

**Designer:** Matthew Cantwell, Secret Gardens of Sydney  
**Garden:** Birchgrove, New South Wales  
**Photos:** Peter Brennan



# THINKING BIG

The canny use of colour and in-built features has turned a small, shaded courtyard into a warm and welcoming space

Having just purchased their new home, a contemporary, architect-designed dwelling built to the highest of standards, the owners couldn't wait to move in. But, while the interior spaces were just perfect, work was needed to turn the main outdoor space — a rear courtyard surrounded by three two-storey-high walls — into a more functional and welcoming environment.

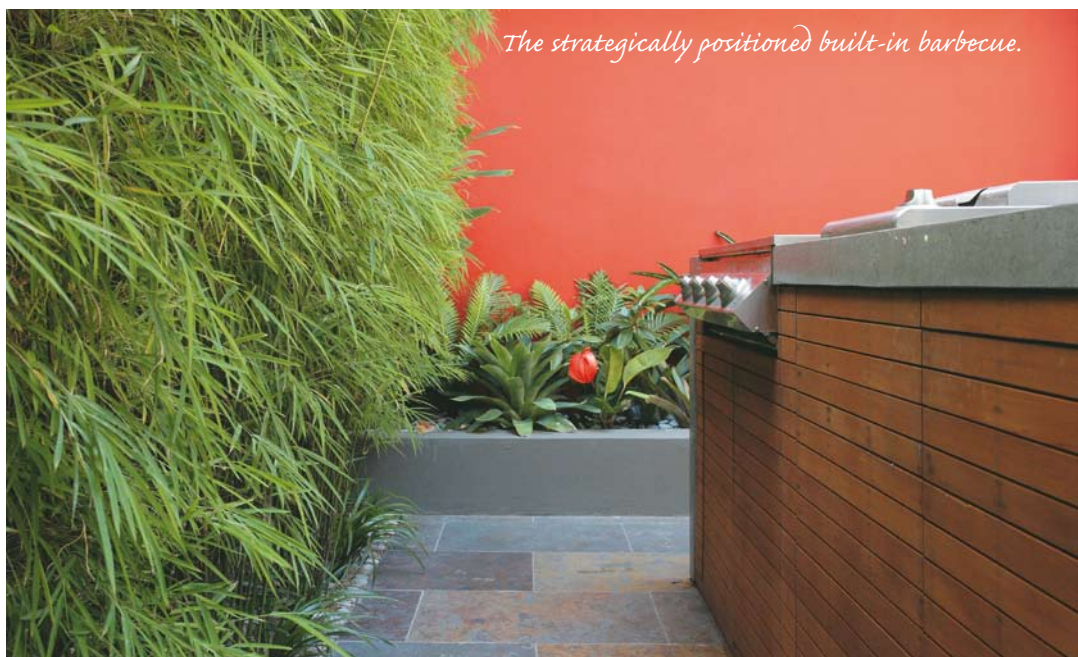
With the three towering walls and a large eucalypt from a neighbouring property that overhangs the courtyard, the garden is subject to almost total shade year round. This was one of the first challenges: to bring sunlight and warmth into an otherwise cold-looking space. Or, if we couldn't bring actual sunlight and warmth into the garden, we could work towards making it feel lighter, brighter and warmer.

This was the inspiration behind introducing such a strong paint colour for the rear wall. The vivid orange, especially when combined with the backlighting in the planter that runs along the base of the wall, injects some visual heat into the courtyard. The vibrant wall also serves to draw the eye and, as it can be seen from the front door, it acts as a siren call, enticing visitors straight through the open-plan interior of the home and into the courtyard.

As the homeowners are very social — they love cooking and entertaining — they wanted to be able to use the outdoor space all year round, regardless of the conditions. Before the new outdoor design was implemented, all the cooking took place in the kitchen with guests gathering around the large island bench. The owners enjoyed the social aspect of this, even

though it meant most dinner parties ended up taking place at the kitchen bench, forgoing the adjacent dining table.

The owners' desire to maintain a close connection with their guests helped to inform the space footprint for the new courtyard. Rather than have the built-in barbecue next to a fence, which would have meant the chef would stand apart from and look in the opposite direction to visiting friends, I decided to place it in line with the internal island bench and encourage the same kind of social interaction as they had enjoyed when entertaining inside.



*The strategically positioned built-in barbecue.*

*Towering walls presented a real design challenge.*



*Ctenanthe and bromeliads give a tropical feel.*

The barbecue is a custom-designed creation constructed of pre-cast polished and sealed concrete panels that provide a smart and easy-to-clean surface. The cabinetry comprises a sturdy marine ply carcass and attractive western red cedar slatted doors for a modern yet completely natural look.

