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# HOUSE & GARDEN

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WHY IT'S TIME TO KEEP CALM AND RENOVATE





**Corner spot**

Resplendent in the corner is purple-blooming mist flower (*Eupatorium megalophyllum*). "It's a shade-tolerant, medium-sized shrub that's really adaptable and grows quickly," says Matt. "People often forget to plant shade-tolerant perennials. This one's a beauty – pretty whether it's in flower or not."

## How to achieve BALANCE & EASE

Once its pebblecrete stepping stones were removed, this Sydney garden could be rezoned into equal parts lawn and outdoor living.

STORY Elizabeth Wilson | PHOTOGRAPHY Nicholas Watt

**Fresh foliage**

"I love lots of green foliage in a garden," says Matt. "I aim for subtle colour variations between foliage types." A boundary hedge of lilly pilly (*Syzygium australe* 'Resilience') offsets the glossy leaves of an evergreen magnolia, which itself contrasts with the standard weeping maple (*Acer palmatum*), underplanted with strappy-leaved clivias.

**Points of interest**

Sitting on one side is an angel's trumpet tree (*Brugmansia*), underplanted with star jasmine (*Trachelospermum 'Tricolor'*) and Japanese aralia (*Fatsia japonica*). "*Brugmansia* can be scrappy, but once it comes into flower, all is forgiven," says Matt, referring to the sumptuous, trumpet-like blooms that appear from early summer to autumn.

**Forever flowers**

Clivias may be a bit old-fashioned but they're very reliable, says Matt. "They thrive in areas that are dry and shady, and provide dense greenery." The lawn is Sir Walter buffalo turf, chosen for its tolerance to shade and rich green colour all year round.

**Surface matters**

These steps leading to the main bedroom are paved in travertine. The stepping stones (above) are in Sydney sandstone, while the crushed gravel section is a mix of white, grey and pink stones.



MATT CANTWELL

**Director**  
**Secret Gardens**

**The project**

When Matt Cantwell first saw this rear garden in Sydney's north, it was overgrown and dated. Pebblecrete stepping stones led through a "1970s-era native rainforest" and there was little connection to the house. By contrast, the front garden was formal. The homeowners' brief was for a back garden that would be easy to enjoy and maintain. Priorities were to declutter, bring in sunlight and allocate space for outdoor dining and lounging. They wanted a balance of lawn, plantings and tiled surfaces, in a design that respected the architecture of their heritage-listed harbourside home.

**The solution**

Matt divided the L-shaped space into two zones: a 16x7m lawn fringed by planting and a 10x10m return with two paved terraces. Plant-wise, he didn't stray far from the formality of the front garden, using classics such as *Buxus*, agapanthus, clivias and lilly pilly trees to provide structure and softness. An existing hedge of slender lady palms allowed him to introduce bolder, more tropical plants such as blue ginger, elephant's ears and ginger (*Alpinia*).

**Designer statement**

"The garden is a blend of classic and modern, with a wonderful balance of hard and soft surfaces, structure and softness, foliage and flowers." ►





### JOURNEY THROUGH THE GARDEN

Matt used 1000x400mm pavers in Sydney sandstone to connect the lawn to two travertine-paved terraces. The first leads to the main bedroom; a few steps further on, the second is an outdoor dining space. "Using stepping stones rather than a solid path alleviates the impact of the hard surfaces," says Matt. He also made a feature of an existing paperbark tree (left) by planting a low hedge of Korean box around its base and filling it in with salvia.

#### Harmonious mix

"I call this a semi-formal Sydney garden," says Matt. "We have the climate to mix tropical plants with more classic, structured plants, to create lovely harmonies of complementary foliage."

#### Lovely layers

A hedge of slender weavers bamboo (*Bambusa textilis* var. *Gracilis*) blurs the boundary edge. Next to it is a clump of shell ginger (*Alpinia zerumbet* 'Variegata') with striking leaves streaked in yellow and lime.



#### Bold choices

An existing clump of slender lady palm (*Rhaps humilis*) was Matt's cue to add similarly bold foliage, including elephant's ears (*Colocasia*), large peace lilies (*Spathiphyllum* 'Sensation') and striking *Calathea* plants.

#### Old favourite

The species in front of the giant pot is aspidistra, a "classic plant", according to Matt. It's known as the cast-iron plant for its easy-care, hardy nature, but also has lush and opulent foliage, he says.

#### Soothing sight

Matt's overarching mission was to create a green and serene space. "When you walk in here, it's soft and easy on the eye. There's enough visual interest to make it engaging, but it's still very calming and soothing."

"This garden is all about balance, in both its proportions and plant combinations," says Matt. Here are his tips for creating balance in your own precious plot:

- ✦ The most common mistake is to use more hard surface than needed. Think about the number of people you want to fit at your outdoor dining table, carefully assess the hard surface required to accommodate that, and avoid expanding it any more than you need to.
- ✦ Whatever space you don't need for hard surfaces or lawn should go to plants.
- ✦ Divide your space into subtly demarcated zones. Use stepping stones to mark transitions between spaces and soften the impact of hard surfaces.
- ✦ Mix structural plants with strappier forms in a blend of ordered and free-form elements.
- ✦ Combine foliage and flowers. "I love subtle foliage contrasts sprinkled with a little colour."



- 1 Paved sitting area
- 2 Hedge of slender lady palm (*Rhaps humilis*)
- 3 Travertine steps leading to master bedroom
- 4 Sir Walter buffalo lawn
- 5 Purple-flowering *Eupatorium megalophyllum*
- 6 Stepping stones of Sydney sandstone
- 7 Travertine-paved terrace leading to bedroom
- 8 White-flowering angel's trumpet tree (*Brugmansia*)
- 9 Paperbark tree
- 10 Travertine-paved outdoor dining and lounging spaces
- 11 House

A Sandstone stepping stones mark the transition from lawn to paved terrace.  
B A tall-stemmed cluster of blue ginger (*Dichorisandra thyrsiflora*) planted in the outdoor dining area. The adjacent bed contains *Agapanthus* 'Ice Blue' and *Cordyline glauca*, edged with *Buxus*.  
C Matt made a feature of this evergreen magnolia by surrounding it with crushed gravel in tones of white, grey and pink, to echo the colours of the nearby paperbark tree trunk.  
D The paved dining zone is surrounded by soothing layers of green. H&G

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