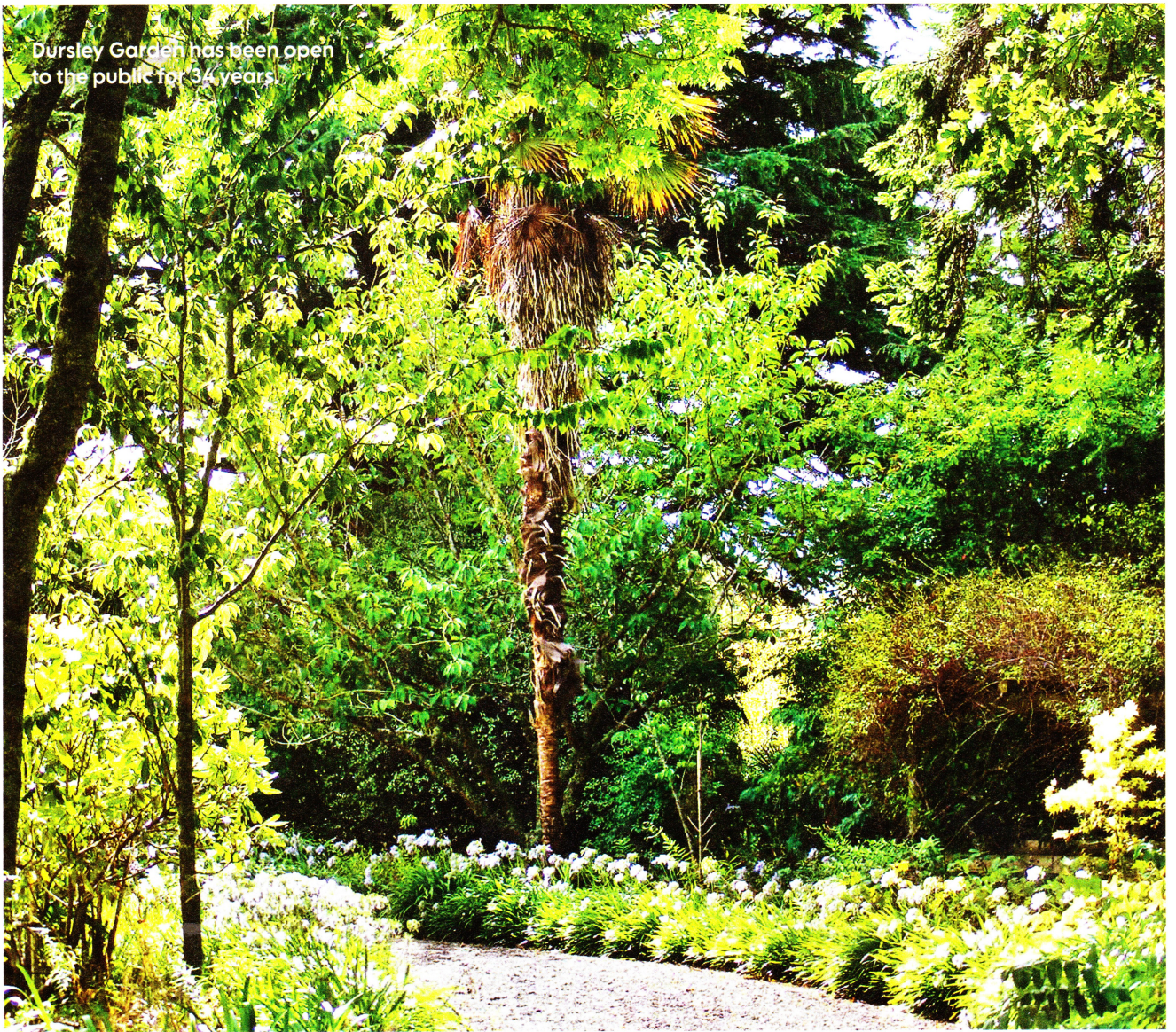
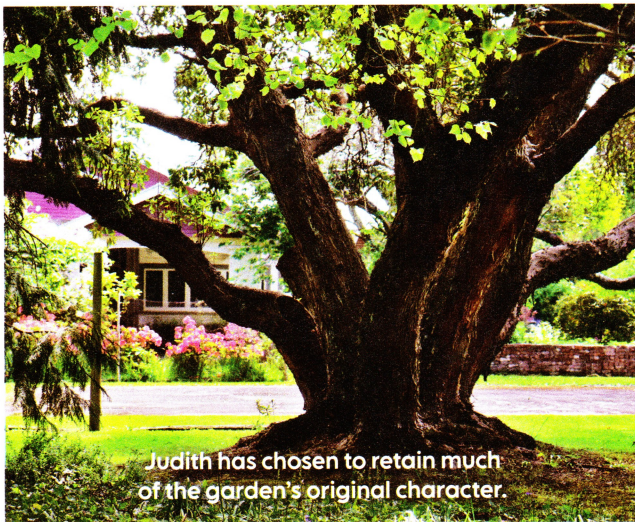


