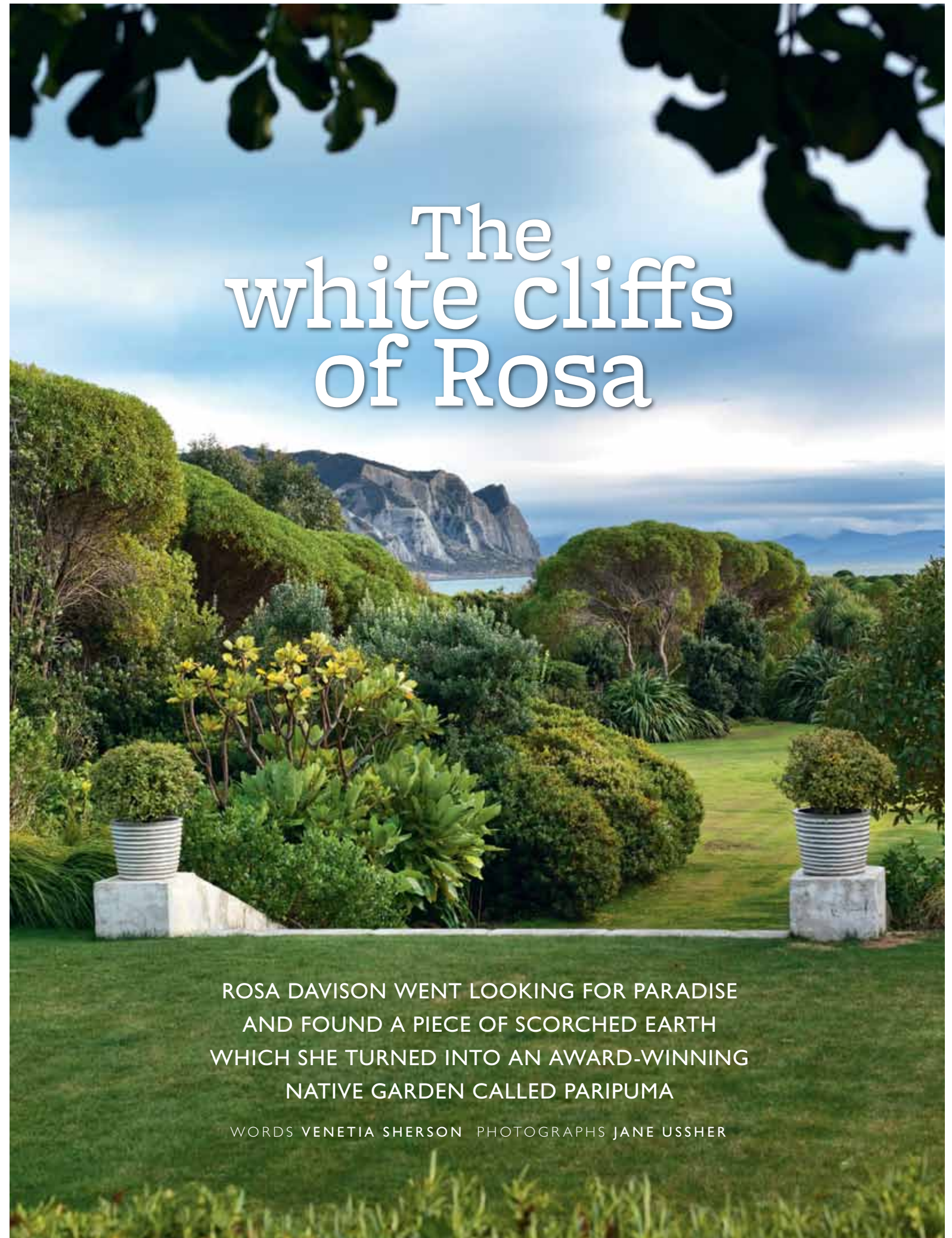


## Transformations

Rosa Davison says she envisaged from day one how her wilderness garden would settle between the restless sea and the parchment-coloured cliffs although when she dug her spade into the unyielding yellow clay for the first time she knew it wasn't going to be easy.



