

# GREEN FINGERED GAINS

It's holiday downtime for most Kiwis. What better time to reinvigorate a property and present a well tended section to attract new tenants? **By Louise Richardson**

Pimp My Lawn can maintain lawns in perfect condition for around \$400 to \$600 a year.

**OWNERS AND RENTERS ALIKE, KIWIS LOVE THE** concept of indoor-outdoor living that has come to define our relationship with our homes.

A nice-looking, well-tended garden can help when trying to attracting good tenants. If you are renovating to sell, quality work carried out on the section is undoubtedly a hands-down winner in terms of fetching the best possible price.

So, it's a new year, it's summer, and you've got some time and a few dollars to spare. What should you do with it?

## TIDY THE JOINT

No amount of money and effort is going to enhance your rental property if the section isn't tidy and it's amazing how much rubbish can accumulate and how quickly, from fallen-down fence posts, broken toys, old pieces of wood. Take the chance to hire a bin, pile it high and sort things out for a fresh, new start.

Prices for a skip usually start around \$200 [check relevant websites as some areas are cheaper than others] for a medium sized bin, bearing in mind that there are three types of waste – general, green [garden rubbish] and hard fill, which includes bricks, concrete and sand. You cannot mix these categories as they consigned to different refuse areas.

## LOVELY LAWNS

Simple investments can be remarkably effective, and tenants, especially those with children, will appreciate a lawn overhaul. Nothing beats walking barefoot on soft luxuriant grass, but a hard, unfriendly lawn, with knotted, gnarly weeds, bugs and bees is another story.

Pimp My Lawn specialises in ridding grass areas of dandelions, daisies and other pesky interlopers.

"A lot of landlords get their lawns treated regularly," director Nick Redmond, who is based in Hawkes Bay, says.

"It's a 'pride in your property' thing; if the lawns look and feel nice, tenants are inclined to take more care of the place and it's only around \$400 to \$600 a year for an average-sized property."

## HIT THE DECK

A property with a deck will almost certainly provide a higher rental return than one without but it's important to look after these structures in terms of looks and safety. Resene Timber and Deck Wash, used annually, is a great investment in the health of your deck and Resene Moss and Mould Killer will help keep it free of dangerous slippery slime.

Always replace rotten or otherwise damaged timber as soon as you note it during an inspection, or your tenant reports a problem.

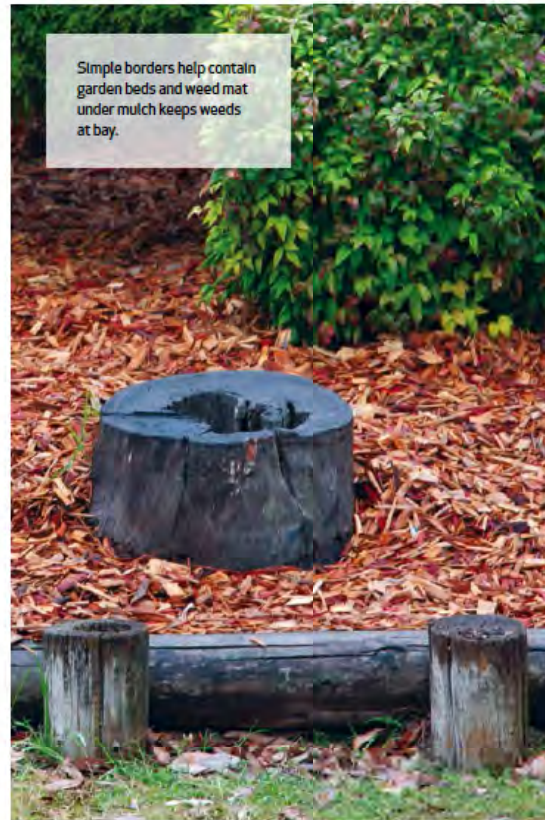
If you're considering a deck, make sure that the design and materials comply with relevant local regulations [see NZ Property Investor, December 2014].



## RENOVATION: GARDENS



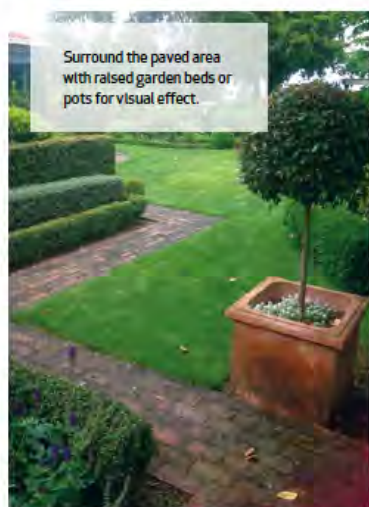
Tenants appreciate being able to walk barefoot on soft luxuriant grass.



