

INFINITY *and beyond*

Blurring the borders between sea, sky and earth,
this garden delivers intimate, meditative spaces
along with a sense of affinity with the limitless.

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

This page The panoramic view
of the Tasman Sea enjoyed from
the infinity pool.



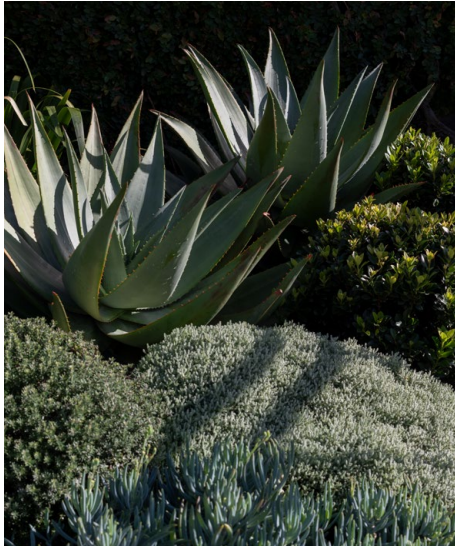
This page, from top Candelabra spurge, wheel cactus and saturn aloes underplanted with flowing casuarina, cotyledons and twin-flowered agaves make a bold statement on the garage roof. Down the side steps, an existing olive tree provides tonal contrast with mother-in-law's tongue, asparagus ferns and creeping figs.

Once they glimpse the giant cacti and succulents soaring skywards from the garage roof, visitors to this seaside garden in Sydney's east know to expect the unexpected. And they are never disappointed. Matt Cantwell of Secret Gardens has delivered both the dramatic and the unconventional in spades. For him, this passion project was a dream come true. He knew the previous owners and had long yearned to work his magic on the garden, which was looking a little scrappy and unresolved. When the current owners, Matt's clients from an earlier job, bought the property in 2014, he finally fulfilled his wish.

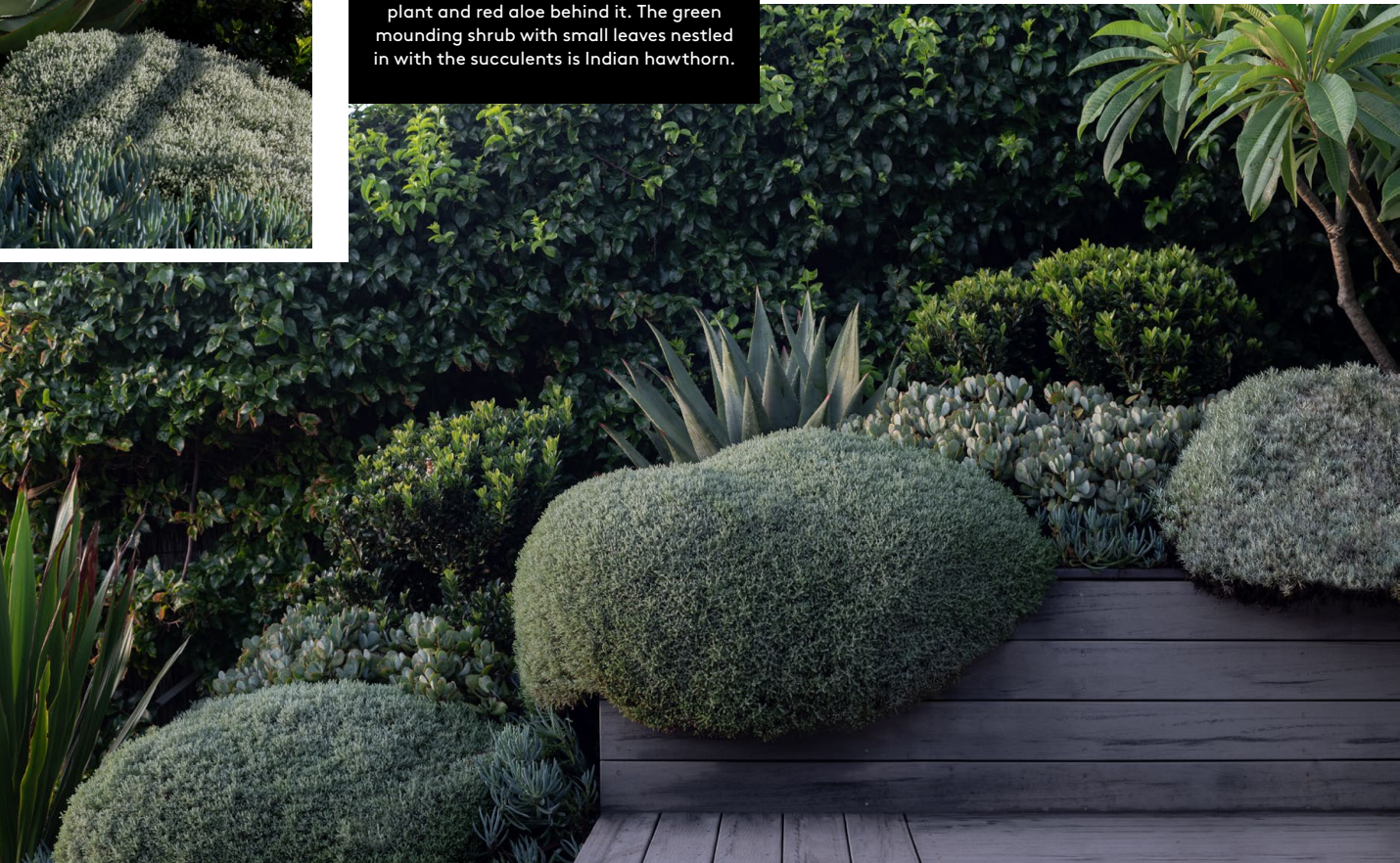
Perched on a steep incline soaking up views of the Tasman Sea, the property had obvious assets but also challenges. Plunging 12m from street level to the bottom boundary, the garden is often brutally buffeted by gales and salt-laden air, while the thin, sandy soil takes no prisoners. Matt's brief for the spectacular site was something equally showstopping. "The clients wanted something architectural to complement the house design, something modern, with good structure and lots of drama in unusual combinations, and, yes, perhaps a bit confronting," he says.