# The white cliffs of Rosa



ROSA DAVISON WENT LOOKING FOR PARADISE  
AND FOUND A PIECE OF SCORCHED EARTH  
WHICH SHE TURNED INTO AN AWARD-WINNING  
NATIVE GARDEN CALLED PARIPUMA

WORDS VENETIA SHERSON PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER

THE CENTREPIECE of Paripuma, Rosa Davison's glorious coastal property, is an ancient, rusted whale pot. It is an unorthodox piece of garden art but its significance goes much deeper than the patina of rust. The pot is Rosa's memorial to the thousands of humpback, minke and sperm whales slaughtered just beyond the white cliffs of Vernon Bluff in Cloudy Bay. According to historians, the bay swarmed with whales in the 1830s. The pot is Rosa's reminder that they must be protected.

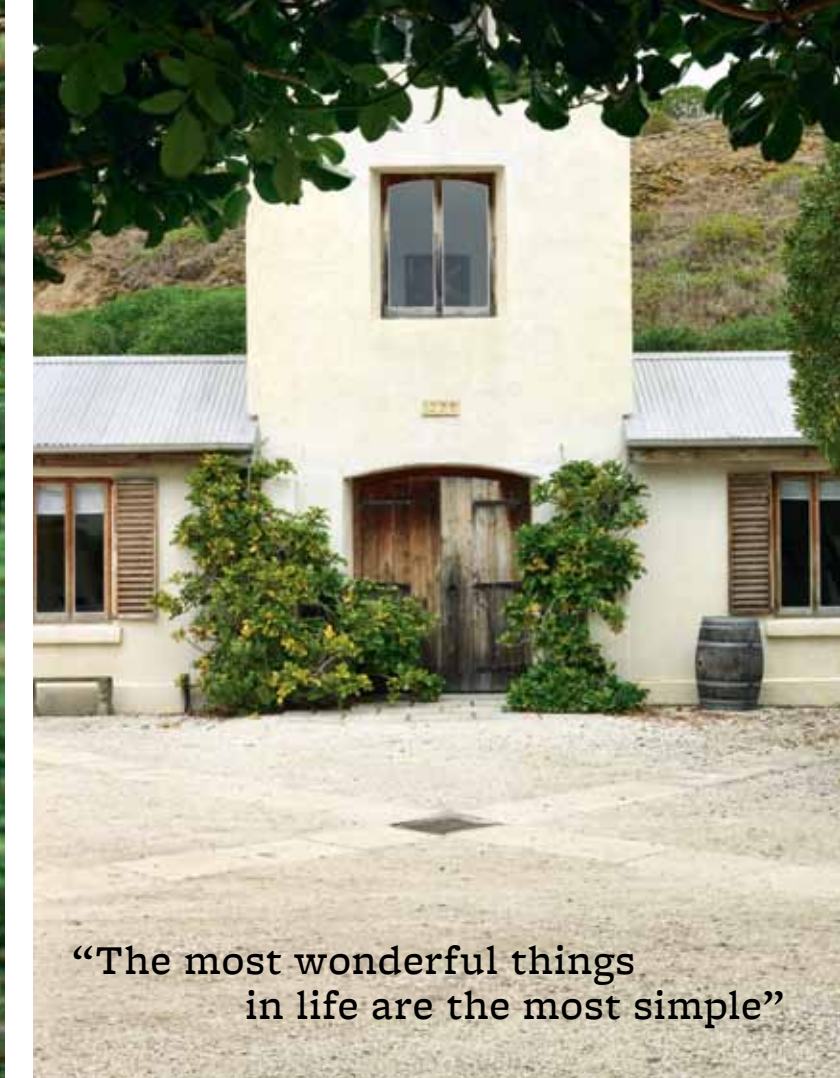
The same goes for the birds and the bees and even the rabbits (yes, rabbits) that now populate the property. "They are a nuisance but I quite like the *Watership Down* effect. I hate to see them killed." That comment says a lot about this woman who has single-handedly hewn from rigid soil and shingle a garden that is, quite simply, nature at its best. Rosa Davison may have a soft heart but, when it comes to dreams, she has an iron will.

