

NATIVE AFFAIRS

In Invercargill, the Southland Community Nursery offers more than just native plants. Through the passion of owners, Chris and Brian Rance, gardeners young and old are educated, inspired and rewarded.

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Imagine having free access to all the locally sourced native plants you require to revegetate your property or a public space. It seems like a dream come true, and it is. At Otatara, 7km from Invercargill, Chris and Brian Rance have established the Southland Community Nursery where, for nothing more than your labour (and the chance to enjoy the company of like-minded folk – including neighbours you're yet to meet) Southlanders can learn to grow native plants specially suited to their part of the world. It couldn't be simpler: the nursery supplies a range of native seedlings, potting mix, pots, seed mix and facilities, and you turn up to volunteer your help.

And turn up folk surely do. For more than 20 years, 10-20 volunteers at a time – from parents with toddlers right through to retired people and whole school (and preschool) groups – have arrived to learn

how to collect seed, grow and plant, and in return, take away native plants free of cost. For those who can't make it to the nursery as volunteers, there is still the opportunity to buy very reasonably priced natives direct from the nursery or at pop-up sales tables around the region.

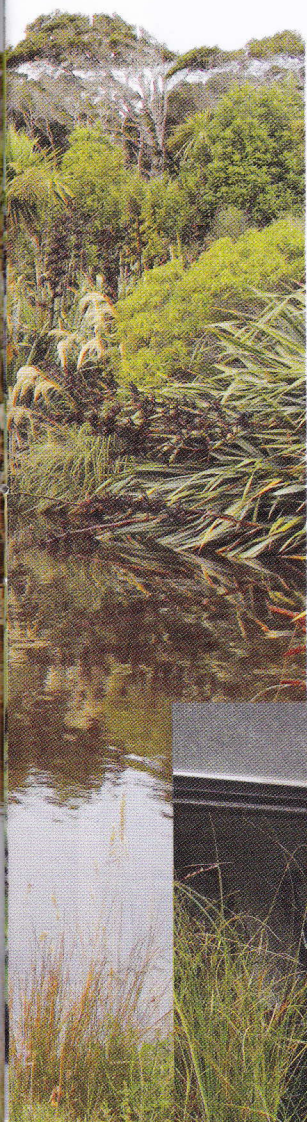
The nursery was born out of the revegetation of Chris and Brian's land, just over two hectares of now-thriving forest and wetland, including a tranquil pond, which abuts Otatara Landcare Group Bushy Point Restoration Project and Department of Conservation reserve. Seeing the need and the potential for plantings outside their own boundary, this inspiring couple developed the nursery which contributes around 8000 plants a year to the local environment.

The nursery itself is a compact, well-organised affair with sections for propagation, seed raising, and the growing

on of plants. With no reticulated water on hand (what is available comes off the roof of Chris and Brian's house) growing platforms have been specially designed to house young plants. Raised on built-up beds for ease of access, the plants rest in their bags on a sheet of black plastic that can be tucked up to retain moisture or lowered to allow for drainage. All watering is done by hand to avoid waste.

The nursery's motto is 'Grow to Go'. In other words, plants are sent out to new homes as soon as they are ready to be released, a policy that cleverly limits the nursery to manageable proportions.

'Keeping it manageable' is a message that is also conveyed to those who tap into the nursery for plants. "Planting is the easy part," says Chris. "Everyone likes to plant but when it comes to providing protection [through trapping and weeding], it's a different story."



LEFT PAGE

TOP: A pond, visible from the nursery, is a haven for wildlife.
BELOW, FROM LEFT: A 'living' moa can be seen from the window of the education centre; Chris Rance tends plants in the community nursery adjacent to her home; Raised platforms contain the growing plants.

RIGHT PAGE

TOP: The new learning space attached to the nursery is a valuable resource, in which small children find plenty to interest them.
LEFT: Chris and Brian Rance load up nursery plants to take out to a planting project.

So don't bite off more than you can chew."

Keeping weeding to a minimum is an ongoing learning curve for nursery workers, with a range of different mulches having been tried over the years. Carpet, once the mulch of choice, is now deemed too heavy to move about, and much of it fails to break down. Currently, the nursery recommends 'Combi-guard', a biodegradable woollen mat laid around the tree and held in place by a reusable plastic surround.

Over the years, the Southland Community Nursery has contributed to some significant projects including Bushy Point (which absorbed around 25,000 of the nursery's plants over 10 years) and Te Rere, Forest and Bird's yellow-eyed penguin reserve on Southland's south-east coast. Chris is adept at applying for grants to assist with various conservation projects,

but the nursery is almost completely self-funding through the sale of its plants.

But it's not only the nursery that Chris is engaged in. The latest development on the Rance's property is a purpose-built and decorated education space. Designed by Chris, it is an exciting under-cover area of bright murals, puzzles and games, informative posters, and children's drawings. Intended to foster in young Southlanders a love of native flora and fauna, the centre receives a string of visits from students, teachers, trainee teachers and Kiwi Conservation Club members. It also provides a space for a wide range of environment-based workshops, and, to top it all off, its garage-style doors open wide to receive a trailer filled with potting mix so volunteers can come in out of the rain while potting up.

The education space looks out on one of the few clear fields in the area – a perfect spot

for children to run about and let off steam between classes. Also outside, and right where it can't be missed, is a 'living' sculpture. Constructed from no. 8 wire and chicken mesh, it has been fashioned into the shape of a moa, which children have threaded through with dried cabbage tree leaf and toi toi 'feathers'. It moves mysteriously in the breeze as if, at any moment, it might turn tail and head for the undergrowth.

While moa have long since disappeared from our forests, the work of Brian and Chris Rance and those involved in the community nursery is fundamental in ensuring that today's Southland birds are in good hands. With an emphasis on growing plants that will feed them and those which provide shelter, the nursery is enhancing the Southland environment while at the same time ensuring the next generation is well prepared to carry on this excellent work.