

Design for bellbirds

Written by Jo Sutherland, Landscape Architect

Reprinted with permission from "Korimako Calling", Vol 2, May 2002

If you plant some native areas in your garden, in years to come you too could enjoy the poignant song of the bellbird right outside your door. You will also be helping to restore natural systems in Christchurch. Native plants are an integral part of the ecosystem upon which native fauna species depend for their survival. Bellbirds need a food supply when they move down to lower altitudes during autumn and winter. Certain native plants provide ripe fruit at these times; this fruit is a rich source of food for wintering bellbirds. I will list the key fruit-bearing species later in this article, and discuss how to use them in design.

Natives are good-looking, low maintenance plants if well selected for the site. They are suited to New Zealand's climate and soils and grow very well here. Eco-sourced natives (genetically local) are potentially even better suited to the area. I think natives go well with each other, whether because they have evolved together, or in the same environment, they seem to have a visual affinity for one another. Natives also offer a range of colour, texture, form, and flower that is sometimes unrealised by the gardening public. Of course, some design tricks are required to make a native garden look really great.

Whether you have a small garden or a large property you will need to include some taller species, as birds are attracted to taller shrubs and trees. Even the smallest gardens suit a couple of trees, provided they are well placed in relation to doors and windows, views, circulation and outdoor living areas.

Larger gardens offer the possibility of planting a more diverse range of species, including taller trees, which favour bellbirds. You can even create a forest. It would be useful to draw up a scale plan of your property, or get professional help to do this, so that the most appropriate plants can be selected for the areas and conditions. Planning is vital so that several years hence, plants will find themselves in the right conditions as they grow together.

Key natives providing ripe fruit in winter months are as follows:

Coprosma (most), Pittosporum tenuifolium and Pittosporum eugenoides, matagouri (Discaria toumatou), broadleaf (Griselinia littoralis), rohutu (Lophomyrtus obcordata), ngaio (Myoporum laetum), mapou (Myrsine australis and Myrsine divaricata), cabbage tree (ti kouka, Cordyline australis), lancewood (Pseudopanax crassifolius), wineberry (Aristotelia serrata), tree fuchsia (kotukutuku, Fuchsia excorticata), totara (Podocarpus totara), titoki (Alectryon excelsum), hinau (Elaeocarpus dentatus), mahoe (Melicytus ramiflorus), horopito (peppertree, Pseudowintera colorata), five finger (Pseudopanax arboreus), kahikatea (Dacrydium dacrydioides), putaputaweta (marbleleaf, Carodetus serratus), matai (Prumnopitys taxifolia).

The above plants all have characteristics that can be used in design. Some make better features than others, while some are more suited to hedges and backdrops. *Coprosma robusta* is an example of a tough, reliable native that bears masses of bright orange berries well into winter but has a form that looks better in a background or hedge. Other shrubs such as *Lophomyrtus* or *Pittosporum* species have a tidier form and many people prefer these to the more rangy look of a *Coprosma*. It is worth noting that for practical reasons, flaxes and cabbage trees need to be planted away from lawns to prevent the leaves choking the lawn mower. I would like to go through each of the species and discuss their characteristics and possibilities, but that will have to be the subject of another article.

When designing a garden there are a few techniques that will help it look great. The first and probably the most important technique for suburban gardens is layering. What I mean by that is using short groundcovers and shrubs in the front of a garden area, medium size shrubs in the middle, and tall species to the back. This works by drawing the eye into a planting rather than being faced with a wall of foliage at the front with groundcovers hidden from view. Feature plants look good emerging from a bed of groundcovers in the mid-ground of a planting, for example: a kowhai growing out of a bed of tussock.



Side view of a layered garden with kowhai amidst low plants

Grouping is another useful technique to create unity in a planting, for example: a group of tussocks next to a group of hebes, in front of a group of flaxes. The effect is simple and uncluttered, the qualities of each species is given emphasis by repetition. This sort of technique is particularly effective in smaller areas, where the use of many different species may look like a collection, not a garden. If you wish to have some collections in your garden, it helps to have some groups of one species to give the eye a rest.

Contrasting colour, texture, and gesture is worth considering in your garden plan. For example a planting of buff coloured arching tussocks with vertical lancewoods, and bold green *Pseudopanax laetus* contrast with each other to show off the special characteristics of each species.

So, plant natives and encourage your neighbours to do the same. With careful planning your garden will look great. Share the vision of returning the dawn chorus to Christchurch.

Places to go:– Christchurch Botanical Gardens, Motukarara DoC Nursery, QE2 Drive native roadside planting, Trees for Canterbury Nursery, Waiora Trust Nursery, Letzgo Native Nursery in Governors Bay.

Further Reading:– ‘Bush Birds’ brochure (information on species), ‘Indigenous Ecosystems’ (Lucas Associates), ‘Christchurch Naturally’ – these three available from Christchurch City Council; ‘The Native Garden’ by Isobel Gabites & Rob Lucas; ‘New Zealand Trees and Shrubs’ by L.J.Metcalf; ‘New Zealand Native Plants’ by Cave & Paddison; books by T.J.Salmon, and by Hugh Wilson, to name a few.

For more information, contact

Jo Sutherland
Landscape Architect
Ph (03) 349 9959 *Email* jo.land@xtra.co.nz