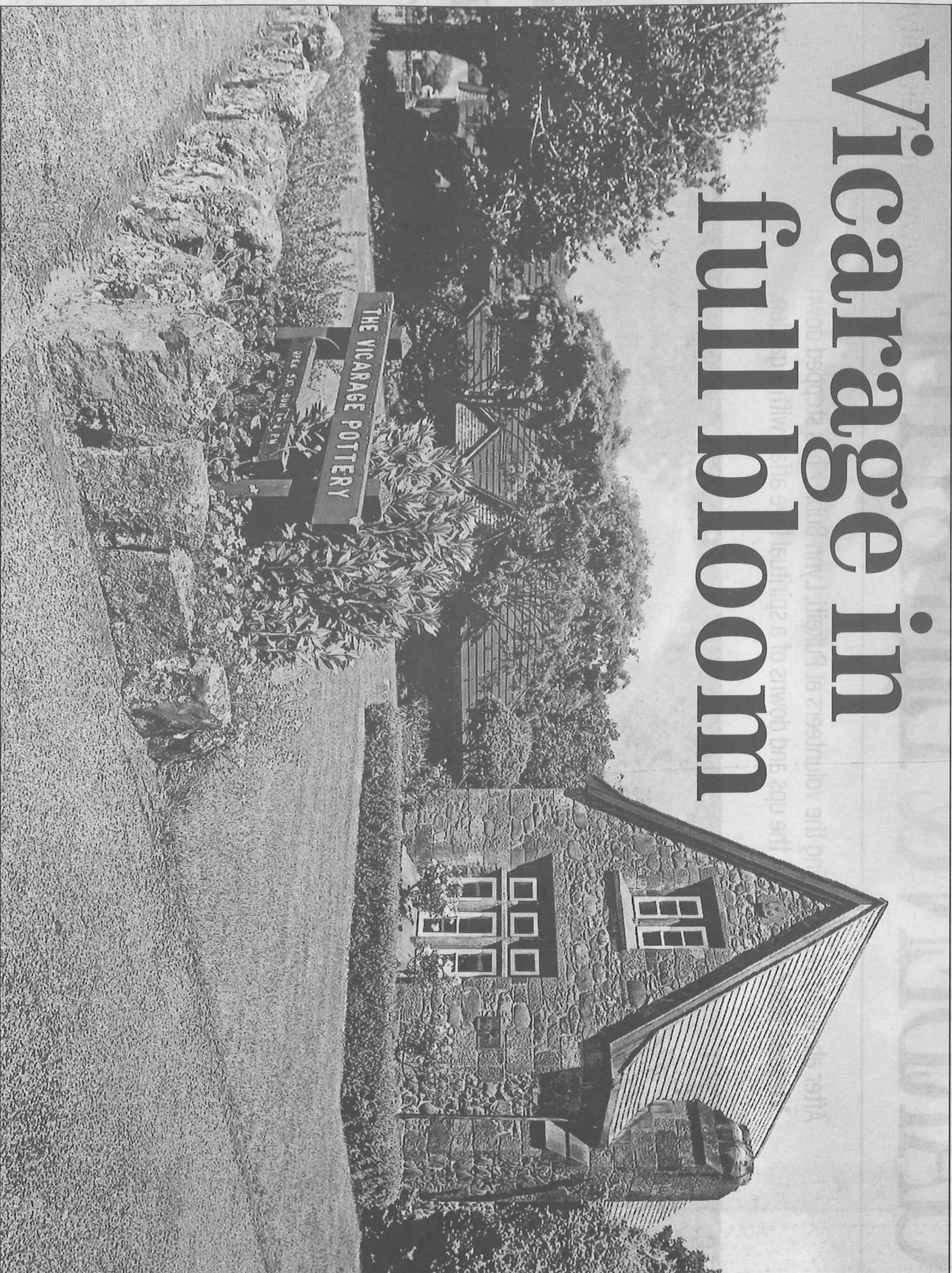


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Vicarage in full bloom



Photos: ROBERT CHARLES/FAIRFAX NZ

If Christmas shopping has you stumped it's worth checking

THE CONSTANT GARDENER



GLEN CHURCH

Vicarage in New Plymouth.

The historic building is in Courtenay St at the far end of the one-way system heading north and is in a quiet cul-de-sac heading down the hill to Te Henui river.

