




# GRAND DESIGN

JUST AN HOUR FROM THE CITY, SYDNEY'S NORTHERN BEACHES IS A LUSH POCKET OF PARADISE - BUT EVEN IN THESE PARTS, THIS ENORMOUS GARDEN IS A SHOWSTOPPER

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Indigenous plants, such as cabbage palms (*Livistona australis*) and Sydney red gums (*Angophora costata*), and groves of Bangalow palms (*Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*) from the original garden provide a dense canopy of shade for a range of subtropical plants in the understorey and the grass pathways that meander through the garden. →



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**(Opposite page)** A carport in the back garden was remodelled into a studio, with windows on three sides looking out into the lush garden and a stand of cabbage palms. Close by, water from a single copper spout pours into a small lily pond, which was constructed in recycled sandstone. **(Above)** The single-storey 1960s house was sensitively renovated to retain its character while creating a better connection between it and the pool area. Himalayan sandstone was laid as a wide terrace around the original pool, and an open cabana for casual cooking and dining was sited at one end. The canopy created by existing tall palms and other trees protects the dense growth below them. Plantings include cabbage palms **(above right)** and exotic alcantareas from Brazil **(left)**. Scattered throughout the garden are focal features, such as tall urns **(right)** – some are used as planters, while others are left empty.



**Gardens have to be many things to many people**, from providing an entertaining area and somewhere for the kids to play to hanging out the washing, exercising, growing vegetables and housing a water tank. “Generally the garden takes second place to all of the structure that’s put into outdoor spaces, so it was a joy to work on something of this scale,” says Mark Curtis, head designer at Secret Gardens of Sydney, who undertook the grounds’ transformation.

At 3700sqm, the garden he’s referring to is big by city standards. Nestled in a valley in Sydney’s Northern Beaches, it’s surrounded by stands of *Angophora costata* and cabbage palms. A 1960s single-storey house divides the gently undulating block into two roughly equal-sized garden spaces, one in front of the house, the other behind. The owners were drawn to the property because of its beachside character and the remnant indigenous vegetation, which they wanted to retain. But they also wanted the garden to be better connected to the house and the pool area.

The original kidney-shaped pebblecrete pool in the back

garden was the subject of a great deal of discussion. Should it stay or should it go, or at least be remodelled into something a little more contemporary? But, as Mark points out, it fulfilled its function very well and, besides, organically shaped pools like this one are now being appreciated for their retro aesthetic. The trick was to do something that would quietly complement it.

“There was nothing wrong with the pool, and we were confident that we could make it work and fit well with what we were doing in the garden,” says Mark. “If you look at the shape of the pool, we replicated that in the garden beds.”

Surrounding the pool on three sides was a log retaining wall, with a dense planting of golden cane palms and xylosma that completely blocked views of the garden beyond. Secret Gardens began by removing the retaining wall and garden bed. Both species of plants were relocated – the xylosma now form a bushy screen along the western boundary, and the palms were distributed throughout the rear garden. Natural split Himalayan sandstone →



garden



An avenue of cocos palms (which are now considered to be weeds by many Sydney councils) lining the driveway was removed to open up views to and from the front of the house (above left). Lines of stone pavers cross the lawn and the driveway, which leads past the house (above right) to a studio and a guest pavilion. "We deliberately inserted the lines of pavers leading to house's main entrance to set up a nice sightline and to signify to guests who park further down the driveway where they need to walk," says Mark Curtis, head designer at Secret Gardens of Sydney. The original front verandah was extended out into the lawn and paved with Himalayan sandstone to create a sheltered outdoor room that overlooks the lush garden (right). The delicate white flowers of spider lilies (*Hymenocallis littoralis*) provide focal points and light up the undergrowth (left).



paving, which complements the pebblecrete while at the same time toning it down, now forms a wide terrace around pool, with a modern, open cabana sheltering an outdoor cooking and eating area at one end.

The hill behind the pool was regraded, and a water-diverting trench was shaped into its surface to direct run-off away from the pool and the house. Steps were also cut into the grass to invite exploration. "We inserted broad stone slabs into the lawn behind the pool to encourage people to walk up into the resort-style gardens," says Mark. "The steps also act as a centreline to draw the eye up the grass slope to where we planted three Gynea lilies (*Doryanthes palmeri*). When they come into flower, it's stunning."

Meandering grass paths lead away on either side of this bed, luring people further into the garden. The paths wind around beds that are packed with subtropical plants, their colourful, textured leaves and exotic blooms in red, yellow and pink lighting up the undergrowth. "This garden was a joy because of its protected location," says Mark. "It presented a rare opportunity

for us to be a little more bold with our choice of plants."

Along the way, low serpentine walls of recycled sandstone rise up to provide places to sit and admire the garden, before dipping down again to become garden edging. "A major aim of the design was to incorporate these flowing organic shapes to encourage people to wander through, especially in the rear garden," Mark says. "The low serpentine walls aren't structural – they are there purely to play with the eye and draw people on."

Work has also taken place on the front garden. An avenue of cocos palms lining the driveway was removed, along with a liquidambar and a melaleuca. "The front garden was kept open, to maintain views to and from the house, whereas the rear garden presented itself as little rooms to explore," says Mark. "It's a garden that draws you in and then leads you on. Already there's that delightful feeling of not knowing what's around the corner, but that's only going to improve with time." ❖

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