Dursley Garden has been open to the public for 34 years.



a certain vintage

A classic garden retains its treasures – while getting new ones too.



Judith has chosen to retain much of the garden's original character.



Judith Callaghan and granddaughter Phoebe.

Judith Callaghan's approach to tending a 109-year-old garden will be familiar to many: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Dursley Garden, located 18km northeast of Masterton, was designed and planted by New Zealand's father of landscape design, Alfred Buxton, in 1916.

And if he were fortunate enough, somehow, to see what his almost two-hectare creation looks like in 2026, he would easily recognise it. The elegant sweeping drive is still there, as are most of the original trees, the woodland walks, and the deep perennial border.

Judith, now 86 years of age, moved to the "very run down" property with her late husband, Royce, in 1973. "The garden was full of sycamore, elm, broom and gorse," she recalls. "There was a buxus hedge that was 30 feet tall!"

"My husband, who was not a gardener, brought in tractors, front-end loaders, trucks and men, and chainsaws. They pulled everything out and cleaned it all up. And then he said to me, 'Right. You're on your own.'"

Judith was undeterred, hailing as she does from a family of gardeners, including her late mother, Joan Thomas. "She was a wonderful gardener, and grew the best of everything – the best dahlias, the best lilies and the best begonias. I'm not like that. I'm more like my grandmother, who had big, sprawling gardens. And I learned how to vegetable garden from my father. I was born before the war and things were fairly tight."

Unlike other gardeners who may have been tempted to treat the site as a blank canvas, Judith has retained many important features of Buxton's original design. She has kept most of the original trees, including a 1917 arbutus which has been climbed over by several generations of children.

Judith loves trees, and even chaired the Trees Committee as a Masterton District Councillor for nine years. "There are a lot of trees around Masterton that I've been responsible for," she smiles.

Some of the property's original roses have also survived. "Roses and this house go together," Judith says. Dursley's roses number in the hundreds, from very old tea roses to modern 'Maroon Iceberg' plants.

"I've got friends who move into those 'waiting for God' places [retirement villages] and they're only allowed about three roses," explains Judith. "When new ones come on the market, they dig up the old ones and bring them out to me."

Judith has established expansive beds under many of the trees to provide year-round interest, including cyclamens, daffodils, tulips and hellebores.

In summer, hundreds of lilies of many different varieties feature throughout the woodland area, along with California tree poppies. Pathways through the trees are lined with azaleas, rhododendrons, camellias and tree peonies.

As we tour the garden, I lose count of Judith's "favourite" plants that she points out. They include tulips, bluebells, rhododendrons and lilies.

But the carpets of cyclamens deserve a special mention. "My mother brought me three cyclamen corms from Ashburton, and I now have about 10 million plants," Judith laughs. "I give them away. They are absolutely stunning when they come out."

The latest addition to Dursley, known as the wild garden, was previously a roadside bank over which vegetative rubbish was tossed. The steep paths and steps were built and dug out by Judith, before being planted with orange Californian poppies, red and pink Oriental poppies, purple foxgloves, red hot pokers and yellow daisies.

"When Royce died, people didn't give me bunches of flowers – they gave me plants," Judith recalls. "So I planted them on the bank, and called it Royce's Patch."

Judith also maintains a large vegetable garden (about the size of a tennis court), and makes pickles and preserves from her bountiful produce. "The only pre-made product I have in the pantry is condensed tomato soup," she says.

The garden has been open to the public for 34 years (Devonshire teas are available on request), and regularly hosts community events.

But Judith says what she is most proud of is her continued ability to do most of the maintenance work herself, including a vigilant approach to weed control.

"I've had people from very important places here, and if I'm walking round the garden with them and see a weed, I stop talking, bend over and pull it out. I don't care what they think."

Her overall approach to gardening is similarly untroubled. "I enjoy my garden but I don't take it too seriously," she says. "My garden just is what it is." ■



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.