

MY SPACE

Leon Searle

Leon Searle grew up near Glinks Gully in Northland and spent his childhood roaming Ripiro Beach and the hills behind it with his brothers, Barry and Neville. He can't tell you when he first started collecting the flotsam and jetsam that now decorate the front yard of his Te Kopuru home. "It was too long ago," he shrugs. "I know our boys were kids; the fifties I guess."

It started almost by accident. Combing the west coast with his wife and commercial fishing partner Lorraine, the couple would come across plastic waste and other debris on the beach. They started picking up the trash and taking it to the dump in Dargaville, but among the rubbish the pair found all sorts of odd pieces, including floats off fishing nets and an array of other strange items.

Soon what began as a clean-up exercise turned into an ever-expanding pile of salvaged treasures until eventually, says Searle, "the wife" decided to put what they'd collected on display – decorating the garden at the front of their house (only a small corner of which is pictured here).

Now almost everyone who drives through the sleepy rural village stops to stare; Searle reckons the most he's counted is 76 vehicles in one day. The couple's alfresco work of art has featured in many newspaper and magazine articles and been the focus of a piece for German television, among others.

While Lorraine is shy, Searle loves the attention. Put it to him that he's become a bit of a local celebrity and he chuckles. "I suppose," he says. "World famous in Te Kopuru. Ha! I suppose I am."

TIM RAINGER

