

# THE DAILY NEWS

## GARDEN lifestyle

Oakura doctor Brent Anderson liked the hospital so much he bought it — the old Iona Hospital, that is. Now the building is the centrepiece of a curvaceous coastal creation. Writer VIRGINIA WINDER and photographer MAARTEN HOLL investigate

NEW PLYMOUTH'S old Iona Hospital is alive and kicking — thanks to a doctor with a bit of cheek.

Eleven years ago, when the hospital was facing demolition, Oakura GP Brent Anderson put in a tender to buy. He was the only person who did, and so the call came that he was now the proud owner of a hospital.

He bought it for \$1. "I figured that if they were going to demo it, I might get it for a dollar," Brent says. "I really only wanted the shell and the floor."

But just a dollar? "I didn't have any then," he says, a touch sheepish.

However, he did have a piece of land on Weld Rd, bought a few years before with two friends. So, just the villa section of the hospital, built last century, was sawn in two and trucked to a gorgeous spot next to the Timaru River, not far from the sea.

"It even came with the couch that was in the waiting room," he says, sitting in the now-renovated villa with wife Susan Chitty.

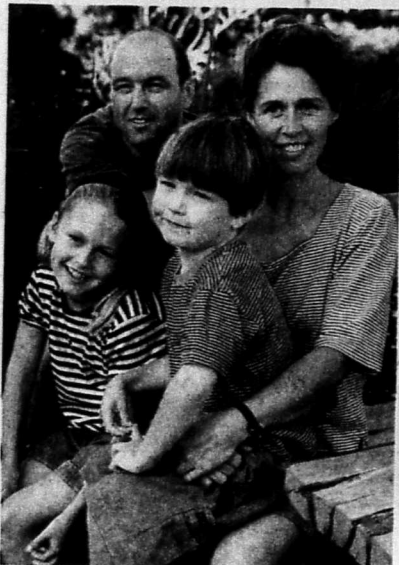
To relocate the hospital, have it repiled and reroofed, Brent forked out \$10,000.

The rest of the hospital was demolished on its New Plymouth site. At the time, the young doctor had been living in a tunnel house on the property, while setting up the Oakura medical centre with Matthew Allen.

"I lived in the plastic tunnel for two years," says Brent. "It was quite cool really."

He also means this literally. "When it was sunny it was about 100 degrees (Fahrenheit) and when it was cold it was about the same as outside. I used to sit there on the couch rugged up to the hilt watching mice run around."

It was an amazing place. I even used to see the old patient in it," he says. "But I slept in that old bus," he says,



NEW LIFE: The villa section of New Plymouth's old Iona Hospital, now home to the Anderson family on Weld Rd. AT HOME: Brent Anderson and Susan Chitty with their children, Sophie (8) and Monty (5).

*'I figured that if they were going to demo it, I might get it for a dollar — it even came with the couch that was in the waiting room'*

# Theyona Hospital

pointing to a photo from the good old days.

Cyclone Bola destroyed his plastic world in 1986.

"It was literally bowled over. We never found some of it. Even my shower unit got blown away."

BRENT was forced to move into the house, which has been stripped back to natural wood, with highly-polished heart rimu floors in the lounge. Outside is a magnificent garden, mostly created by Susan.

During the Taranaki Rhododendron Festival, the couple flung open their gates to the public. Though they weren't part of the official programme, visitors still came.

"Heaps of older people recognised the hospital," says Brent. "They were quite fascinated that they had been in these rooms."

The garden is definitely festive class. Susan has created an ever-curving cottage garden mixed with native plants and old roses. These are all protected by shelterbelts, planted by Brent and his mates when they had horticulture dreams.

"We were deluded by the fact the kiwifruit industry was booming," he says.

But the bottom fell out of the market, leaving Susan a bare canvas to paint on.

She hails from the South Island, where she worked in the arts department in the movie industry. In

Taranaki, she has harnessed that creative bent and let it loose in the natural world.