Matt levelled the garden, retaining a frangipani on the eastern (ocean side) and an olive grove in an intimate walled courtyard on the western (street side) of the house. He created a series of discrete spaces: the first with architects Milieu Creative, who masterminded the home renovation, involved building decking on the lowest level near the sea, with an array of succulents and natives spilling over the boards. Above it, Matt planted out a tiered garden. A smart solution to the steep site, terraces step down towards the ocean from the house.

Just below the infinity pool, lush lawn encircles the established frangipani. Beyond are two massive masonry planters, rows of cacti and succulents, including wheel cactus (*Opuntia robusta*), blue torch cactus (*Pilocereus azureus multi*) and red aloes (*Aloe cameronii*); the cacti stand in striking contrast to the concrete supporting walls behind. These areas are connected by concrete steps along the relatively sheltered north boundary, where Matt planted an eclectic mix of asparagus ferns (*Asparagus densiflorus meyeri*), mother-in-law's tongue (*Sansevieria trifasciata*) and creeping fig (*Ficus pumila*), the intriguing interplay of foliage creating contrasts of colour and texture.



This page, clockwise from top left A native fan palm retained from the original garden, now underplanted with asparagus ferns, stands sentry at the top of the steps. The lower deck is flanked by an array of succulents and natives, many in glaucous shades. The tight silver groundcover spilling over the deck is cotton lavender, with a bluebird jade plant and red aloe behind it. The green mounding shrub with small leaves nestled in with the succulents is Indian hawthorn.





For the garage roof, he was gifted a blank slate that he planted with fabulous cacti and succulents, such as wheel cactus and candelabra spurge (*Euphorbia ammak*), as well as agaves and aloes, underplanted with natives casuarina (*Casuarina glauca*) and coastal rosemary (*Westringia* 'Jervis Gem'). But first he strengthened the roof so it could bear soil to a depth of 300mm to accommodate the roots. "The striking black backdrop of the house and the fence really makes the vegetation stand out," says Matt. Equally, the organic, sinuous profiles of the vegetation highlight the crisp right angles of the house.

His treatment of the secluded walled courtyard abutting the street stands in contrast. Instead of the bruising ocean winds, the biggest challenge, he says, was the blistering westerly sun. He thinned out the lower branches from an existing olive grove that bursts forth from granite paving, retaining the precious canopy for shade, but also making it light and open, and dappling the cobblestones in sunlight. To soften the trunks, he underplanted the bases with mondo grass. But his beloved cacti make a powerful statement here, with a trio of Mexican giant cardon cactus (*Pachycereus pringlei*) hunched in a corner.

The undisputed stars of the garden remain the cacti and succulents, both classes of plants vastly underutilised in Australian gardens, despite their inherent suitability for this climate, says Matt. Strikingly, he underplanted these sculptural specimens with flowing groundcovers such as casuarina, which cascades down masonry walls. "They are like dripping liquid. I played with proportions with the cacti and then added casuarina and creeping fig to trail down. Mondo grass, too, brings freshness," says Matt. "Cacti are associated with arid areas but when underplanted with these groundcovers the results are surprisingly lush. Sculptural plants take the focus and keep their form, while fluffy plants, requiring more maintenance, bring softness." Such a hardy plant palette, tailor-made for tough coastal conditions, also requires little water. Expect to see more of them, he says. "Used near the sea, they team nicely with glaucous blue-grey natives, such as *Westringia*, dwarf banksias and grevilleas. They are totally at home together."

Matt doesn't hesitate when asked to name his favourite feature of the garden which he says is a work in progress. "The garage rooftop garden. I love it when plants really work with the architecture. They are striking and sculptural." And, as any good entryway should, they give a tantalising hint of what's to come. secretgardens.com.au; milieucreative.com



This page, above The tiered garden with its aloes, wheel cactus and blue torch cactus underplanted with casuarina and blue jade plants. Below and opposite page The secluded courtyard has pared olive trees and Mexican giant cardon cactus making a bold statement in one corner. A bed of mixed succulents in the courtyard provides an outlook for a low-set dining room window cut into the wall.

