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How to

DECK IT OUT

Unexpected pairings and thoughtful juxtapositions take this Sydney garden to the next level.

STORY *Elizabeth Wilson* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Nicholas Watt*

Play the scales

The rear deck measures 5x4.5m deep. Three sets of doors open onto the deck, so having well-scaled and portable furniture was all-important. "Too many people use undersized or oversized outdoor furniture," says Matt.

Mixed leaves

"This is a foliage-based garden," says Matt. "It's about contrasting shapes, sizes and textures." Here, the silver tones of *Santolina chamaecyparissus* are mixed with dwarf lilly pillly (*Syringum australe* 'Tiny Trev'), *Crassula ovata* 'Blue Bird', the yucca-like *Nolina nelsonii* and *Diets morea robinsoniana*.



Strangely familiar

"The plants we've used are familiar to most people, but they're in unfamiliar combinations," says Matt. "Some are modern and sculptural. Others are lush with a bolder leaf, and would look at home in a tropical garden. And we've used shrubs you'd see in a formal garden."

Practical steps

Matt designed large platform steps for an easy transition between home and garden.

"They're staggered so visitors can walk over them with a relaxed stride," he says. The timber is tallwood. "It's one of the best timbers to use if you want it to turn silver. It ages gracefully and evenly."

Pots of bold

Using planters of various shapes and sizes in the same colour creates cohesion. On the deck, the half-moon planter is dedicated to herbs while the tall planter contains *Rhapis 'Excelsa'*. On the steps is a dwarf version of a fiddle leaf fig and above, a mixed pot of *Cotoneaster*, *Crassula ovata* 'Gollum' and *Neomarica*.



MATT CANTWELL

**Managing director,
Secret Gardens**

The project

Creating a garden on a sandy, steeply sloping site is not without its challenges.

"But those challenges drive the opportunities," says Matt, who designed this oasis in a hilly Sydney beach suburb.

"The change of level allowed me to introduce new materials and details, and play with the views and vistas."

A renovation of the Federation home at the property had "reduced the garden to a sand hill", says Matt. From this blank canvas, the owners wanted to create a private retreat with provision for off-street parking at the front and a pool at the rear.

The solution

Matt has created level areas of lawn fringed with textured, layered plantings both front and back. These zones are offset by areas of gently cascading steps and densely packed garden beds. Like the house itself, the garden is a hybrid.

"The house is both Federation and modern: parts of it are structured and formal, parts are relaxed. We've reflected this in the garden," says Matt. By adding nutrients to the sandy soil, he has allowed for a diverse plant palette that goes beyond coastal species.

Designer statement

"I love the way the structural components of the house and garden work together. It feels casual, comfortable and private." ▶



POOLSIDE BEAUTIES

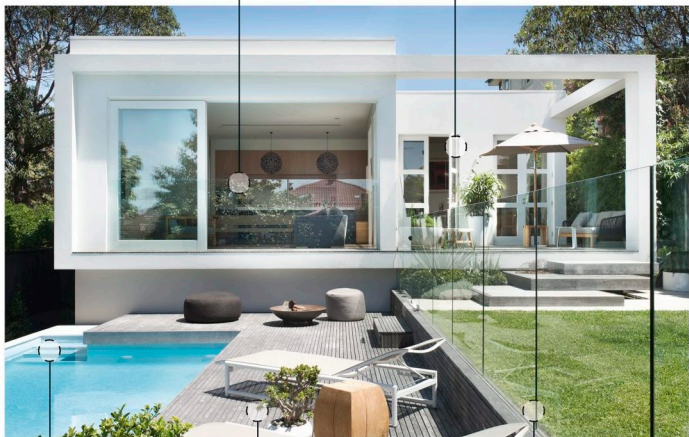
Growing along the length of the pool is a row of fiddle leaf figs. As they grow, they will be pleached (their branches cleared) and their canopies will join and bend over the pool to create shade in summer. The fence is painted in Dulux Monument. "If you have a long timber fence, we always recommend painting or staining it a dark tone," says Matt. "It's great at night if you're uplighting the garden: it puts the focus on the plants."

Harmonious hum

The architectural lines of the home are echoed in the structure of the garden, creating a pleasing harmony. "Whenever I design a garden, I think about outlook and 'in look'," says Matt.

Clear view

A glass pool fence allows the barrier to virtually disappear between lawn and pool. Matt recommends installing the fence in-channel on a concrete footing. "It's a more refined look," he says.



Tropical waters

For the interior pool tile, Matt specified a white glass mosaic. "It gives the pool water a light sky-blue tone. It's my favourite choice, always."

Serene surrounds

The decking around the pool is 50mm-wide tallowwood boards, intended to age elegantly and turn silver, teamed with sandstone surrounds.

Lovely lawn

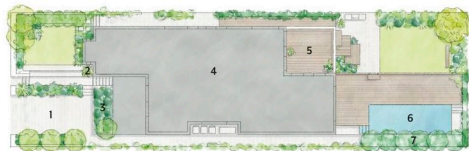
The lawn is Kings Pride buffalo. "Soft-leaved buffalos are shade-tolerant and able to handle the full western sun," says Matt. "In winter, half this lawn is shaded by snow pears growing along the boundary."

Matt's tips on successful plant combinations:

- ✦ Mixing foliage colours and textures will create interest and depth. This is achievable in even the most compact garden beds. (But make sure you offset this with beds that are very simple in composition, containing plantings of one or two species.)
- ✦ When planning your plant compositions, think about foliage first and flowers second. The plant will be without flowers most of the time.
- ✦ Be realistic about the time you have available for garden maintenance and choose your plants and materials accordingly.
- ✦ Using steps in a garden always presents a great design opportunity: get these right and you don't need garden bling.
- ✦ Using plants with silver, grey and glaucous tones will help to create a lovely coastal feel.



- 1 Driveway
2 *Asparagus densiflorus*
'Myersii' (pot)
3 *Carissa* 'Desert Star', frangipani
4 House
5 Rear timber deck
6 Pool
7 Fiddle leaf figs



A "The front garden pays respect to the heritage of the house, but we've pushed it," says Matt, who removed the balustrade from the front balcony to make the entrance more welcoming. The bed is planted with *Carissa* 'Desert Star'. "I call it 'gardenia by the ocean'," says Matt. "The dark green foliage underpins the lighter greens." At left is a potted Foxtail fern (*Asparagus densiflorus* 'Myersii'). B *Miscanthus* at the front gate. C An interplay of lime and grey tones in the front garden. **H&G**

Secret Gardens, Botany,
NSW; (02) 9314 5333 or
www.secretgardens.com.au.