

# INSIDE

INSPIRING HOMES WITH HEART

## Christmas *chic*

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Sliding glass doors from the living area are pulled back to create a 14-metre-long opening, effectively turning the house into an outdoor pavilion.

# OPEN *heart*

It may feel like something straight from the plains of Palm Springs but this inner-city patch of green is surprisingly family-friendly

WORDS **FIONA JOY**

STYLING **PAUL HOPPER** PHOTOGRAPHY **NICHOLAS WATT**





*dark water*  
This wet-edge wall creates a striking contrast to the adjacent white boundary wall. “When water passes over the wall, the black provides a dazzling reflective effect,” says Matt.



*growing ambitions*  
As the owners of garden landscaping business, Secret Gardens, Rochelle and Matt Cantwell (**above**) drew on their expertise to create “a seamless connection between house and garden”. Their business also provided many of the outdoor area’s bold custom-made planters.

**W**hen garden designer Matt Cantwell, his wife Rochelle, and their three children, eight-year-old Luca and seven-year-old twins Estelle and Max, moved to their Sydney beachside house more than three years ago, it was the garden that persuaded them this was going to be their forever home.

“It was quite lovely,” says Matt who, together with Rochelle, runs the award-winning garden design and construction company, Secret Gardens. “The first thing I was drawn to was the mature trees. There are two very big eucalypts and a banksia, so it was a cool, shaded spot on the western side of the house. There was also a huge jacaranda and even a koi pond! It was a lovely spot.” But the family had grand plans for the space, wanting to transform it into a luxe garden with plenty of attitude. “We ripped it all out and started again, gutting the whole garden except for the three trees,” says Matt.

**the dream** It took six months to re-create the garden in the “mid-century Palm Springs with a bit of Hollywood glam thrown in” style that was the couple’s preferred look.

Being a designer and owning a garden design business (Rochelle is the company’s general manager) clearly had its advantages when the

couple started work, but also posed problems most of us wouldn’t have to consider. “As a designer you’re aware of all the options, so when it’s your own, you drive yourself mad each night by developing the drawings further and taking them in different directions,” explains Matt. “Rochelle pretty much left it up to me – she knew I was in the zone – and when we reached the point at which the build was due to start, the last concept on the drawing table was basically the one that was built.”

Linking the house to the outdoors was a priority for the couple, and while the house itself didn’t need much work, having been renovated just four years previously, Matt and Rochelle felt it hadn’t been properly connected to the garden.

“We extended the roofline out and thickened the eaves to give it that nice detail,” explains Matt. “Then we put in glass sliding doors. They’re far more functional than bi-folds. One click and they open, so you open them on a more regular basis. What’s great is that I can be cooking in the kitchen and watching the kids in the pool. It was important that the connection was easy; that the space felt relaxed and we could be in the pool, at the outdoor dining area or in the internal living areas or kitchen and still feel connected with each other.” →

A white modular lounge from Cosh Living (**above**) adds freshness to this chillout zone, while the ‘Acapulco’ chair from Terrace is another nod to mid-century style. Behind, wispy *Lomandra tanika* provides a windbreak. Pretty potted *Nolina nelsonii* and *Zieria prostrata* (**opposite, above**). A Gandia Blasco chair from Parterre (**opposite, below**) sits between an hourglass planter from Garden Life and aloe in a pot from Terrace.





### \*swing vote

The 'Leaf' swing by Alberto Sánchez (above) was imported by Secret Gardens from Spain and hangs from an old eucalypt.

**the process** Once the work was underway, Matt says the build was relatively problem-free. The biggest challenge – aside from keeping the neighbours happy – was one common to all beachside properties: the engineering on the site was complicated by the fact the house is essentially built on sand. “But when it’s somewhere you plan to stay for the next 25 years, it’s worth all the energy that goes into it,” says Matt.

And, the results are indeed spectacular. The garden is an oasis of greenery and dappled light. “The light in the afternoon, when the sun starts to come through the trees and on the white wall behind the swimming pool, is just spectacular,” says Matt.

Another bonus is the additional space on top of the garage, which Matt and Rochelle have currently set up as a separate ‘adults’ zone, taking advantage of what would have otherwise been an unused spot.

As far as the overall care and maintenance of the 700-square-metre block is concerned, Matt insists there isn’t a lot to do. Well, not that much for him to do, that is.

## “THE GARDEN WAS DESIGNED AS A PLACE TO HAVE FUN WITH THE KIDS”

“I mow the lawn in summer because I like a crisp finish, but I’m not going to pretend I do it all,” he says, laughing. “I have some fantastic horticulturalists who work for me and I don’t claim to know as much as they do, but it’s actually a pretty low-maintenance space. Anything

growing in pots is very resilient and can survive on neglect. And when you’re regular with your maintenance, it’s never a big task. But more importantly, it was designed as a place to have fun with the kids, not as a sculpting exercise.”

Matt and Rochelle love to entertain friends outside in spring and summer, and it’s clear that this beautiful garden – with surrounding walls extending 2.4 metres high – is designed for friends and family to enjoy in privacy, despite the fact it’s surrounded by nine neighbouring homes.

When asked to pick a favourite element, Matt ponders a while. “I love my advanced banjo figs,” he says. “They’re about five metres high at the moment but eventually they will be big enough to hang over the lawn, and that’s where my hammock will be.” ❖

For more details on Matt’s work, visit [secretgardens.com.au](http://secretgardens.com.au).

In this exterior area, outdoor furniture, such as the Manutti ‘Zendo’ lounges from Cosh Living (above), chosen for weather-proof convenience as much as sophisticated style. Behind is one of the garden’s original trees, a kentia palm, which strongly informed the couple’s interpretation of mid-century design and provided a hint of Hollywood. Potted cacti is another low-maintenance option while bamboo adds greenery to the far wall.