The dream of Paripuma had its genesis in Marlborough when Rosa was a child. Her family has lived

in Marlborough since the 1840s and during her school years the Sounds were her summer playground. There was never any doubt that she would settle in the province. After leaving school she trained as a commercial artist and, following marriage to Michael and three children, she began stencilling, influenced by Cornwall artist Lyn Le Grice. For some time she travelled around the country, passing on her skills to others. In the late 1990s she and Michael turned to growing oysters and Rosa again found herself on the road, this time taking shellfish to market. She says it was a tough gig because oysters have such a short shelf life. During those years she also obtained her pilot's licence.

But the inner artist was always demanding to be freed. So 14 years ago the search began for a place where Rosa, now established as a landscape gardener, could let her creative juices spill over. She found it in a piece of scorched earth, 25 minutes south of Blenheim, flanked by a moody sea and parchment-coloured cliffs. ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Rosa has planted thousands of natives since she began the project 14 years ago; the tower of the original building now serves as bed and breakfast accommodation; an ancient whaling pot is the centrepiece of the passage from the house to the sea; Wilfie and Frankie, children of next-door neighbours Michal and Peter Wells, make friends with Stitchy the piebald pony.



"The most wonderful things in life are the most simple"





Rosa designed the house to harmonize with the garden and chose colours to blend with the landscape. Objects of affection reflect her passion for the past while a pair of riding boots nods to her love of horses. The big kitchen table doubles as a workspace where Rosa catches up on correspondence while taking in the views.



**FAMILY TIES**  
 The Marlborough region is part of Rosa's DNA. Her family has lived there for more than 150 years. She grew up in the Waihopai Valley where her parents were dry-stock and crop farmers. Her father was very artistic and during wet summers at the Sounds Rosa and her three siblings, Richard, Janie and Jimma, spent hours drawing on their sketch pads. She was closest in age to Jimma, who later became a respected architectural designer and built a Coober Pedy-style underground house on the land next to Paripuma (see our story *The house that isn't there* in Issue 26). She says she has tried to give her own children, Antonia, Freddy and Georgina, the same idyllic upbringing in a place where they could fish and swim and ride horses. "Georgina used to gallop up the garden on her horse, taking out great divots from the lawn. It was never a problem. What's a garden for?"





Rosa says she fell in love with it because it was, quite simply, what she loved. “It was the water, the wilderness and the cliffs, the hallmarks of this region – and the possibilities.” A photo taken on her 50th birthday shows her standing in a bare, sandy paddock with her arms stretched out behind as though about to dive or take flight. “I was telling Freddy [her son] about my vision. I had my reference points – the white bluffs to the left and Mt Rahotia slightly west of north. I was saying, ‘I want it to look like someone has made a huge clearing through the bush.’” Then she picked up her spade and attempted to plant a pohutukawa, gifted by a friend. “The spade hit rocks and hard clay and I wondered how I would ever get anything to grow here.”

Fourteen years and thousands of plants and spade chips later, the dream has been realized. Paripuma (which means white cliffs) sits well against its natural coastal backdrop. The Pacific Ocean surges on the doorstep, giving ground then sucking it back as a southerly rips through. The distant hills change from green to lavender, lit by skies of gold and pink. The sharp cliffs tower above like marble balustrades.

Against the lavender hills and aqua sea the garden is a green oasis. The plants are all natives: a mix of ngaio, ake ake, cabbage trees, muehlenbeckia, coprosma, hebe, nikau, puka and flaxes and an increasing number of rare species. Lines of eucalypts (“they grew in New Zealand 15 million years ago”) act as wind-breaks. Rosa is passionate about New Zealand plants. “New Zealanders have this great gift of native flora – 80 per cent is not found anywhere else in the world. Botanists marvel at it, so it mystifies me that we import fashionable plants from abroad. I think we’re better interpreting the beautiful, classical gardens of the northern hemisphere using our own plants to create a unique style in the way that cafés and restaurants are now producing uniquely New Zealand food.” ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Friends and family gather for a glass of wine as the distant hills change from green to lavender; a guest bedroom; the house has been designed to take advantage of the sea and garden views; specialty dishes from the region are prepared for guests by chef Jimmi Reddington in the large, open-plan kitchen.



