



Before restoration work.



From left: Eliana Baird, Nadia McCrae, Adam Philips, Matariki and Karyn Burgess, and Anna and Lynton Baird.

group effort

Two neighbours saw a weedy, polluted stream and decided to do something about it.



The same section of the Mangawhero Stream after the replanting efforts.

A group of gardeners in the Masteron suburb of Lansdowne is hoping to inspire other communities with its DIY approach to restoring a local stream.

The Awatotara Project was established by neighbours Karyn Burgess and Anna Baird, who met through their involvement in the nearby Oxford Street Community Garden and were keen to find ways of creating stronger links within the community. A neighbourhood potluck picnic they organised in early 2020 was held on a green space near the Mangawhero Stream, which at the time was rampant with weeds and polluted by grazing cattle. "A few of us got talking and said, 'Let's do something about it,'" recalls Anna.

The spring-fed stream trickles alongside the railway line at the northern end of Masterton, through a nearby golf course and under Oxford Street before making its way into the Waipoua River. Part of the area the stream passes through is known as Awatotara among local Māori, due to the many large tōtara growing there.

A group of interested residents held project planning meetings over Zoom during the first Covid-19 lockdown. These meetings included the Masterton District Council, landowners and funders. After about a year, work on restoring the stream began in earnest.

The project has been funded by the Lansdowne Residents Association, Mountains to Sea Trust and Te Uru Rākau (New Zealand Forest Service), with most of the money being used to buy plants and fencing. Mulch was donated by the Masterton District Council, which manages the stream. The Wairarapa Pūkaha to Kawakawa Alliance (a network promoting community-led environmental restoration) has paid for a four-hour-a-week project coordinator, Nadia McCrae, a recent conservation graduate from UCOL Masterton (Universal College of Learning) is a government funded Institute of Technology & Polytechnic. The nearby Tribe Church has provided volunteers, coffee and kai for project working bees, which can attract anything from six to 40 volunteers.

"We don't want to burn ourselves out, but rather keep making progress at a reasonable pace," says Anna. "If you're here for the long term, you don't need to try and get it all done in one year."

In the past two years, about 1000 native trees and shrubs have been planted along the stream, with another 1600 on the way. Mānuka, māhoe, maire, corokia, lacebark and tarata are all in the mix. The Greater Wellington Regional Council's native plant guide have been used to identify suitable plants for the area.

The group focuses on non-invasive techniques such as clearing large obstructions manually. Mulch piled up over layers of cardboard is used to suppress weeds.

The long-term vision is to provide shelter and shade alongside the entire length of the waterway (estimated at half a kilometre), and a healthy habitat for the creatures who live in it. Over the time they have been working there, the gardeners have noticed more water flow, less silt and an improved smell in the stream. "Every waterway deserves to have its mauri respected," adds Karyn. "Why can't a stream be an urban ecosystem rather than a storm water drain?" ■

See the Awatotara Project's Facebook page for more information.

How to start a group & work smart

- Start with some values the group agrees on.
- Be prepared for a lot of meetings so you can get as many people on board as possible. Involve the council, landowners and neighbours.
- Connect with other groups, environment centres and wider environmental projects for support and ideas. They might also have resources to boost your workforce.
- Try different things and learn as you go.
- Be as social as possible – provide kai at every working bee and meeting. Jump on board with events such as Neighbours Day.
- Break the project into manageable chunks and start small. Try to get each area well established before you expand.
- Plant the most established seedlings. Use PB 10 planter bags rather than root trainers if you can.
- Put cardboard and mulch down on flat areas before planting. Hot tip: The most useful cardboard comes from furniture shops!
- Use plant guards or at least stakes for every plant so you can find them later.
- Learn which species thrive and plant more of these.
- Invest in a paid coordinator if you can.



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.