

Side-sizing

TRADING PLACES FOR A GRANDER LIFE

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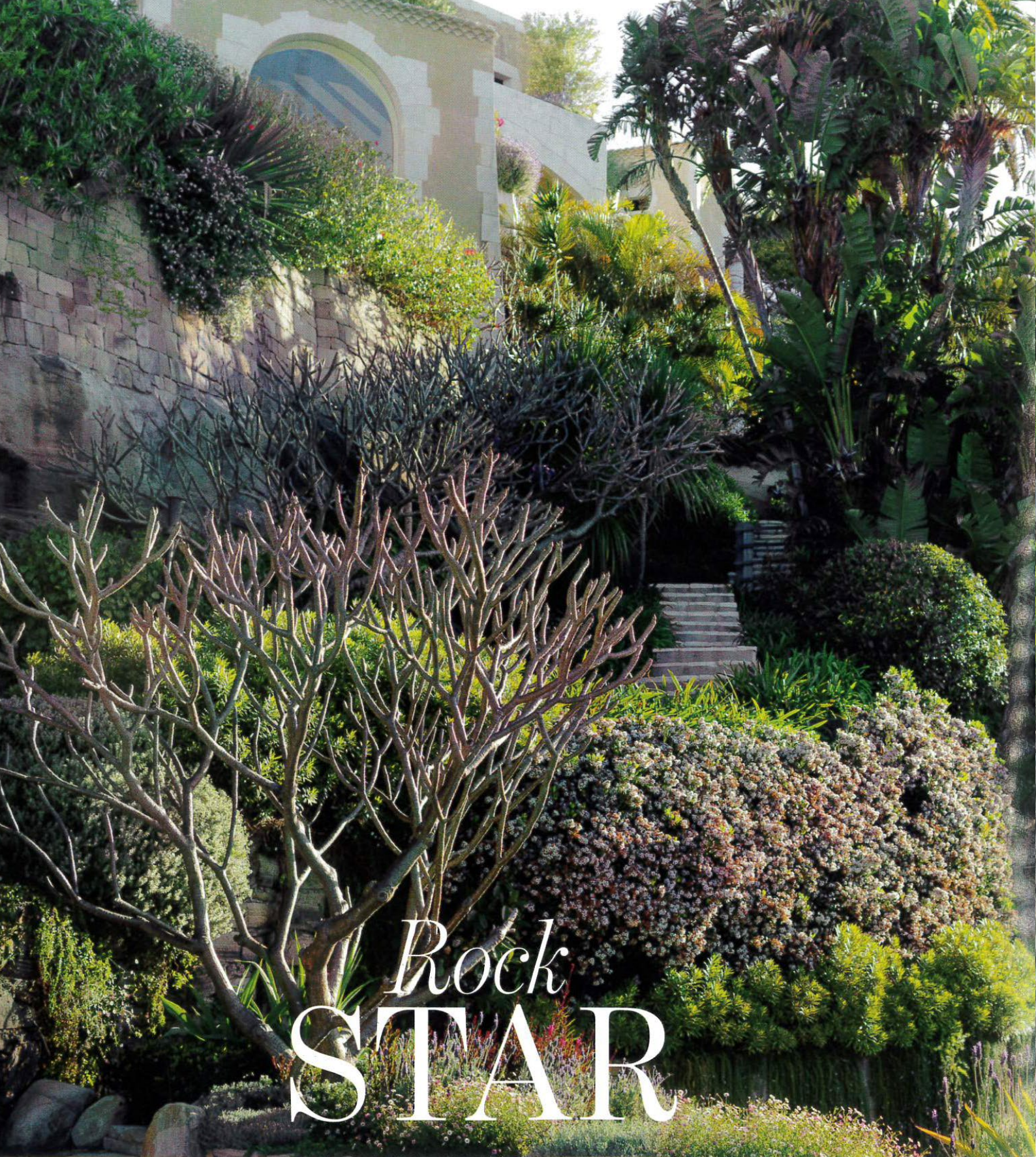


