

Home & Garden

My favourite room

Nurturing the drop-in vibe

In Kerikeri, a couple of English adventurers have gone all out to create a space with a casual, beachy feel.

Vanessa Owen treasures her home's casual, drop-in vibe. Occasionally someone will pop in when no one's home and leave a message on the blackboard at the entrance to the waterfront Kerikeri villa. One message read: "Couldn't wait, but had a cup of tea and did the dishes," says Vanessa.

"Often our friends will come around, walk in the house and the kettle will be warm, but there is no sign of us anywhere because we are down at the beach."

Vanessa and husband Richard, who are originally from England, fell in love with this stretch of sand at Kerikeri almost two decades ago, often sailing past it and stopping to picnic.

Twelve years ago they managed to buy the land that ran down to the beach. Later, they found a villa in Dargaville and trucked it to the site. "We gutted it back to bare walls," says Vanessa, and the couple spent the next 10 years transforming it into the welcoming family home they'd envisaged.

Reminders of the couple's Northern Hemisphere beginnings pop up throughout their home, including in the expansive, light-filled kitchen.

The table, for example, was originally a ping-pong table, bought by Richard and Vanessa two years after getting married. "It had no value at all - we paid about £20 for it, but we have done it up over the years and I'm very



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attached to it." It used to sit in the middle of the room, but the Owens shifted it so they could put their armchairs by the English Aga.

The Barry Ross Smith print of the Queen with a moko, which hangs in the corner of the room, is another of Vanessa's favourites. "It references where we are from and where we are now," she says.

Did you have a vision for this space?

I wanted it to be really open; the kitchen was a new addition to the house and had a lower ceiling, so I didn't want it to feel like a cave. I also didn't want a kitchen island but a long table, French style, where I could be cooking food one end, doing art in the middle, while

the kids did homework at the other!

What was the decorating process for this space?

We used Porter's stucco wash in Oyster on the walls and then hand-waxed and buffed it with beeswax for a really soft, warm feel and then painted the kitchen cabinets in Alabaster White for a really crisp contrast.

The chairs around the table and the cane furniture outside has been whitewashed. The floors are Travertine.

How would you describe your decorating style?

Classical coastal. I love the balance and elegance; the period pieces I

was born and raised with in Wycliffe Castle.

Then throw in years spent sailing in the West Indies where I discovered Plantation Houses with their wrap-around verandas and indoor-outdoor flow.

From the day I arrived in New Zealand and saw my first villa I fell in love - they were all my childhood memories and sailing years wrapped into one, and I have been renovating with them, relocating them, playing with the spaces in them ever since!

What are the key features of this space?

Our huge old table from France running down the centre of the room - it has had dozens of paint

effects. There are lots of open shelves to display treasures and loved pieces and, of course, our Aga for the long, slow cooking we all love.

What do you like best about this space?

It is a bomb-proof space and it needs to be. I love that the Travertine floors are hard as rock and the colour and texture is so similar to our rocky beach that when our son Reef dumps a sandy fish in them it blends in!

The kitchen is improving with age and holds the stories of countless lunches and dinners in its soft waxed walls, but it's breathtaking view that steals the show every time.

Garden tasks for this week



Poppies are sown on or around Anzac Day, so that they are flowering by Remembrance Day on November 11.

Protect fruit from possums

Apples are in season, and while you wait for your crop to ripen, you can be sure possums will have their beady eyes on them too. My parents have hit upon a simple solution to keep their fruit safe by rigging up a low electric fence around their trees. So far, it's been 100 per cent successful. To guard two heavily laden trees, my father used a solar-powered, portable electric fence unit (bought from FOG Wrightson) and attached the electric tape to wooden fence batons with sections of garden hose acting as insulators.

When the fruit was still forming, the guards around the trunks were enough, but as they grew and the branches got lower to the ground, further measures were needed. The fence seems to be keeping pukeko away as well, even though they could easily fly over the top. My parents did the same thing around their peach trees during the summer and not a single fruit was lost to the furry fiends.



Make your own climbing frame

Autumn is the perfect time to get stuck into garden projects. Cooler temperatures and the consequent slowdown of growth usually allows a little more breathing space to get those jobs done that the manic pace of summer harvesting won't allow. Sweet peas, runner beans, peas, passionfruit and anything else that likes to scramble naturally needs something to cling to, and this DIY climbing frame cost next to nothing to make. This frame was made from old steel reinforcing mesh and is held in place by some repurposed 4x2 timber that was once part of an old pergola. The frame was built to fit perfectly over one of the smaller raised beds in my mother's garden. The first thing she plans to plant there are sweet peas.

Keep an eye out for anything that might be useful to turn into a handy climbing structure. Old chicken wire, garden gates or sections of fencing - even bed heads can be fashioned into a useful support for climbing plants. Or bash in a couple of posts or sturdy stakes at each end of your

garden and string wire between them for a simple frame that can be easily taken down as required.

Brew liquid comfrey fertiliser

It won't be long before comfrey dies back for the winter (if it hasn't already) so pick the last of those big leaves and make your own comfrey tea. Fill a bucket, bin or drum with water and pile in as many leaves as you can. For extra nutrients, add chopped seaweed harvested from the high-tide mark, a small amount of farm animal manure (not pet poo) or any other nutrient dense material, cover, then leave it to break down for up to six months. Check regularly, giving it a stir and top up with grey water as required. When applying, dilute to the colour of weak tea as it can be incredibly strong.

Sow poppies to commemorate Anzac day

Red soldier poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*), are the classic poppy of remembrance. They can grow up to 1m tall, and their single, red bowl-shaped flowers traditionally provide splashes of colour in early summer. In New Zealand, poppies are sown on or around Anzac Day (Tuesday), so that they are flowering by Remembrance Day on November 11.

How to sow poppies:

Poppies prefer a site with well-drained soil and full sun. Sow poppy seeds direct over bare soil - you might like to spray first to clear the area of weeds. If you prefer, you can also raise the seed in containers and transplant the seedlings in spring. Feed plants in early spring with a controlled-release fertiliser.

Small garden? Try bokashi composting

If you only have a small garden and not enough material to make regular compost, then Bokashi bucket composting could be for you. This system is perfect for turning food scraps into useful liquid fertiliser and the resulting fermented material can then be dug back into the soil to break down.

In as little as four weeks it will have composted away and given those nutrients to the soil. An advantage is that you can add items such as citrus, meat, fish and leftover food that couldn't normally be composted or put in worm farms. You can also make your own bins using two plastic paint buckets, one placed inside the other with holes punched through the bottom of the inner bucket. Buy bokashi kits from hardware stores and online at zingbokashi.co.nz. - Rachel Oldham



Vanessa, Richard, Milli and Reef on the front porch.



Reef and jack russell Archie sit on a high chair that was bought in France.



Whitewashed outdoor chairs are used around the dining table.



Moving the table meant the pendant light was in the wrong place so instead of rewiring they bought a light with a long cord and hooked it up so it hangs over the table.