

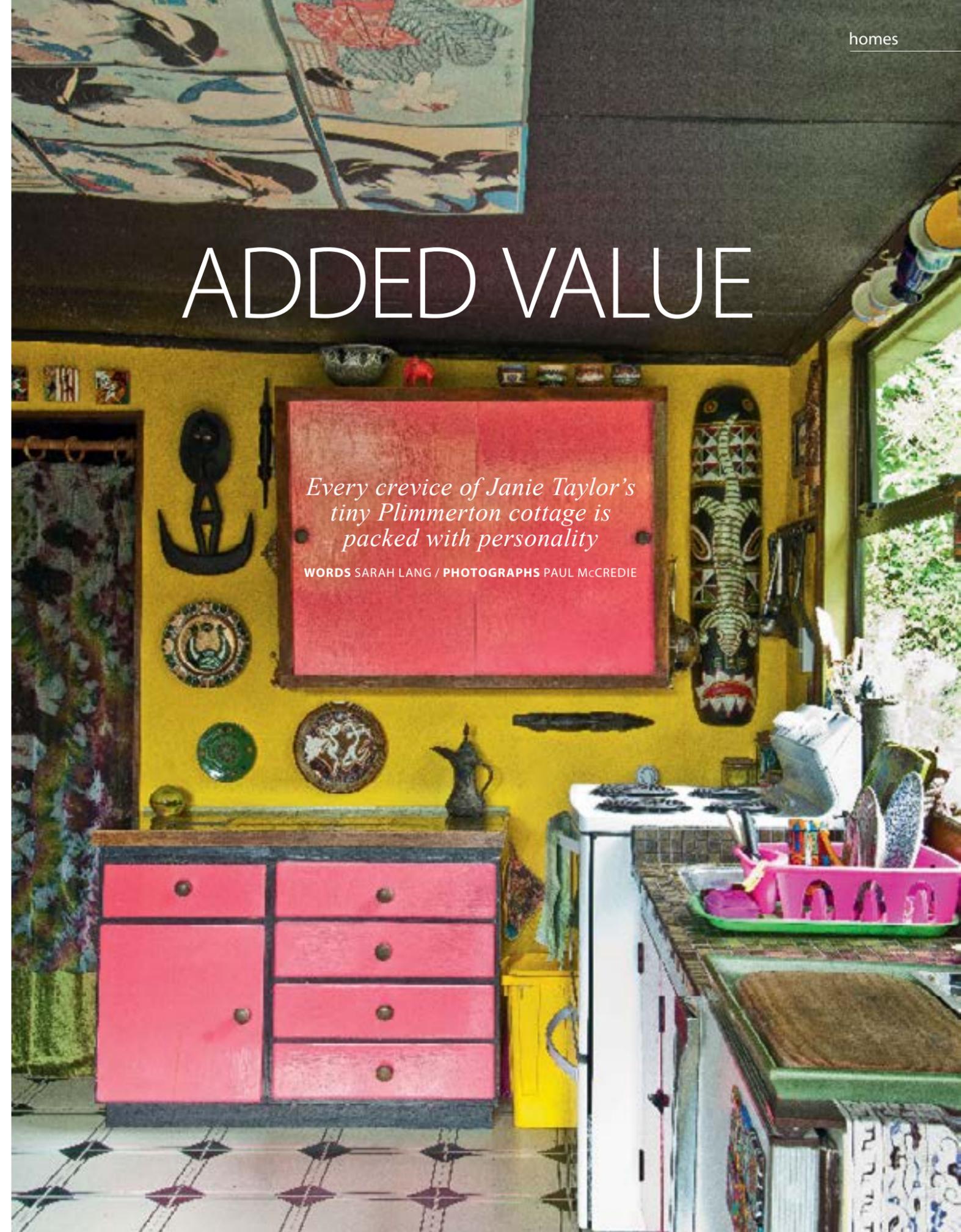
**THIS PAGE** In the dining room extension she added to her home on the coast north of Wellington in the late 1970s, Janie Taylor has hidden all the "horrible things" she doesn't like to look at, such as shoe polish and broken secateurs, behind a pink curtain; she picked up the handmade clay tea set for \$8 at the Salvation Army: "I don't like cooking or entertaining, so I have no need for anything other than a small, cafe-style dining table. I've had one dinner party in my life, when I turned 60, because I owed so many people hospitality!"

