

## A Brief History of the Ngataringa Organic Garden, Devonport, Auckland

Compiled by Tanya Sorrell

The site of Ngataringa Organic Gardens sits on the northern end of Devonport near Ngataringa Bay. In 1899 the land was part of the gasworks property, though aerial photos show that the storage tanks sat just south of the garden land. Memorial Drive was planted in 1952 alongside and running north of the site along Lake Road. In 1964 a tip was established to the west of the site.

There is an early connection between the tip and the gardens through recycling and composting operations. In 1977 Richard Tong started a recycling scheme at the tip, which according to the *Flagstaff* was the first of its kind in New Zealand. Two years later in 1979 Tong's operation launched the first large-scale composting operation in the country. Tong told the *Flagstaff* in 2014 that the Framework gardens grew out of the composting scheme, as it was the source of organic material for all of the raised beds that made gardening on the site possible.



Borough of Devonport 1899: Map courtesy Auckland Libraries Kura Collections

### The Framework Gardens

The gardens arose from the work of the Framework Trust. Established in 1984, the Framework Trust is a charitable organisation that helps people with mental illness learn new skills and build their confidence through horticultural work. It had sites in Kingsland and Milford, and had a

partnership with Kelmarna Gardens in Herne Bay. It was working on site at Ngataringa Park before their garden at Ngataringa was officially established.

Volunteers from the Framework Trust practiced their landscaping at Ngataringa park, planting trees and shrubs and making paths. They established the path between Victoria Road and “Ducks Crossing,” the crossing of Lake Road at the North end of the park. Ngataringa Park was officially opened on 27 February 1994, featuring locally renowned speakers such as zoologist John Morton and a youth rock concert. The ceremony was held on day two of the 1994 Devonport Food and Wine Festival, and parents were encouraged to drop their young people off at the concert on their way to the event.

With a \$15,000 grant provided from proceeds of the Devonport Food and Wine Festival that year, the Framework Trust acquired a lease from the Devonport Community Board for three acres of land at Ngataringa Park. They constructed a number of raised beds and established a nursery on site. One goal for the gardens was to raise plants to revegetate Ngataringa Park.

The plants raised by the Framework Trust were likely also used in the landscaping for the Ngataringa Park maze, which was established shortly after the park was opened. Designed by landscape architect Heather Ann McConachy, the maze was inspired by Celtic and Māori design and used local materials like shells, local bricks, and scoria.

The Trust carried out their mission at the Ngataringa site for many years, operating organic gardens, a plant nursery, and landscape contracting. A palm nursery operated in the northern part of the site. Linda Christianson, the manager of the time, explained the approach: “If you have a mental illness it knocks the socks off of you. People come here to learn new skills and can work here until they feel confident in their skills and abilities to be able to move on somewhere else.”

The Framework Trust always ran the site with organic methods. In 1994 there were a team of up to 15 working on site raising a range of seasonal vegetables. The Trust practice was to save and sow their own seeds, as well as sending them to a seed bank. They worked across their sites to develop biological solutions to pest and disease issues, such as a predator for the white butterfly and biodynamic preparations. Geoff Reed, the coordinator at the time reported that the gardens supplied a number of restaurants and a wholesale distributor.

### **The Framework Trust Bows Out**

Funding issues for the Framework Trust meant that the organisation was spread too thin across their multiple sites and projects. In winter 2012, they decided to leave its Devonport site after twenty years. This alarmed members of the community, who formed a Facebook page – “Save Framework Garden Devonport.” A working group was established composed of Christine and Michele Lennan, representatives of the Devonport Community Garden, and Devonport Transition Town (DTT). DTT member Cameron Smith presented a business plan to representatives of the Framework Trust and the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board.

The original plan involved continuing with mental health services, and staff gardeners, and amounted to an annual cost of around \$110,000. The goal of the working group was to bring all local community gardens together under the Devonport Community Garden at Taka-a-raro/Mt Cambria Reserve. This included the two sites as well as a planned edible forest at Fraser Reserve in Belmont and an old herb garden in Devonport village. While the Local Board did not have funding for the project, it was eligible for various contestable grants.

### **Birth of the Ngataringa Organic Garden**

The new group continued to campaign for funding to continue with mental health services, but in the meantime they worked to transition from the old Framework garden to a new entity – the Ngataringa Organic Garden. Many of the volunteers and clients from the Framework days stayed on. An Open Day was held in April 2013, at the zenith of a successful first season. Cameron Smith told the *Flagstaff* that the site operated off small donations and sales of worm tea, vegetable seedlings, veggies and pot plants. As is the case now, these were sold from a stand outside with an honesty box to collect the proceeds. Opening hours in 2013 were Wednesdays and Sundays from 10.00am to 2.00pm.

### **Buildings on the site**

Originally, the Trust had planned to build a new building from rammed-earth bricks, but this does not appear to have been realised. In 1998 the Trust received resource consent to build a greenhouse structure on the site. It had been declined in 1996 due to visual effects from its proposed site at the Northern end of the property.

It is unknown how the kitchen building came to be on site. Two past employees of the Framework Trust who had worked at the site recalled the buildings were there for as long as they could remember, though they did definitely supply the kitchen with a fridge and cooker. It is possible that the kitchen building pre-dates the Framework operation.

Aerial photographs from 1980 and 1987 show a cluster of buildings in the vicinity of the gardens. They appear to be associated with the tip, which by 1974 had started to run a recycling scheme and by 1979 was running a composting operation. The kitchen building might have originally been a lunchroom for the people working at the tip.

In 1996 the Framework Trust took possession of an old house at a new reserve in Milford, but they told the *North Shore Times* that they had no place for it on the North Shore. They had been using it at its Milford site as a drop-in centre for recovering psychiatric patients. They traded \$5,000 worth of native and exotic plants to landscape the new reserve. It is unclear where the Trust moved the house, possibly their old Kingsland site or Kelmarna Gardens. While there is no evidence to suggest this acquisition is related to the Devonport site, it demonstrates another possible way the buildings could have been established.

Other buildings on the site include a tool shed, a pergola, and a pizza oven

### **Social and Educational events**

In the Framework Trust days the garden also ran educational events for schools and the community, covering subjects such as organic growing practices, recycling and endangered wildlife. They also invited visitors to see rare poultry which were part of a national breeding programme.

The NOG planting calendar has been punctuated by many social events over the years. There have been regular meetups, including a group luncheon every Sunday for many years. In 2015 NOG held a garden festival to celebrate the spring equinox.

The gardens have often been used as a living classroom, hosting school groups and workshops for people of all ages. The *Flagstaff* reported on “Herb Fairy Academy” a series of workshops by Eva Scherer in the Summer of 2017, focused on teaching young children about the benefits of various herbs like lemon balm and stevia.

## **Bibliography**

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“Amazing concept for Devonport” 22 February 1994

“Devonport Community” 24 June 1994

“Bid to get Framework Trust House” 1996 10-10

“Trust Exempt” 1998-05-01 (nursery gets consent)

### ***Devonport Flagstaff***

“Framework Gardens” 14 April 1994 Page 11

Unlocking a secret: Devonport gardens, 20 October 2005

Campaigning hard to save community garden, 3 August 2012

Ngataringa Organic Garden Open Day, 5 April 2013

“Getting back on top of recycling”, 4 April 2014

Ngataringa garden festival heralds the arrival of spring, 2 October 2015.

### **Personal Communication**

Beverley Pollard, current employee of Ember, successor to the Framework Trust. Worked for the Framework Trust since 2006. Emails in October 2022.