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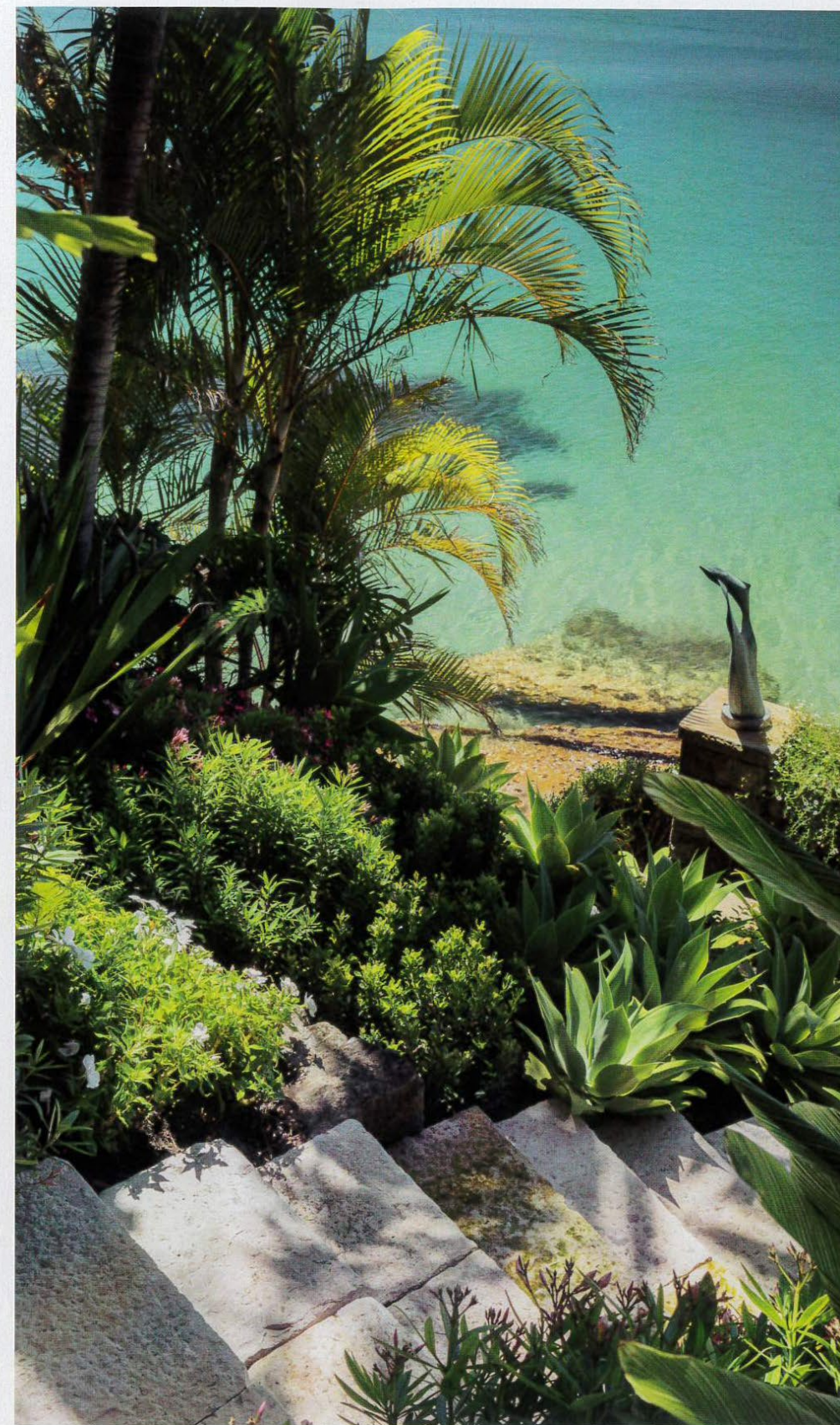
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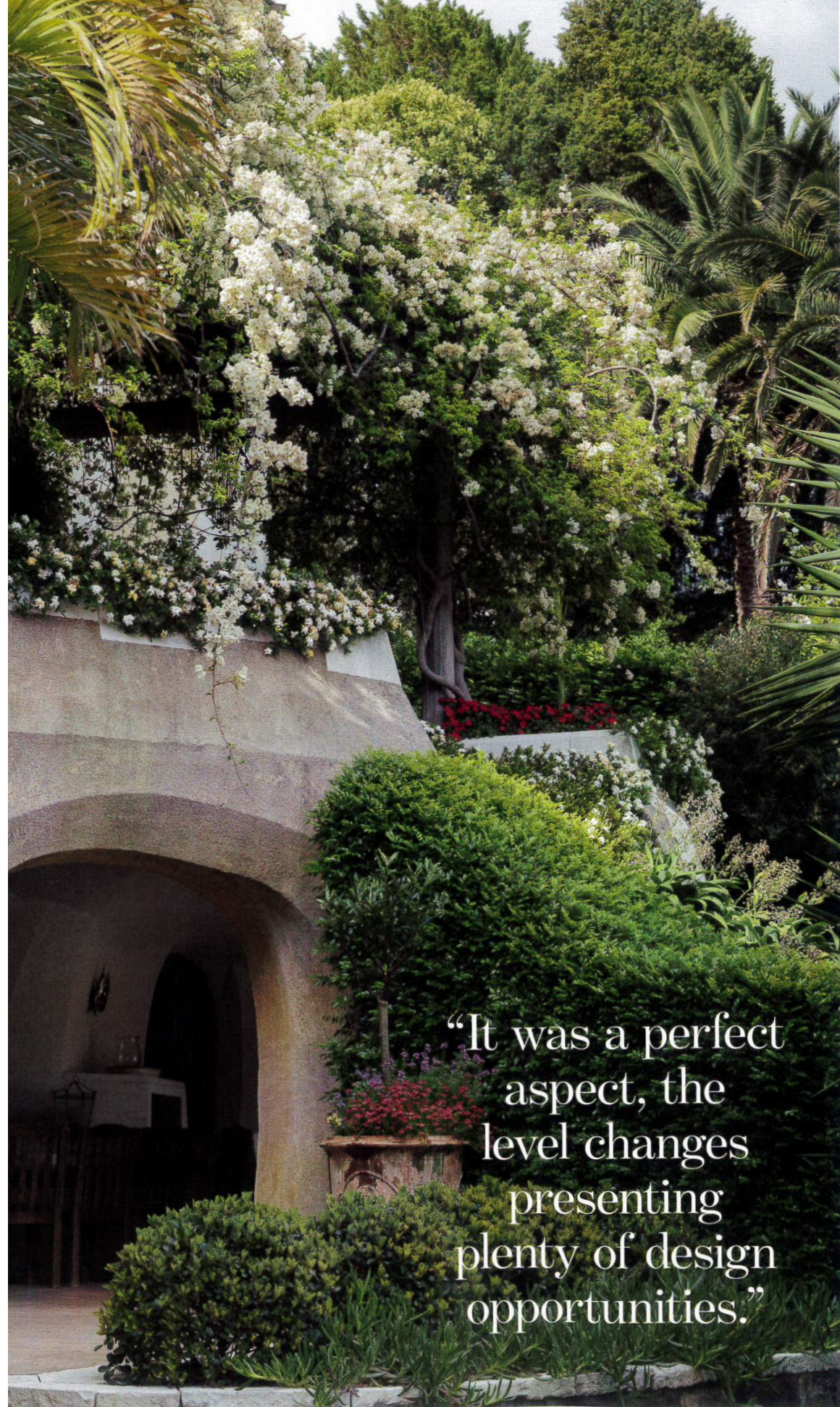
These pages The view from the boatshed across to the lower entertaining deck. The stairs lead up to the mid lawn. Frangipanis line the pathway, and layers of planting tumble over each other to conceal as much wall as possible. **Right** Stone steps lead to the waterside deck equipped with a cooking area. Bronze sculpture with golden cane palms, agaves, dwarf oleander and *Rhaphiolepis* 'Snow Maiden'.



