

# Down to Earth

Landscape designer Damian Wendelborn combines artistic flair with practical skills

STORY: Rose Thodey

PHOTOGRAPHS: Matthew Williams

**D**amian Wendelborn possesses a singular mixture of vision and practical ability that can turn unpromising sites into highly desirable gardens with an edge of style and comfort. "I like the variety of residential and country property work," he says, "as long as you have the right connection with the people."

Damian's father was an Anglican minister, teacher and chaplain at different schools throughout the North Island, and his mother continues to work as a composer and music teacher. After stints at St Peter's School in Cambridge, St Paul's in Hamilton and finally at Kristin School in Albany, Damian headed off overseas for a gap year, working with kids in outdoor education.

At Kristin, Damian was lucky enough to have eminent artist Alistair Nisbet-Smith as his art teacher. As is so often the case, one teacher can have a huge influence on a young person's life and Damian remembers being inspired as he learned the basic skills of charcoal drawing, then painting with oil. A highlight of the course involved an expedition to Okura River estuary, where the class worked on temporary installations and then watched as they were washed away by the tide. >



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Damian Wendelborn and one of his stone water features. Creative solutions for shade. Nikau palms dominate a layered retaining wall.



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THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: The bright scarlet leafy rosettes of *Neoregelia* bromeliads brighten up shady spots. A young cycad (*Cycas revoluta*) has perfect form. Creeping philodendron, *Rhaphidophora decursiva*, makes a lush green groundcover.



became busier with private projects. But he kept working at Stone and Water World in the weekends, honing his skills in this demanding field.

For six years Damian also worked as an assistant lecturer with Ian Henderson at Unitec, teaching the studio design paper in the second year of the diploma course. "It was lots of fun," he recalls. "It really keeps you on your toes, as you have to learn to respond quickly to twenty to thirty design solutions for the same property, but at the same time allow individuality to come through. I had to learn to think on my feet."



Damian's wife Darryl-Lee works full-time as a project director with consultancy firm Beca and between them they juggle work and caring for their two children, Stella, seven, and George, four. Damian is also an accredited member of the Garden Design Society of New Zealand (GDSNZ), an organisation whose aim is to promote excellence in garden design, and he sits on its accreditation board.

Much of Damian's work to date has been with developers on new or renovated houses. This creates some freedom, but occasionally a client pushes him outside his comfort zone so he's compelled to try new things - and that's good, he says.

After his gap year, Damian came back and enrolled in a property administration degree at Auckland University, "but it was too business-oriented for me".

An interview at Unitec - where his art portfolio played a major role - was the next step and Damian was accepted into a landscape design diploma course. What led to that decision?

"I always liked making things and my parents are keen gardeners. They always had big veg plots and fruit trees wherever we lived. I guess that's just where you play and grow up."

Having chosen the design option over technology in his second year, Damian graduated with a Diploma in Landscape Design in 1994 and started working for Auckland landscape supplies store Stone and Water World. "I helped people who didn't know what to do and picked up lots of work as they just streamed through the gates in the mid-90s."

After a couple of years, his own company, Urbanite Landscape Design,

"For each project you have to consider the site, the budget, regulatory framework and any emotional constraints - the needs and wishes of the client. Looking to balance and respond to these things forces you to refine the big-picture idea. The design has to evolve and hopefully pops out the other end intact, and better for the process." ■

Membership of the GDSNZ is open to anyone interested in garden design. For information, visit [www.gdsnz.org.nz](http://www.gdsnz.org.nz).