

A photograph of a modern, white, two-story house with a flat roof. The house features several windows with white, louvered shutters that are partially open. The house is surrounded by a lush garden with various plants, including tall cacti, succulents, and flowering shrubs. The sky is blue with some clouds.

OUT

club med House and garden are seductively intertwined here

Striking architecture by Luigi Rosselli and an alluring garden by Secret Gardens are in seductive synchronicity in this Sydney hideaway. Shuttered windows evoke Mediterranean climes, the relaxed, breezy feel heightened by the greenery below – loose, relaxed and freely flowing in its structure. A United Nations range of influences intermingle; European-style olive trees set the tone, underplanted with plants redolent of California while smaller foliage, including Australian natives, add softness. Turn the page for more details.

global roaming

In its inspiration, this freeform garden in Sydney's east evokes some of its well-travelled owners' favourite destinations

The pre-existing water feature has new brass jets. Striking vertical elements include Mexican fence post cactus (*Pachycereus marginatus*) and olive trees (*Olea europaea*) in raised planters, one at right over the submerged garage. Other plants include Aloe Big Red (Aloe hybrid LEO 0002), twin-flower agave (*Agave geminiflora*) and Aloe Winter Bells (Aloe hybrid 8521A). Butterfly bush (*Gaura lindheimeri*) lends softness and a looser structure.



The owners of this garden in Sydney's eastern suburbs, a professional couple with three young children, are keen travellers – as *Inside Out* goes to press, they are away globetrotting for a year. But when they can't get on a plane, they have the world literally at their doorstep.

Their lush private paradise, tinged with sun-soaked echoes of California and the Mediterranean, is a desirable destination that you won't find in any travel brochure.

When Mark Curtis of Secret Gardens first saw the garden in 2020, it was nothing to rush home for. Following an inspired house renovation by architect Luigi Rosselli – complete with walls of shutters that surely called for something more alluring – it had been clinically planted out with prim rows of *buxus* hedging punctuated with white pebbles underfoot. “It was very sterile,” says Mark, who was hired to make it more inviting. “The client wanted to create a sense of arrival, and a journey to the front door; something dynamic and interactive, with colour and interest, and an architectural influence in the plantings.” Something redolent of California and Ibiza may not have been part of the original brief, but it evolved into that. ‘Soft’, ‘whimsical’, ‘dramatic’, ‘colourful’ and ‘contemporary’ were adjectives volleyed about in early site visits.

Unlike the rear garden, this wasn't to be a playground for the children. “Elevated above the street, it had to be non-trafficable,

THIS PAGE (top left) A close-up of a pollarded olive tree in the raised planter. (Top right) Striking foliage contrasts, in shape, texture and colour, abound throughout, with trailing rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* ‘Prostratus’) along a retaining wall, offsetting round-leaved navel wort (*Cotyledon orbiculata*), twin-flower agave, Indian hawthorn (*Rhaphiolepis intermedia*) and Aloe Big Red. **OPPOSITE** Well-established trailing rosemary and Cousin It (*Casuarina glauca* ‘Cousin It’) cascading down the existing sandstone retaining walls, interspersed with white salvia (*Salvia leucantha* ‘White Velour’) and San Pedro cactus (*Trichocereus pachanoi*), deliver street appeal. The olive trees give a hint of the pleasures that await above.



“This garden is relatively maintenance-free. All it needs is a little weeding and the occasional snip”

MARK CURTIS, LANDSCAPE DESIGNER

with no deliberate access to the garden to obviate the need for balustrades, which would disturb the visual flow,” he says. That translated to just one stepped path up to the front door.

Mark retained the original hardscaping as a framework, including limestone pavers and masonry retaining walls, together with a raised water feature clad in stone tiles. But that ready-made layout, rather than being a limitation, freed him up to concentrate on the plantings. “We didn’t have to worry about the structural elements as they were already there,” he says. But with a soil depth of just 30cm, any tree would require a raised planter. One aluminium planter (painted in robust bridge paint), new brass jets in the water feature, and a fibreglass planter by the front door were the only hardscaping additions. “We also had to work around a native beehive behind the water feature,” adds Mark. “We couldn’t move it because the clients wanted native bees. They don’t sting, are quite discreet and were a joy to work around. We just left them to their own devices.”

The rest was open slather. After stripping out impoverished soil and replacing it with a new nutrient-rich, lightweight and well-aerated option, Mark went to town with the plantings, installing lush layers of trees, succulents and perennials. Retaining magnolias on the boundaries for an instant sense of containment and privacy, he then created a dense, rich tapestry. Three olive trees – one housed in the raised planter – create that Mediterranean ambience as well as verticality in what could otherwise be a flat space. “Mature and pollarded to give them an open character, the olive trees provide height, scale volume and softness.” They have been underplanted with architectural agaves, aloes and, most strikingly, Mexican fence post cacti, all evoking the Californian desert. In contrast, shrubs such as

oleander and Indian hawthorn “are evergreen, round and organic”. *Salvias* rub foliage with butterfly bush, *Cousin It* provides groundcover, and trailing rosemary tumbles down masonry walls. Meanwhile, a *bougainvillea* by the front door also references that Mediterranean-Californian vibe. “It’s unruly and is allowed to flow out of that pot,” says Mark.

