

# JUNGLE *fever*

While nearly half a hectare, this exuberant garden blends grandeur with tranquillity and a surprising intimacy at every turn.

These pages in the upper rear garden, spiral ginger (*Costus barbatus*) adds a splash of bold colour in beds shared with lacy tree ferns (*Cyathea cooperi*), beneath bangalow palms (*Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*) and cabbage tree palms (*Livistona australis*). Burgundy-leaved cordylines (*Cordyline fruticosa* 'Rubra') add extra colour.

Words **CHRIS PEARSON** Photography **NICHOLAS WATT**



## GARDEN

**This page** In the rear garden, the pool by Landart with interior in Westox cement render features Alpine dry stone wall cladding and pavers in Duro limestone, both from Eco Outdoor. Surrounding the pool are European fan palms (*Chamaerops humilis*) and Bismarck palms (*Bismarckia nobilis*), while *Heliconia* 'Hot Rio Nights' and frangipani (*Plumeria* sp.) bring bold colour when in flower. **Opposite page, from left** The patio overlooking the lawn at the front of house with crazy paving from Eco Outdoor. Daybed and cane armchairs made to order by Beachwood. Areca palms (*Dypsis lutescens*) deliver a tropical vibe. At the rear, 'Tali' dining table and 'Kotti' chairs from Eco Outdoor. Frangipanis (*Plumeria* sp.) are underplanted with tractor seat plant (*Ligularia reniformis*).



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When shaping this lush hideaway on Sydney's Northern Beaches, landscape designers Secret Gardens truly lived up to their name. Just shy of half a hectare, the tropical sanctuary reveals itself on a grand scale, with sweeping lawns providing a vast stage for towering palms and eucalypts. Yet it's also surprisingly intimate and cossetting, the effect nurtured by discrete – and discreet – garden nooks enclosed by drifts of luxuriant greenery.

The creator of this “curated jungle”, principal Matt Cantwell has forged a fertile partnership with nature, enjoying the luxury of time as he has watched the private paradise flourish from awkward adolescence to beautiful adulthood since he first entered the gate 16 years ago. Then it was plain and unprepossessing, with perhaps the most glaring design fault being a grove of cane palms and cabbage trees separating the house and pool from the sprawling backyard beyond. In the front was lawn overload, the garden fully open with little privacy from neighbours and the street. And the plantings were “too small and insignificant” in relation to ancient eucalypts that dominated the site, says Matt.

“The owners wanted a tropical garden like a mini-Botanic Gardens with sweeping lawns and massed plantings of tropicals and perennials blurring the boundary fences to make the whole site very private,” he says. “It was to have an Hawaii vibe, like *Fantasy Island*, where you might expect Tattoo to pounce out of the bushes.” While characters in that 1970s TV classic were often disappointed, the owners' dreams came true here.

In this, Matt was helped by the garden's natural assets, including its topography and climate. Nestled in a valley, the site “has an amazing microclimate that holds its humidity making tropical plants especially easy to grow”.

The first stage was to pull out the palm grove and a retaining wall behind the pool. He then edited out poor performers front

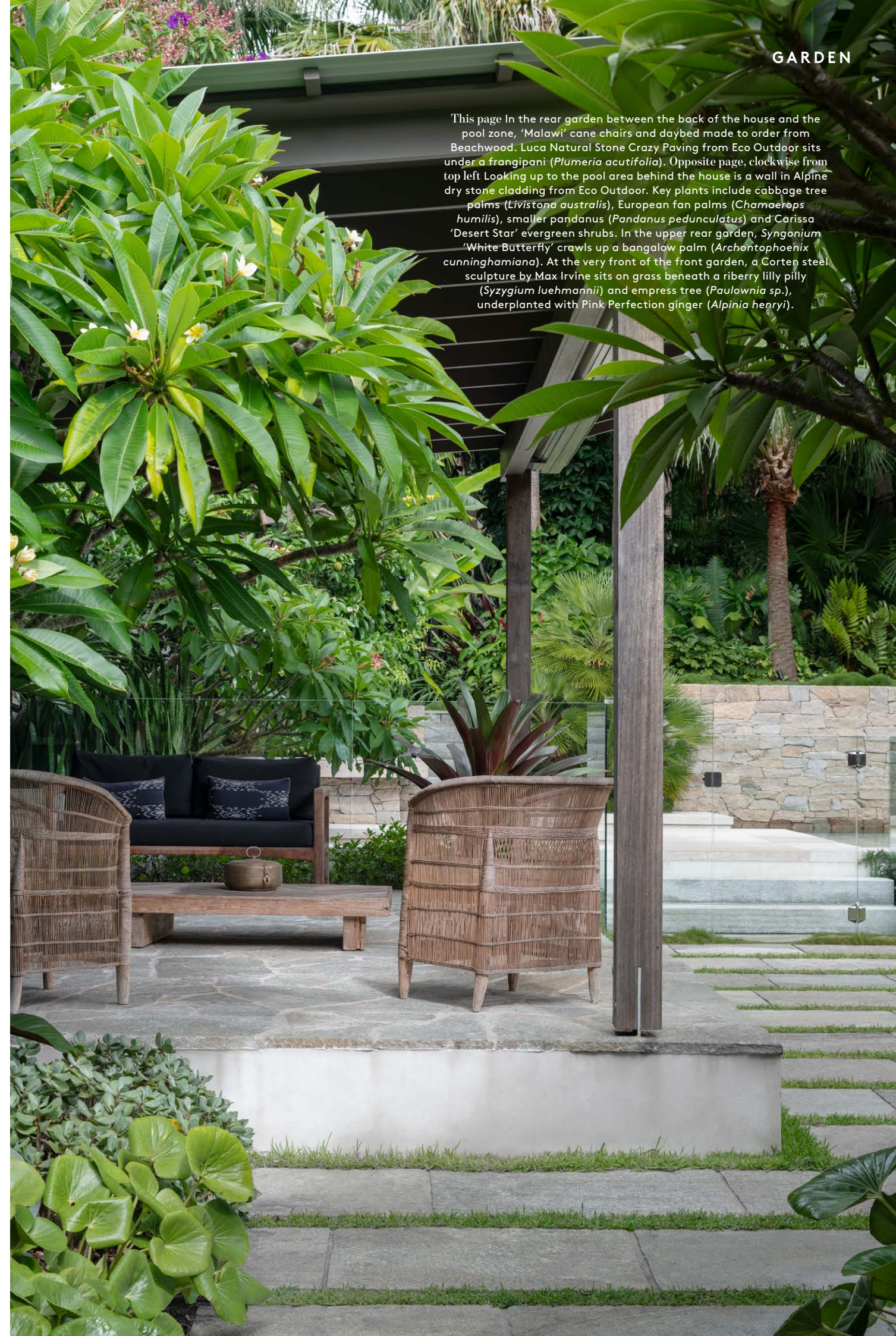
and back, including the temperamental species of lawn, while retaining carefully edited palms, such as the bangalow palms (*Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*) and Mexican fan palms (*Washingtonia robusta*), and eucalypts to provide instant maturity and depth. He then installed islands of greenery enclosed by fast-growing perimeter plants to create a sense of cosy inclusion belying the property's size.