If you are a keen potter you will already know about it because it's the headquarters for the local potters' society. I guess I've always known about the Vicarage because the gardens are looked after by the parks department, so 30 years ago it was part of my domain.

But I have to say the gardens look a lot better now than they did in my day. They are looking sharp and worth a 10-minute browse before you head inside to take in the pottery.

Starting at the roadside, there's a newly planted hedge of the native *Melicynus crassifolia* which used to be known as *Hymenandra*. As you will see, it makes a fine alternative for box hedging as it's a tough, hardy evergreen which copes with salt winds as well as everyday gales.

Its natural home is on the coast both sides of Cook Strait, so they don't come much tougher than this. It also copes with shade, whereas naturally it's a sun and gales sort of shrub and it's a part of the violet family which is seriously weird. This and the taller tree version, the common whiteywood, are both members of the pansy family. Doesn't make any sense to me but hey, that's our weird native plants for you.

On the subject of box hedges, there's a fine box hedge next to the Vicarage wall and looking good with no sign of the disease they have become notorious for. I'm guessing the constant breezes around here keep it healthy as the box disease is

much worse in calm, sheltered gardens. There's an even better native, a sister plant, as a replacement for box hedging. It is *Melicynus obovatus* - check it out at a garden centre.

Anyway, back to the Vicarage garden. Down to your left is a fine holly tree, very appropriate given the upcoming festive season. Underneath are two hydrangeas which can't quite make up their mind if they're pink or blue, but they still look good with both shades.

Although our favourite mophead hydrangeas come from Japan, the Japanese gardeners are only recently

Bells', first marketed by our local Duncan and Davies nursery. It's really a wild plant called *Pieris ryukiyuensis*, but not surprisingly they thought 'Temple Bells' sounded nicer. No-one talks of this plant as a hedge but it would make a neat little replacement for *Buxus*.

Snowy day lilies are mixed in with the shrubs and hold their own for colour and for ground cover purposes.

The glossy leaf open shrub is *Brunfelsia* 'White Caps', an exotic looking shrub and closely related to the purple blue 'yesterday, today and tomorrow' shrubs, but somehow much

lavender flowers. It's not at all a typical hebe, but well worth growing for the open habit and long pale flowers.

The bright white Marlborough daisies will impress you. *Pachystegia insignis* grow wild on the roadside cliffs as you drive down from Picton to Kaikoura and nowhere else in the world. That's it - just a few miles of cliff face is their only place in the world. For years they were considered very hard to grow until the Otari Plant Museum in Wellington tried growing them and noticed them self seeding in the gravel paths. Now everyone germinates them in gravel.

The taller shrub with the notch out of the end of the tiny rounded leaves - well that's a *Myrsine divaricata*, one of the many divaricating or tangled native shrubs. Just for a complete change the tree here is a *Ginkgo biloba* with a similar shaped leaf to the *Myrsine* only much bigger.

Back on the other side, the border around the house has a mix of herbs, and some lovely pink *Silene* and blue honeywort or *Cerintho major purpurascens* with curving purple flowerheads. Although that sounds like a mouthful, cerintho means wax flower and then major as in big and purple flowers. This honeywort self seeds around the garden but most of us are happy to let it loose a bit, and the bees will thank you as it's a favourite source of nectar. The big fluffy bush on the corner is a new acacia and I know the name is

in my head somewhere. Finally I found it, *Acacia cognata* 'Jimeilight'.

Have a look at the structure of the building made with different-sized natural stones.

Where I come from in Somerset, England, all the houses are made like this as the locals became experts at choosing the right stone for the spot. I've helped build dry stone walls and know what an art it is, and how, with a little practice, you get to enjoy the selection process.

Turns out this Vicarage building is not only one of the oldest in New Plymouth, but in all of New Zealand.



Stand out: The bright white, impressive daisy.

catching on to them. For generations they were despised because of their inconsistency of colour.

The big leaf groundcover shrub is the evergreen *Viburnum davidii*, named after the famous French explorer Pere David. My one complaint about this dense shrub is it's a sitter for the thrips pest which turn the leaves silver. The nearby purple sage and prostrate camellia are probably a safer bet for gardeners who want their plants to be pest free.

The rounded shrubs are a dwarf form of hly of the valley shrub *Pieris* 'Temple