

# black rock and coral charm

**Hill country farming and extending a garden in the Hurunui district needs adaptable positive people, and plants with a backbone. The Anderson family grow herbaceous paeonies, lilies and hardy perennials as a winning combination.**

**WORDS & IMAGES Martin Wilkie**

Driving across the one lane Hurunui Bridge is a chance to gauge the river's flow, and get some idea of grass growth in the hill country around Cheviot. This farming season has started well, continuing the recovery after a three year drought prior to 2018. Recently I had an opportunity to turn inland from the bridge, along the gorge above the river and through farmland for 12 km to Black Rock, Stuart and Debbie Anderson's home with its beautiful garden.

Until Arthur's Pass became accessible, the Hurunui valley was the recognised route from Canterbury to Westland, although the lower areas were not as well travelled. It's a rugged landscape, with steep faces dropping to gently sloping river terraces, which have been further carved down by the water. Black Rock homestead looks across the valley from a terrace which falls off dramatically at the garden's edge to the Kaiwara stream (a tributary of the Hurunui) far below. Stuart's father bought 400 hectares/1000 acres in 1939, which was increased over the years to 2800 hectares/7000 acres at present. The Andersons run 9700 Corriedale sheep and a mix of 560 Angus and Hereford cattle; and with Stuart's two brothers owning neighbouring properties the area is in good hands.

The garden has about 40 cm of good topsoil over fertile river clay, very suitable for a variety of hardy perennials: herbaceous paeonies, *Iris*, lilies, delphiniums, hellebores and bulbs; it's a tough climate which can be hot and dry in summer and bitterly cold in winter. Stuart comments that although winters have become milder (on average) in recent decades, his impression is that summers are not as fierce as he remembers from the 1970s and '80s; and the characteristic Canterbury nor'wester, which could last for a week of 30 °C temperatures, is far less predictable. With shelter to the north and west the garden is well protected, and gets very little easterly wind. Average rainfall is typically around 850 mm annually, a little more than Christchurch, and rises to 1000 mm nearer the coast.

Stuart's parents planted the original garden in the 1940s, and some attractive mature trees from that time are valuable for the garden's permanent structure. *Arbutus* Strawberry tree, *Malus* crabapple (most likely *M.* 'Profusion' with wine red flowers, introduced to cultivation in 1938), *Quercus robur* English oaks planted in a long sweep along one side of the entrance driveway; and a superb *Magnolia soulangiana* in the forecourt, around which the modern 'L' shaped house was carefully positioned. Old pear trees and other pipfruit from the original orchard have also been kept, just west of the house.

The original homestead was replaced in 1995—untreated timbers and extensions over the years made a new house inevitable, and the Andersons were happy to work with architect William Trengrove. The resulting building is characteristically urbane, beautifully placed at the far end of the gently sloping driveway and framed by the oak woodland on the left. The house is further back from the terrace edge (the old house site is now the main lawn) with tall chimneys, pitched roofing profiles echoing the surrounding hilltops, and crisp white Oamaru stone cladding. In its proportions and details I can see a definite nod to English architect Lutyens and his Surrey houses from the turn of the 20th century, which is no bad thing.

In early September there can be a dusting of snow on the hilltops, however around the house there's plenty of new growth and colour. The garden is full of spring flowering bulbs: tulips, *Crocus*, *Galanthus* snowdrops and *Narcissus*—Debbie mentioned in an email that 'the daffodils are coming thick and fast, so have asked for the sheep to be removed from the front paddock!' Many come from Pleasant Valley Daffodils at Geraldine, and are planted in drifts between the driveway oaks, along curving pathways and around the crabapple trees. Some fine clumps have established under a row of the classic Noisette climbing rose 'Mme. Alfred Carrière' trained on supporting posts. Most of the bulbs and later perennials are good for picking, as Debbie explains that 'my garden is very much about the flowers, or has been until now—I am a collector! I have only just got into mass planting and a bit more structure in the garden... and we do have some nice older trees'. She has planted more trees, including *Cornus* dogwoods, crabapples *M. floribunda* and the violet scented double pink *M. ioensis* 'Plena'.