Small, fussy plants were replaced by larger foliage varieties or mass plantings for maximum impact. “The scale of gestures required was a bit daunting,” confesses Matt. “There was no room for fussiness or anything too busy. Instead of three square metres of one plant, you would require 15 square metres and a simple backdrop for punch. I didn't need many different plant varieties for impact, but I struggled to get the scale right. The garden swallowed up plants.”

At the front, he planted more palms to echo the back garden, as well as riberry lilly pilly (*Syzygium luehmannii*), not just for its colour, but also to provide dense screening on the boundary. Meanwhile, beside the front patio, he planted frangipanis for that quintessential tropical look – being deciduous they would allow light through the house over winter and shading in summer – underplanted with tractor seat plant (*Ligularia reniformis*) for a dense layering, together with judiciously applied bird of paradise (*Strelitzia nicolai*) with its large, bold leaves. “It's a very robust plant that we only use when we have space without surrounding structure, as it can be quite destructive,” cautions Matt. Alcantareas (giant bromeliads) and kentia palms also feature heavily.

Beside the guest accommodation in the back garden, poker-like spiral ginger (*Costus barbatus*) makes a bold statement, with its distinctive bold red flowers and towering stems, underplanted with dwarf tree fern (*Blechnum gibbum* ‘Silver Lady’) which is “durable and a good filler for big gardens”. Meanwhile, tall lacy





tree ferns (*Cyathea cooperi*) are dotted across the site, “great for the way they play with light, as sun passes through”.

Arguably, the biggest investments plant-wise were dragon trees (*Dracaena cochinchinensis*), their spiky fronds lending a striking sculptural quality against the softer foliage plants. As well, low-maintenance and hardy Sir Walter buffalo grass replaces its ho-hum predecessor. “Because of the density in the rear garden, we needed lots of grass at the front,” says Matt. While expansive lawns might be frowned upon in most Australian gardens, the site’s microclimate ensures plenty of rainwater and, with the lawn at the bottom of a sloping site, gravity aids its irrigation.

Once in the ground, these plants didn’t hold back. “The downside of a tropical garden is they grow at such a rate,” he says. “It’s like taming the beast – we are constantly diminishing the volume to avoid overcrowding, keeping the plants in check, by pruning and thinning.” Two maintenance teams visit the property every fortnight.

Hardscaping is kept to a minimum, with perhaps the most striking feature being the original concrete dual-strip driveway, which Matt retained, but, with the carport at the front of the property, this is rarely used. “For simplicity, we minimised structure,” he says, “adding stonework and a paved terrace at the front for detail.” Meanwhile, the kidney-shaped pool was replaced with what you see here.

Mr Roarke and Tattoo would both feel at home in Matt’s – and nature’s – handiwork. “I joked to the owners that this is the sort of garden where you need a golf cart,” he says. “It seems to go on forever. Older and grander, it has a life of its own. It’s as if you’ve entered a curated jungle on a jaw-dropping scale. This is one of the few projects where I have had the chance to plant at such volume. I love sitting on the verandah looking at what we have achieved.” [secretgardens.com.au](http://secretgardens.com.au)