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Working it out

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Sandstone paving at the rear is the perfect partner for the old house.



Going back to front

Convention is put aside to make full use of a beautiful garden, writes **Robyn Willis**



The feature wall complies with pool safety regulations and offers a visual and sound barrier from the street.

There are certain conventions adhered to when talking about garden design. These days, there's an expectation that the rear garden will have an outdoor seating area suitable for entertaining, and a lawn or even a pool for the kids to enjoy.

When director of Secret Gardens Matt Cantwell and his team turned up to this home in Randwick, he could see that the back garden already offered a working courtyard with direct connection to the house.

The family, which included four children, were hankering for a pool in this space — already an active play area for the children — but Matt had other ideas.

"The courtyard space at the back was a nice-sized area and it was functioning well as it was," Matt says. "To put a pool in there would have really compromised the outcome."

Changing hands

Transforming this garden, known as Wurringulla, is just one of the projects in Matt's first book, simply called *Secret Gardens*, released this month.

Built in 1907, the house was initially a residence before being converted into a

convent and joined to the property next door via a corridor in the 1940s. The site was subdivided and then sold off, leaving a generous 800sq m site to work with.

With plans to extend the outdoor entertaining area at the back and soften the lawn with less structured trees and shrubs, Matt turned his attention to the front garden — and the location of the pool. Making the decision to place the pool at the front was easy.

"The formal rooms were at the front of the house and the light was great but they weren't activated and they didn't use the space



French doors open on to the existing courtyard space at the back.

outdoors," he says. "The front garden only consisted of a lawn and the tessellated tile area outside the dining room doors."

Although the house sits on a busy road, a 4m-high hedge offered privacy.

"We added the feature wall as well because the hedge was quite thin lower down," he says. "It also gives soundproofing from the street."

Matt created a contemporary garden across the whole site, which was still sympathetic to the age of the house.

"We chose bluestone paving for the front garden," says Matt. "We used sandstone at the back but it would have retained too much moisture at the front, which faces south."

"We try to be respectful to the architecture rather than to compete with it."

Maintaining balance

Getting the balance right in terms of what spaces to include and how big they should be is critical if the garden is going to be used.

"When the kids are young, you want to keep an eye on them so when you're designing a pool for a family with four children, visibility is really important," he says.

"We wanted the parents to feel comfortable out the front, as well as in the back garden so that they would be and to be able to have other people over as well."

Despite its contemporary design, Matt says there's a sense of permanence about the whole garden now.

"Things progress and the house changes hands," he says. "When people see the garden as secondary to a beautiful home, you know it's worked."

More Secret Gardens, \$59.99, New Holland



An outdoor shower on the western side of the house is a practical addition in an unused part of the site.



The use of softer plants and shrubs takes the edge off harder surfaces.