**OPPOSITE** Janie prefers the outdoors to the indoors, so yellow walls bring the sunshine inside the kitchen: "When I moved in, I looked at that kitchen cupboard and said, 'That has to go'. But I got used to it and now friends say, 'It's so retro. Can I have it?'"

# ADDED VALUE

*Every crevice of Janie Taylor's tiny Plimmerton cottage is packed with personality*

WORDS SARAH LANG / PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL MCCREDIE



IT WASN'T UNTIL the teacher complained about a repeatedly muddy bottom that Janie Taylor realised her daughter Megan, then six, was sliding down the front of her steep section as a shortcut to Plimmerton School. Thirty-five or so years later, that mud's been replaced by a rainbow of flowers and a maze-like path with helpful chalk-marked arrows reminiscent of the string that led Theseus home after slaying the Minotaur.

It's a much less scary creature I find around the back. A brisk, sprite-like woman adorned in rainbow-coloured clothes and dangly earrings calls hello and we spend a few hours talking about everything from family to flowers.

At 64, Janie seems a contradictory sort: she's private yet talkative, self-effacing yet self-assured, introspective and idiosyncratic. Certainly the mother of four, gardener and painted-tile artist, who taught exercise classes for the elderly for years and worked in other people's gardens (for small change, baking or for free), is much more accomplished than she gives herself credit for. Perhaps that's because she's had a hard-scrabble life. Not that she's complaining: "I like the challenge of finding a way to bend myself around whatever comes my way."

Bend herself she has. A largely disabled right hand and an impaired left hand mean she can no longer sew her own clothes and computers are out. Her joy of 10 years, hand-painting designs on tiles, is now such a frustrating process she does it only occasionally. "But gardening's my first love and it just needs good arms, palms and patience." So that's where her energies go.

Forty years ago, Janie, who grew up in Glasgow and the South Island, boomeranged back from Scotland with her young family. Having asked her father to find a cheap place for her, she arrived, site unseen but money paid, at a cottage on a quarter-acre section covered with discarded whiteware and beer bottles, clinging to a wind-battered Plimmerton hillside. She wasn't impressed: it was ugly, she thought, and would be just a pit stop. But, as the garden and her four girls grew, she came to love it.

As a child in Glasgow, Janie had watched, fascinated, as residents who could afford a key turned the locks of "secret" gardens enclosed by wrought-iron fences at the centre of horseshoe-shaped tenement buildings. Sixty years on, surveying her own garden, Janie lights up just as a child would.

From a "super-steep, totally hostile clay bank" where nothing would grow, Janie has created a terraced garden popping with colour and personality. She began by buying one plant and collecting one big stone at a time, pushing them home in the pram with each of her babies over a period of 13 years. >



**THIS PAGE** (from top) The pictures on the ceiling of the open-plan kitchen and dining space are ripped-out pages from a Japanese calendar that was too beautiful to store away; the space's "deliberately childish" colour palette keeps her young, says Janie. The four squiggly figures on Janie's hand-painted tile represent her four daughters. **OPPOSITE** In 1985, leopardskin was the only wallpaper pattern Janie's four girls (then aged between six and 14) could agree on for their shared bedroom; it's now Janie's workroom.





**THIS PAGE** (clockwise from top left) There were no internal doors when Janie moved in so she's opted for colourful curtains instead. Most of the tribal art, bought second-hand, was made in New Guinea and Bali. "My bedroom is my refuge," says Janie. "I go in there after I exhaust myself with work and don't come out till I'm rested." Japanese grass-cloth wallpaper covers the living room wall leading into Janie's bedroom. **OPPOSITE** The green on the living room walls "takes me back to my days acting in theatre – the green room is where you went to collect your thoughts. I come here to make myself stop working."



*"I like small things – accents not focal points. As in the garden, I don't want anything that will dominate the room"*

With the stones she made low retaining walls. She fashioned fences from gathered sticks and wire. She created flat spaces, made winding paths and sowed seeds, weeding out what wouldn't grow or withstand the wind.