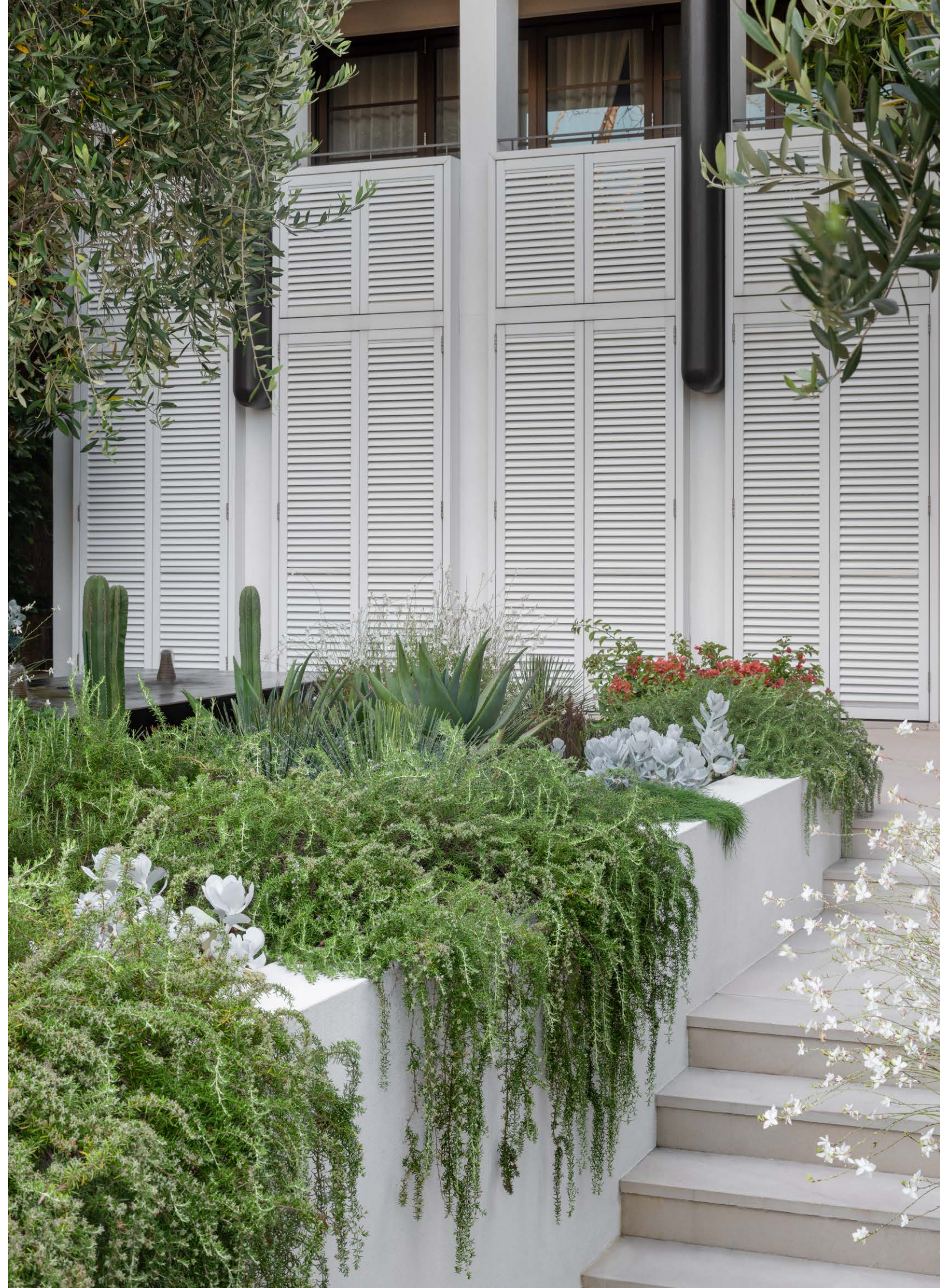
Though seemingly spontaneous, this garden is the result of careful planning. “The positioning of plants allows the eye to move across it, with channels framed by larger specimens creating a sense of movement,” says Mark. “It’s a naturalistic garden, much looser than before. There’s no lawn, no contrived garden beds, the whole space is garden and the eye wanders to different forms, shapes and colours, grounded by the olive trees to provide scale. Tonally, we wanted muted grey-green foliage – glaucous Mediterranean tones, not bright green, and without gloss.”

While sun-drenched European summers might be the immediate reference point, Mark says this garden provides year-round interest and shifts with the seasons. “The *bougainvillea* provides a splash of summer colour, and the aloes and agaves bloom in brilliant tones during autumn and winter. There is a marvellous washed-out glow to the garden in summer when the succulents stop flowering, but then they kick in again.” 

Secret Gardens is at secretgardens.com.au and [@secretgardens_au](https://www.instagram.com/secretgardens_au)

THIS PAGE Groundcovers such as trailing rosemary and *Cousin It* soften the masonry on approach, while San Pedro cactus, existing southern magnolias (*Magnolia grandiflora* ‘Exmouth’), olive trees and Aloe Big Red all add verticality.

OPPOSITE Trailing rosemary, round-leaved navel wort, *Cousin It*, Aloe Big Red, Mexican fence post cactus and *bougainvillea* (*Bougainvillea* ‘Bambino Pedro’) all usher the visitor up some steps to the front door.



A loose layering of colours, shapes and textures beguiles as the visitor ventures toward the home's entrance. Trailing rosemary, round-leaved navel wort, Aloe Big Red, Mexican fence post cactus, bougainvillea and twin-flower agave accompany them on the journey.

plant palette

While their foliage is strikingly diverse, all these inclusions are robust and drought-tolerant



- 1 Trailing rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus').
- 2 Aloe Big Red (Aloe hybrid LEO 0002).
- 3 Butterfly bush (*Gaura lindheimeri*).
- 4 San Pedro cactus (*Trichocereus pachanoi*).
- 5 Round-leafed navel wort (*Cotyledon orbiculata*).
- 6 Bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea* 'Bambino

Butterfly bush and trailing rosemary sit along a retaining wall, while herald's trumpet (*Beaumontia grandiflora*) creeps up the masonry beyond.