Despite the evidence before her, she doesn't see her garden as a garden. So how would she describe it? "A native plantation – a bit untidy round the edges." Order is achieved, she says, by the formal design and a strong central axis down the wide park-like lawn towards Cloudy Bay to Mt Rahotia. Where the mowing stops, wilderness takes over. Plants give way to shingle, driftwood and dunes. A single tree trunk stands like a sentinel between grass and sand.

To the delight of ducks and swans, a pond has been established where previously there was a lot of water run-off. Rosa likes to work with nature, not control it. She wants the plants to have their way but she also needs them to be strong. Some things have surprised her. "Pohutukawa, puka and ponga shouldn't grow here, but they do." Tucked in a garden by the house are two *pennantia baylisiana*, once the rarest tree in the world and endemic to the Three Kings Islands. A *tecomanthe speciosa* vine, also rare and from Three Kings, winds its way contentedly across a veranda.

Rosa designed the house with the same symmetrical lines as the garden, with high, wide windows that all have views of the sea. Inside are other remnants from the past: the doors are built from oaks planted by Michael's great-grandfather. Paripuma provides accommodation



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Bay hunter Summer, one of three horses on the property, waits by the stable door; the first stage of the house in 2001, just two years after planting had begun; an enlarged old photograph of hunters is a feature beyond the double doors from the courtyard.

#### A PLACETO SHARE

Three years ago Paripuma won the Landscape Award from the Marlborough District Council at the Marlborough Environment Awards. Last year and again this year it is included in Nelmac Garden Marlborough, from 6 to 9 November (see [gardenmarlborough.co.nz](http://gardenmarlborough.co.nz)), the country's premier garden event, which features several gardens of national significance. Private tours of Paripuma's garden can also be arranged. The property can accommodate up to 12

guests in the house and a stand-alone B&B and be booked exclusively for weddings and events ([paripuma.com](http://paripuma.com)). Rosa says she loves to share the property with others so they can enjoy what she and her family have always loved. But she remains modest about her achievements. "I'd love people to realize they can easily make things happen even in the harshest climate. The thing is to choose the right plants for the area and get them in, then Mother Nature takes over. It doesn't happen overnight but it does happen!"



View more photos of Paripuma at [nzlifeandleisure.co.nz](http://nzlifeandleisure.co.nz)

"I wanted it to look as though someone had made a huge clearing through the bush," Rosa says of the sweeping stretch of lawn that stretches from the house to the ocean. "I had my reference points: the white bluff to the left, Mt Rahotia slightly west of north." All paths lead to the sea and the shifting shapes of sand and driftwood.

for guests in a bed-and-breakfast unit and the house can also be rented, which means Rosa and Michael often have to up sticks. Shortly after our interview a film crew moved in for six weeks to shoot the appropriately named *Light Between the Oceans*. It causes no hardship. "I love other people to share what we have here."

Naturally there have been low points. During a recent high tide, salt water entered the river-fed irrigation system and scorched the plants. Last year's earthquake, centred near Seddon, rocked the house and sent waves of moguls through the garden. The dust from the cliffs was like an atom bomb. But the property came through unscathed. There have been other testing incidents. The sheep (Basil and Dorothy Francis) and horses have broken into the garden and eaten the plants. Ditto the rabbits. None has suffered retribution. "I don't want to be precious about my garden. I'm happy for animals to make it their home too."

In the end it is the triumphs that stand out; what Rosa refers to as her "riveting moments". Like when her first seedling appeared or when she saw the first bird's nest, the first wood pigeon, bellbird and tui. Or walking on the beach after a storm and discovering that the sea has delivered her an additional 20 metres of beach line.

"Sometimes I just sit outside for hours watching a beacon blinking in the distance and the ships going past. The colours keep changing. There are still whales out there. The most wonderful things in life are the most simple."

