

Nigel - happy making plans for spaces

Richard Loader

Not being afraid to ask a silly question often unearths practical or creative solutions to landscaping problems that clients had not previously thought about, says Southland landscape architect Nigel Cowburn.

With an interesting life that has included mold making, plastics, panelbeating, concrete, construction, gardening and forestry, Nigel describes himself as a one-stop-shop landscape architect, specialising in rural clients as well urban design and townhouse work.

“Essentially I have moved from shaping materials to shaping and managing spaces,” explains Nigel, managing director of Growplan Landscape Architects, based in Gore.

After completing a Diploma of Ecology - specialising in weed control, Nigel’s discovery of the world of landscape architecture may not have happened had it not been for a fire.

“I moved to Christchurch to do a BSc in Ecology with the aim of researching herbicides. There was a fire one day and everyone spilled out of the building including a number of interestingly creative types - the sort of people who looked as though they thought outside the box.”

Discovering they were landscape architect students, Nigel immediately saw his future path, switched courses and completed a Bachelor Degree in Landscape Architecture.

He says a landscape architect has the ability to be presented with a really complex set of problems with economic, social, geographic and climate elements and finds a solution matching the client’s needs.

“When people hear the word ‘landscape’ they think ‘garden’. But we think about long times and spatial scales. For instance you might be designing all the plantings on the motorway between Auckland and Wellington.”



Nigel Cowburn: “My job is to look for ideas and solve the problems.”

A key part of what Nigel does is meeting clients on site, learning from them what they know about their environment.

“They know much more about their landscape than I ever will and their input is vital. My job is to look for ideas and solve the problems.”

Nigel’s work has ranged from smaller town house

gardens, to larger urban and industrial designs through to farms and large lifestyle blocks.

“I’m currently designing the grounds and gardens of a winery near Wanaka - that will be an attractive five-hectare landscape.

“I’m also involved in several urban subdivisions - from lot layout and stormwater systems to planting design and management.”

While Growplan’s geographic reach has focused on the South Island, Nigel is extending that throughout New Zealand, specifically in relation to the farming sector - riparian design, water flow into streams and controlling the negative effects of nutrient run-off.

“I want to help give farmers windows of control over their finances and time. The main problem at

the moment is that everyone’s thinking they just have to plant, without planning first, often ending up with weed control problems or the riparian planting is not doing what they hoped it would do - which is clean up the water ways.”

Another area that Nigel is passionate about is planning for pivot irrigators; making use of all the small pieces of land that result from conversion to pivots.

“Rather than waste that area, you might be able to have an arrangement with a neighbour or contractor who could do something with the land.

“Growing industrial hemp or sunflowers are all viable options, as is using an area to handle runoff. We need to find ways of preserving the economic value of the land for the farm owners.”



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