Now, every crevice is planted. Bright blooms and old-fashioned plants chosen for their affordability and resilience coexist in this egalitarian garden. "I can't be bothered with plants that need more attention than their neighbours."

It's clear that the garden grew up around the girls: here's the stump of the ivy-covered tree they used to swing off; there's the flat spot that housed the trampoline. "I love seeing my seven grandsons chasing each other around the same paths I built for their mothers."

Today a bossy tui slides down a wire to sup on nectar. "Some would call this a hodgepodge, but variety's my thing – there's always room for another plant. A garden's never finished. My garden and my house are a journey, not a destination."

Her 80sqm weatherboard cottage is very basic but it's a visual feast. Take care with errant elbows here, as it's easy to knock one of the hundreds of op shop curios that pepper the house. Think tribal art, painted plates and Janie's tiles affixed to the walls; an alligator-shaped table, a "button curtain" that sheathes an old meter box, collectables her daughters gave her. Think quirky.

The house has become a gallery of Janie's life and memories. "I like small things – accents not focal points. As in the garden, I don't want anything that dominates the room."

Indeed, you could sit in this house for weeks – months even – and still notice something different. Her partner, retired TV director/producer Michael Scott-Smith, teases her about her design compulsion. "He says if he sits in a chair long enough, I'll change him too." The pair spend alternate nights here and at Michael's house and usually do their own thing by day ("We're both loners who like our own space").

The dining room adjoining the kitchen is a 2m extension largely built in 1978, until the money ran out. That didn't faze Janie: hessian, tapa cloths and a woven shawl line the visible corrugated iron of the ceiling and ripped-out magazine and calendar pages form a wall collage, relayed as it fades. More layers equal more warmth. With no internal doors and no insulation, it gets cold here. "I have clothes in three sizes to layer up."

Janie knows her place raises eyebrows. "People who know me love it, but strangers are terribly outspoken – 'How can you live with the clutter?' But I'm quite happy to walk carefully around my house in order to have things I can feast my eyes on.

"My house and garden aren't a quick read, but they're never boring." Much, I suspect, like their designer. >

**THIS PAGE** Janie's bench seat, which she made from old fence posts, gets sun all day; she uses found materials such as stones and shells in her garden wherever possible, for both environmental and financial reasons: "Plus I want the garden to reflect the fact that I live in a bach-style house in a seaside town."

**OPPOSITE** The joy of standing in this doorway, says Janie, is that "everything I can see, I planted myself". This path at the side of the house was once a patio where the girls played; after they left home, Janie gave in to the urge to extend her "ordered but not formal" garden here.



**Favourite room:** The garden!

**Least favourite activity:** Cooking. It's not my thing. Slaving in the kitchen is like prison for me. I love people who bake for me. My partner sometimes thoughtfully brings food boxes around.

**Most important thing about my place:** That I can be busy and have results I adore.

**If I could have done one thing differently:** I have no regrets about my house, my garden or my life. But, if I'd known my passions when I was young, I probably would have focused on being some sort of designer.

**I had four children because:** I added an extension and thought, there's room for one more, and I was curious to see what I'd produce. I've always loved preschoolers: their curiosity, excitement and enthusiasm.

**The first ornament I ever wanted was:** One of those awful dolls with tinsel wings from rodeo sideshows. My mother told me I had terrible taste!

**People often comment on:** My hand-painted tiles. I called up a Wellington art dealer and said: "Please could you tell me if it's art or rubbish," and he said it was art. I find it hard to part with them, but I'm going to look into trying to sell my designs because I'm no longer insecure about them. It can take me anywhere from 10 to 30 hours to do one, with three coats.

**I express myself with:** My garden, my home, my tiles, my clothes and my necklaces and earrings. I've never been interested in make-up and hairdos but I did want ornamentation. If I don't like what I'm wearing, I don't feel right.

**I like to sit back and:** Read picture books that I get from the library – gardening, homes, interiors, landscapes. I'm not much of a sitter though; I'm a doer.

Janie Taylor ■

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