrum aquilegifolium*. Anna with plants from their commercial nursery and Fern, the chocolate Labrador. Peter built the steps where self-sown aquilegias and verbasiums flourish. **OPPOSITE** (from top) Rhododendrons and a flowering cabbage tree cocoon the soon-to-be-established guest accommodation. Kanuka stakes support garden peas. Peter lets the chickens out.