Matthew Cantwell created this lush, extravagant garden in

Sydney on a steep waterfront site cut into solid sandstone.

Photographs **NICHOLAS WATT** Words **CHRIS PEARSON**



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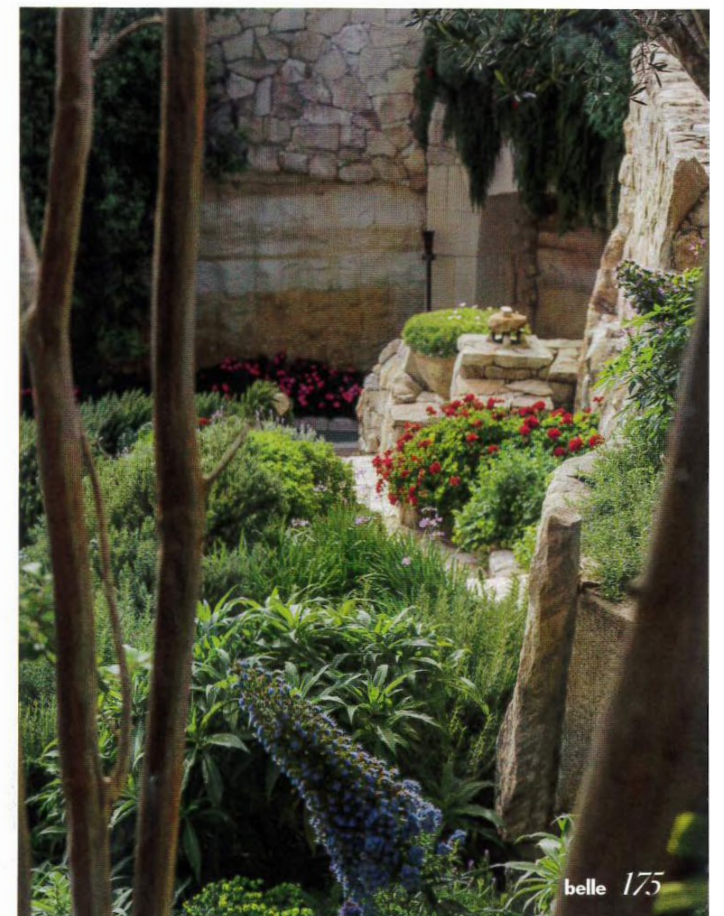
A garden designer rarely scores a massive blank canvas on which to paint a richly tinted, multilayered landscape, especially on Sydney's densely built lower north shore. But, in 2011, Matthew Cantwell of Secret Gardens received a fortuitous phone call from a homeowner who had bought a neighbouring property. “The house had already been demolished and the site reduced to a virtual quarry, cut six metres into solid sandstone,” he says.

The steep, north-facing site cascaded 30 metres from the street to the water. “It was a perfect aspect, the level changes presenting plenty of design opportunities for destination points bathed in year-round sunshine.” So far, so good. “But there was no soil, just rock, with no vegetation left, so every planting opportunity would have to be created.” How could it ever become the lush, highly personal wonderland it is today?

As well as a larger swimming pool and outdoor entertaining areas, the client wanted expansive lawn but, most of all, a journey from the house down to the water, with plantings connected by meandering paths and places to linger along the way. And the garden had to be distinctive in other ways – as well as being geared to leisure, it had to be a working garden with produce plots and a chicken coup.