In front of the house, pathways lead off in different directions from the main lawn. This is a garden which draws the visitor along to discover unexpected beds and borders full of unusual perennials, screened by rhododendrons and camellias so that not everything is visible at once. Scent is part of this process of exploration; a daphne is quite close judging by its fragrance, however it may take several minutes and another pathway to find it.

There are soft colour combinations you might expect in a classic English flower garden, with shrub roses such as 'Penelope', 'Buff Beauty' and perennial phlox and salvias. There's plenty of green foliage to unify the other colours, and Debbie is keen on brighter shades too, in their season. The garden has several kinds of euphorbia, including *E. characias* subsp. *wulfenii* with tall flowerheads of piercing acid green and chartreuse. This colour looks superb next to magenta pink azaleas—something to do with the clarity of light in early spring.

Pea straw is used generously, as it helps the soil stay cool and moist over summer and breaks down to a layer of fine compost (once the blackbirds have worked it over). Wax-eyes, bellbirds and finches visit the garden regularly, one of the benefits of having many different plants flowering and setting seed at different times. Quail find their way around the borders, and Debbie is watching the vegetable patch like a

hawk, 'just hoping the quail don't massacre it like they did last year!' The area is a vital source of fresh produce, and she started planting early this year to have plenty on hand for late spring and summer. Red currants are great for jam & jelly, and enjoy the conditions almost too much; they've been cut back recently to preserve some space for the black currants.

With an eye towards garden visits and family weddings, a new border beyond the tennis court has been completed, after an old double row macrocarpa hedge was removed. Stretching the full length of the tennis court and on to the edge of the terrace, Debbie's new plantings include *Cornus* 'Eddie's White Wonder' dogwoods underplanted with white *Pieris* Lily of the valley, and a mix of perennials. The tennis court is separated from the new border by a pea gravel pathway, which is kind to bare feet. Four tall glazed pots are spaced down the length of the garden, and pittosporums, coprosmas and other natives were planted by Jamie McFadden from Hurunui Natives nursery.

Debbie enjoys maintaining the garden herself, with help from Stuart who 'mows the lawns, rotary hoes the vegetable garden and is very handy with a chainsaw for big pruning jobs; and lately is being creative in making gates and some garden sculpture for me'. He also trims *Buxus* box hedges with formidable precision—these were grown from cuttings Debbie took from the Cheviot Reserve old Mansion House gardens 'and I did get permission!' she laughs. The garden can be irrigated in very dry conditions, using water pumped up from the Kaiwara to a holding tank; and there are natural springs further up the valley as another potential source.

Without the macrocarpa hedge, it's possible to see out to the west of the house, where Stuart has created a kind of parkland, with groups of exotic trees in the paddocks. They have grown significantly since the drought, and include liquidambers, cedars, walnuts, limes, eucalypts, *Abies* Spanish fir, and the big cone pine *P. coulteri* from Baja, California. The common name is no exaggeration—cones can be 35 cm long and weigh up to two kg.

Debbie owned and ran the successful Two Rivers café in Cheviot for a decade, and supplied freshly cut herbaceous paeony and lily flowers from the farm for sale. She still supplies the renamed café—Christchurch is a little too far to maintain perfect freshness. The plants thrive in their own enclosure on a gentle slope above the woolshed, and early paeonies flower before the lilies. Apricot colours such as 'Coral Charm' are first, followed by 'Sarah Bernhardt' and other pale pink shades; then darker pinks and reds; and whites are generally the last, as the lilies begin to arrive on stage.

*Black Rock is part of the Hurunui Garden Festival 2019, from Friday 1st to Sunday 3rd November. A special daily tour 'Hidden Gems' offers a delicious long lunch in the garden. For more information, visit <https://hurunuigardenfestival.com/>*