

GARDEN GURU

Beside the seaside



Neil Ross

WHEN JACKIE Michelmore and her husband bought a derelict mussel works on the banks of an estuary, their friends thought they might have been drinking the seawater and gone a bit mad.

Not only were all the buildings derelict and dangerous, but most of the sea wall had been long-since washed away by storms. That was 10 years ago.

One thousand truckloads of fill and some serious engineering works have finally satiated the hunger of the sea. A beautiful New-England style house of bleached timbers and glass sits serenely above the shoreline, as if sheltering from the onslaught of the occasional gale, and keen garden designer Jackie has transformed the surrounds into a seaside garden to die for, with a mix of imaginative naturalistic plantings, quirky sculptures and a nod to the past.

Rather than obliterate the remains of the mussel works, Jackie incorporated them into the garden to give it a sense of place and an injection of character. So the shell of a cast-concrete

"The [garden's] most memorable feature was originally the worst eyesore."

filter bed became walls for a sunken courtyard garden, complete with swimming pool and shady barbecue loggia built out of old sea-wall stone.

Similarly, the most memorable and quirky feature was originally the worst eyesore. A vast circular wash bed, cracked and leaking, has been part-filled with sand to make an enormous sunken beach volleyball court rimmed with grasses and succulents.

Jackie is very conscious of the type of plants and colours which fit in here and admits that she is obsessive about what is and isn't allowed. "I've chosen a lot of dynamic plants," she explains, "grasses act like weather-vanes showing us what the wind is up to. I started with just 20 and just kept splitting them and all those tiny sprigs have become hummocks, creating a sand-dune effect. You could barely see them when they went into the ground."

Yellows and limes are considered far too strident in a setting like this and though orange is "a colour which sings when seen against water", Jackie finds its intensity too distracting in this wide landscape and plumps instead for quieter colours like the glaucous foliage which seems so common in many coastally adapted plants.

The looseness of species like fennel



Jackie loves using grasses in her coastal garden, describing them as "weather-vanes showing us what the wind is up to".



Flotsam and jetsam is turned into garden art.



Even the family gumboots are arranged with creative flair.

and Verbena bonariensis link the garden with the natural landscape beyond, and with the smell of the sea never far away, it's also serendipitous that so many coastal lovers are aromatic too. Jackie values Russian sage (*perovskia*), figs and myrtle (*Myrtus communis*), which all add their own notes to the salty air, especially on warm days.

Between the house and the water, an existing windbreak of scrub has been carefully cloud-pruned into a simple but stylish echo of the skyscape beyond. Again, it's a feature that was retained and transformed rather than

being thoughtlessly grubbed out — though pruning it can be precarious where the ground falls away; "adrenaline gardening" is how Jackie describes it. Jackie is adept at the sort of mass planting which suits an open site like this and though her style is obviously sensitive and thoughtful, there's room for plenty of that most traditional seaside ingredient — humour.

Many of the lighter elements here come from objects washed up with the tide. "I don't beachcomb for the flotsam and jetsam — it tends to find me," Jackie laughs. "If something interesting

floats past, however, I have been known to launch the kayak and paddle out to salvage it."

By the slipway, sun-bleached buoys are collected and displayed on a dead tree, transforming it into a sort of glowing avant-garde sculpture, and Jackie's artistic touch also manifests itself in the flamboyant way the family's gumboots are stacked outside the front door.

Here, where the land runs out, Jackie says it's easy to feel connected to nature and the weather. Much of this two-acre site is devoted to native wildflower plantings and shelterbelts —

Could do this week

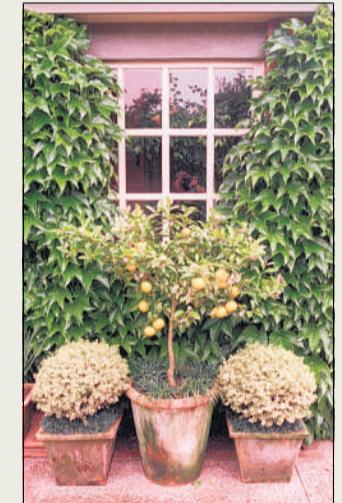
■ Whitefly can be very active at this time of year, especially in greenhouses and around citrus trees — spray with a safe insecticide such as Yates' Target.

■ Citrus are greedy plants and should be fed several times a year if the soil beneath isn't too dry. Apply a dedicated citrus fertiliser around the drip-line (outer perimeter) of the bush and water in.

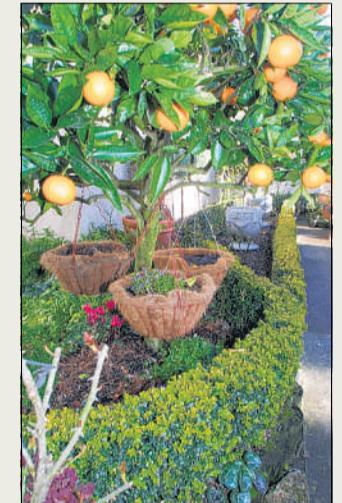
■ Use bird netting to protect ripening fruit.

■ Many flowers look a bit jaded and lacklustre this month. An exception are the gauras, or butterfly flowers — easy perennials for warmer areas which perform all summer without let-up and never need deadheading.

■ Cut the flower heads from plants like false valerian (*centranthus*) and *Lychnis coronaria*, which can be a nuisance if they seed too madly about the garden.



Lemon trees look great in terracotta pots (above) and fruit trees planted on berms (below).



even a small wildlife pond scraped out when the new sea defences were being built. A row of salt-blasted and long-dead trees has been retained as a favourite perch used by visiting hawks, and Jackie keeps a logbook to note down the avian ebb and flow.

"The view out of the windows across the water is better than television," she says, "from windsurfers and boats to the first swallow of spring or a skein of geese marking the end of summer — there's always something to see." And clearly with a grand garden like this, always something to do too.