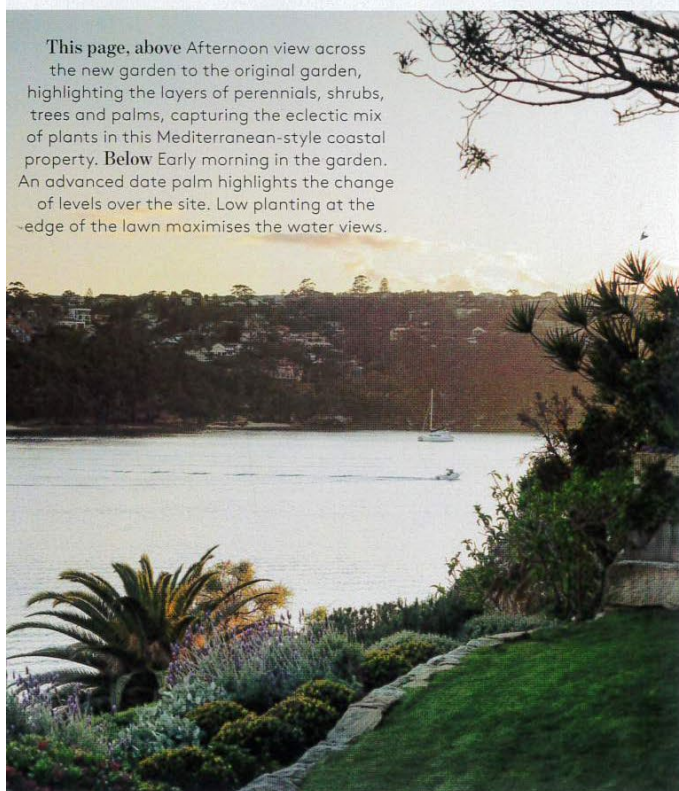
These needed to blend seamlessly with the home and its existing garden, both of which boasted strong Mediterranean influences. As part of extensive alterations, the house had been reoriented, with a new arched loggia connecting it to the newly acquired site at the upper level. And, from there, Matthew would create a zigzagging odyssey, featuring a deck, grotto and other pausing points.

The excavation had produced endless sandstone, which he reused in walls around the pool and as large feature rocks. “As it weathered





This page, above Afternoon view across the new garden to the original garden, highlighting the layers of perennials, shrubs, trees and palms, capturing the eclectic mix of plants in this Mediterranean-style coastal property. Below Early morning in the garden. An advanced date palm highlights the change of levels over the site. Low planting at the edge of the lawn maximises the water views.



and became harmonious with exposed areas of bedrock, this would provide a feeling of age," he says. Imported stone used in flooring and wall details, as well as thin herringbone, brick-like tiles, provided a consistent look.

"Not many plants couldn't work in this garden," says Matthew, who relished the prospect of greening out the old "quarry". "But there is definitely a Mediterranean flavour and colour is key." A "super-advanced" *Ficus microcarpa billii* created immediate scale, along with other mature specimens, such as a bottle tree, date palms, olives, citrus trees and crepe myrtles, all craned in to create an instant canopy and to harmonise with the client's well-established adjacent garden. "It improved privacy, with the diverse selection framing views, creating shade and microclimates for diverse underplanting," he says.

Oleanders, a Mediterranean staple, in red, pink and white provide screening and windbreaks, especially around the pool. Lavender, rosemary, echiums, cleome and salvia are peppered throughout the sunnier areas at mid level, while *Eupatorium*, gardenias, white hydrangeas and various *Plectranthus* make the shadier spots their own. Trailing rosemary abounds and, along with *Myoporum* and convolvulus, spills over rock faces and sandstone retaining walls, creating waterfall effects. Meanwhile, the produce garden includes herbs, vegetables and an orchard bordering the chicken run.

Matthew visits most weeks to oversee its maintenance. "It still takes my breath away. It is always changing, with something new flowering, so I always walk the entire site. It draws you in, because it's an easy garden to get lost in and find a private space to enjoy." secretgardens.com.au