For the flooring, Brazilian slate was used. While chosen mainly to help hide any staining caused by leaves dropped from next door's soaring eucalypt, this particular slate is the perfect means of balancing out the otherwise largely monochromatic colour scheme. In addition, the stone paving boasts an assortment of colours including some rust-coloured tones that add even more warmth to the courtyard and work in harmony with the rich burnt-orange feature wall.

Decking was installed under the overhead balcony to provide a consistent floor level with the interior. It provides warmth underfoot in the cool months and the timber tones →

*garden gallery*



*A bird's-eye view from the top level of the home.*

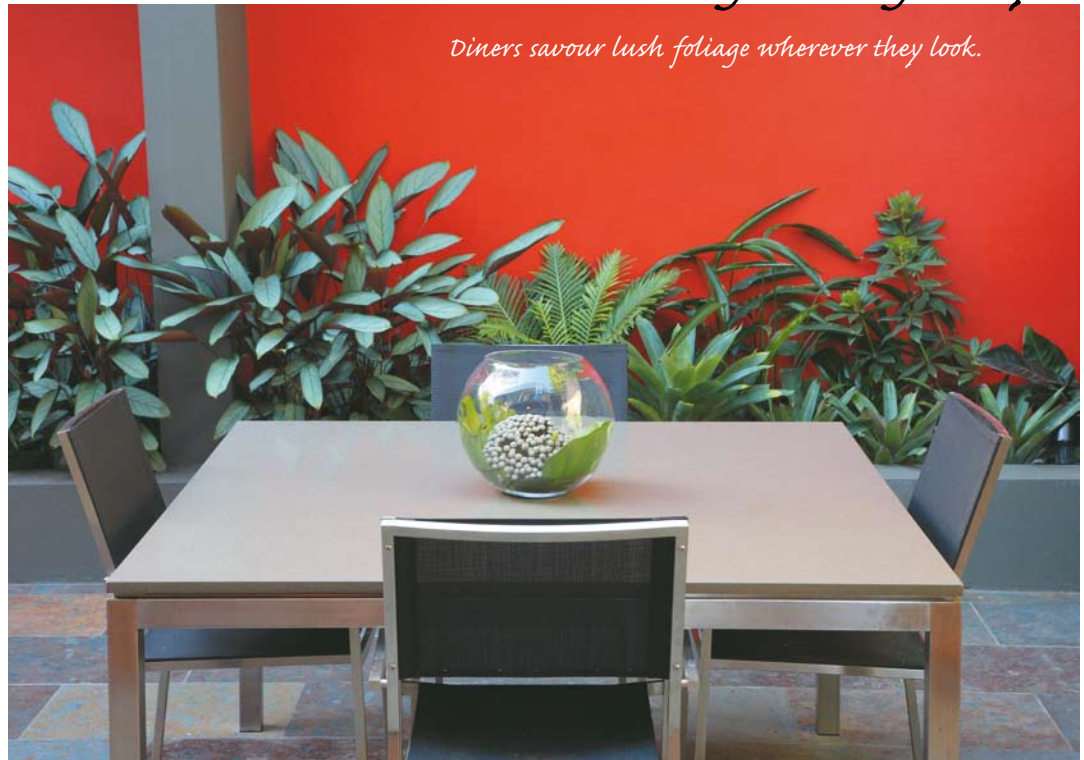


*“The vivid orange injects some visual heat into the courtyard”*

*The courtyard is now an inviting place to dine.*

## *garden gallery*

*Diners savour lush foliage wherever they look.*



complement some of the colours in the slate, helping to forge an easy indoor-outdoor flow.

Extensive lighting brings the space to life at night and is consistent with the quantity and level of lighting in the interior of the home, further adding to the seamless indoor-outdoor feel. A combination of uplighting and downlighting highlights the garden's key features and ensures it is both inviting and practical to use during the evening hours.

All planting had to be tolerant of very low light levels. Blue bamboo, a dwarf variety of clumping bamboo, is a great backdrop

to the cooking area. It also provides privacy from the adjoining terrace and when lit takes on a luminous green "glow" that is quite mesmerising. *Ctenanthe 'Grey Star'*, bromeliads, ferns and Mexican bamboo combine with the blue bamboo to give the garden a look that is luxuriant and just a touch tropical.

The final effect is of a smart, contemporary space boasting a diverse yet complementary palette of materials and plants that is easy to use and full of year-round interest. ■

**Note:** This garden won the best Residential Landscape Design \$30,000 to \$70,000 in the 2008 AILDM Landscape Design Awards.



*That all-important indoor-outdoor connection.*