Simple borders help contain garden beds and weed mat under mulch keeps weeds at bay.



Tenants expect garden lighting in more upmarket homes.



Surround the paved area with raised garden beds or pots for visual effect.



If you have green-fingered tenants, encourage them to grow their own plants or vegetables.

Paul Magill, who has a number of investment properties in Auckland, sounds a word of caution. It's great to extend the living area of the house with a deck in terms of rentals and trading property, he says. But it's a folly if you try to build something that requires consent.

"I spent 15 minutes talking to [the] council about a deck that was slightly larger and higher than usual and I might as well have been trying to build a rocket to Mars," Magill says. "It was never going to get off the ground without architect's plans and geotechnical and engineering reports!"

### ON THE TILES

If a deck isn't feasible, some landlords advocate pouring a simple concrete slab on which renters can place their garden furniture. However, bricks and pavers are remarkably inexpensive at most large DIY stores and for a couple of hundred dollars you can provide a patio or courtyard area that's attractive and stylish – as well as practical.

Ask staff which products are strong enough for your intended use, since different weather conditions throughout

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the country can have a bearing on suitability. If you want to take things one step further a simple built-in barbecue is surprisingly easy to construct.

Enhance this type of space further with the addition of some sort of protection from the sun – such as a shade sail [these are often under \$100 through on-line sale sites] or even a more permanent gazebo-type-structure. As with all enhancements, the location of your property and the type of tenants you seek should dictate how far you go in terms of cost and effort.

### AND SO TO BED

Surround the new paved area with raised garden beds or plants in pots for best visual

effect and if you have reliable, green-fingered tenants, encourage them to grow their own flowers and vegetables. Everyone gets satisfaction from a home-grown tomato or a handful of fresh herbs, and you'll be doing your bit for the planet too.

Again, large self-service stores are your friend, offering easy-to-assemble kitset garden bed products but it's easy to make your own too.

Check when buying the timber as there are issues around the use of treated and untreated wood. Most of the big-names have takeaway project sheets or, better still, handy online instruction videos to assist you.

### GARDEN IN GENERAL

The long-term value and eventual sale price of your property will almost certainly be affected by basic landscaping – or the lack of it, so tenants aside, it's worth paying at least some attention to the garden in general.

Simple borders made of rocks, ponga logs, wooden railway sleepers or other inexpensive materials can be constructed to contain slow growing, easy care perennials. Make sure you use mulch and weed-mat in order to reduce the need for labour.

Landscaper Bruce Inwood of Garden Mechanix in Auckland says he has landlords who want a cut-over once or twice a year.

"And if you have a bare section, I can easily come in and do a makeover as big or as small as you want," Inwood says.

"I can easily design it to require minimal upkeep."

Inwood notes that customers in up-market areas are more inclined to invest in their back yards.

"I had a lady in Parnell who was renting out a particular house for a premium and part of the deal was obviously that someone would tidy the large garden once a month, so that's exactly what I did!"

Privacy can be an issue in rental properties but Inwood recommends a row of pittosporum for dealing with that particular issue.

"It's all about good choices and keeping things simple," he says.

### LET THERE BE LIGHT

Outdoor lighting of some sort or another is an essential feature for any property – for safety and security reasons alone.

Outside steps or stairs should be adequately lit so that tenants don't suffer nasty falls, and security lighting not only helps protect the property against burglary but can also add extra illumination.

If you have provided a deck or paved area where renters can entertain, it's a nice – and often much appreciated touch – to add some simple lighting, even in the form of fairy lights for a tree.

In a more up-market house that is destined for sale, some sort of garden lighting system is more or less expected these days.

Such chains as Lighting Plus and Lighting Direct regularly have storewide sales with large discounts so use these as an opportunity to stock up on lights, and always engage a registered electrician to install them.

### END OF THE DAY

Keeping on top of the little things that can go wrong is key to maintaining a rental property that is appealing to tenants, inspiring them to take care of it and ultimately protecting your investment.

While many landlords can't see the point of providing pleasant landscaping and outdoor living, others can clearly see the benefits such efforts can bring – and from a tenant's point of view, seemingly small things can make all the difference.

"A useable clothesline would be nice," says a Rotorua renter. "After two years, I'm still waiting for one!" ■