"We just gardened as we went," says Susan.

Outside the lounge is a circular plot, where a Susan-made stone-age birdbath stands in the centre. She makes these concrete ornaments, and pots, with fellow Oakura gardener Philippa Holman.

"Pots are pretty physical," says Susan. "You come home pretty tired after doing a day of concreting."

She prefers fabric painting and of course, crafting the land with shape, texture and colour.

Her favourite hue is green. "I don't like miles of flowers in my garden. It's more soothing to look at if it's all green."

Close to the house, in planter boxes built from aged railway sleepers, there are purple and white blooms. Masses of thorny bonnets, Mexican daisies, thalictrum, campanula, viscaria, alyssum, catmint and miniature agapanthus merge with roses.

Susan points out a thorny-stemmed white rugosa rose.

"An old lady told me they used to be clipped into hedges to keep the boys away from their daughters. They used to grow roses up brick walls and castle walls too — like Rapunzel."

The garden has other frighteners. Out on the lawn a huge crocodile stands ready to snap at innocent wanderers, or

offer a place of rest. A second crocodile seat waits for its prey at the end of a path in another part of the garden. These wooden reptiles were bought in Bali and sent home in a container.

"We got caught in a traffic jam," says Susan, "and we were right outside this shop with two of them, so we went in and bought them. That's all the guy had in the shop. He stared at us as if we were mad."

Other animals haven't been quite so welcome in the Oakura garden. When the family was once in the South Island for Christmas a herd of cows stampeded through the property, crushing Susan's flowers and munching a whole driveway of newly-planted palms.

"The farmer reimbursed me, which was very nice," she says.

A lone cow, which trampled all over her hostas, caused Susan the most grief. She did everything she could to herd it out, but to no avail.

"It just stood there and stared at me."

THE family also has a donkey called Carlito, who too often gets loose among the flowers at night.

"Brent and I run around with torches trying to catch him — he's very naughty."

In the hot sun, not far from the now healthy hostas, we pass under a railway sleeper arch laden with the rose, Alberic Barbier.

"That's a pretty vigorous rose — I attack that one with the hedge clippers,"

Susan says. We enter another circle, which reflects the space before the house.

"This was sort of Brent's garden," she says, pushing into a mini-forest. She stands before a green, jagged

beastie. "That's Brent's bizarre tree, it's a monkey puzzle tree. I banded my head on it once when I was weeding and it really hurt. The prickles are really sharp. We used to call this part Brent's prickly, or ugly garden. It was just things he wanted to buy and we didn't know where to put them. It was originally natives."

"I'm actually starting to move into his garden," Susan says, standing before a taste of Kiwi.

"This is a silver fern." Susan lifts up a frond to show off its metallic underbelly. "I just thought it was another ponga."

UP here in this quiet spot, she reveals why she has turned to gardening. "My brother died when he was 23. That's when I really got into my garden. I just sort of had to go out to work all day."

"You can solve every problem by digging over a patch. If I get stressed I have got to go out and garden. One hour would be the minimum I spend in my garden a day. It's not a chore, that's for sure."

She leads the way down a path, where an enormous beach dinosaur provides a natural leaner for human curves. "Men always come home with driftwood," Susan laughs.

Suddenly we are face to face with the second crocodile, its tail twisting violently. Susan leads us safely away up another trail.

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LUSH LIVING: Green is a theme of Susan Chitty's garden plan.

### GARDEN PRIZE

The Daily News' Garden & Lifestyle section this week offers you a chance to win a \$25 voucher courtesy of Tellars Nursery, Beaconsfield Rd, Stratford.

To enter the competition, simply dial the Infoline number (06) 759 4636, then dial ext 2800 for this week's question.

Which perennial is on special at Tellars Nursery this week?

Congratulations to last week's winner of a palm, courtesy of NZ Palm Co Ltd, Valued at \$75.

Margaret Field, New Plymouth

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