



Embracing Natural Beauty — Bracken Garden by Secret Gardens

Words by Aaron Grinter • Photography by Nicholas Watt • Landscape by Secret Gardens

Sitting on a headland in the small New South Wales South Coast town of Malua Bay, a new project by Secret Gardens revitalises a property devastated by bushfires and extreme weather.

Located about four-and-a-half hours south of Sydney, the little getaway of Malua Bay was devastated by the 2019 bushfires. Thankfully, the Bracken Garden site managed to avoid severe damage, with only the understorey burnt, but it was then obliterated by a severe hailstorm in 2020. With little left to hold the ground together, the sloping site started to erode, meaning that intervention was immediately required.

When Secret Gardens arrived on site, it was essentially a blank slate, with weeds primarily colonising the area previously cleared for the house. A dream location, with views north to Pretty Point, south to Guerilla Bay and Rosedale, and direct access to the adjacent beach, it was an ideal design opportunity – “a special site that hadn’t been able to realise its full potential,” says Matt Cantwell, creative director of Secret Gardens.

Despite the loss of understorey, the majestic spotted gums remained following the fire; although still recovering when the project began, they now create a towering natural screen, filtering glimpses to the popular beach below and cliffs beyond. From the beach, they offer privacy to the home, which makes a bold statement on the headland, with strong

rectilinear lines and a dominating form that seems to float on the site. The previous garden lacked deference to the home, so Secret Gardens’ new design aimed to complement the scale and lines of the building, with rectangular decks, large-format tiles and long linear structures drawing out the existing form.

The existing garden also lacked useable space, coming up to meet the dwelling. “With fire protection in mind, we took the design in a different direction,” says Matt. “We pushed the larger areas of planting further back and brought the lawn and open areas close to the house.” Injecting distance between the dwelling and the plantings offered the opportunity for amenity areas close to the house, thus a bocce court, tiled terrace and sprawling green lawns were added.

Secret Gardens’ new design stayed within the footprint of the previous garden, except for the addition of meandering paths to destination points around the property. The materiality was selected to be sympathetic to the geology and topography, and new structures needed to be able to withstand fires and damaging storms. Due to the risk of erosion, these new structures were intended to slow the movement of water across the site, maintaining soil integrity and absorbing water.

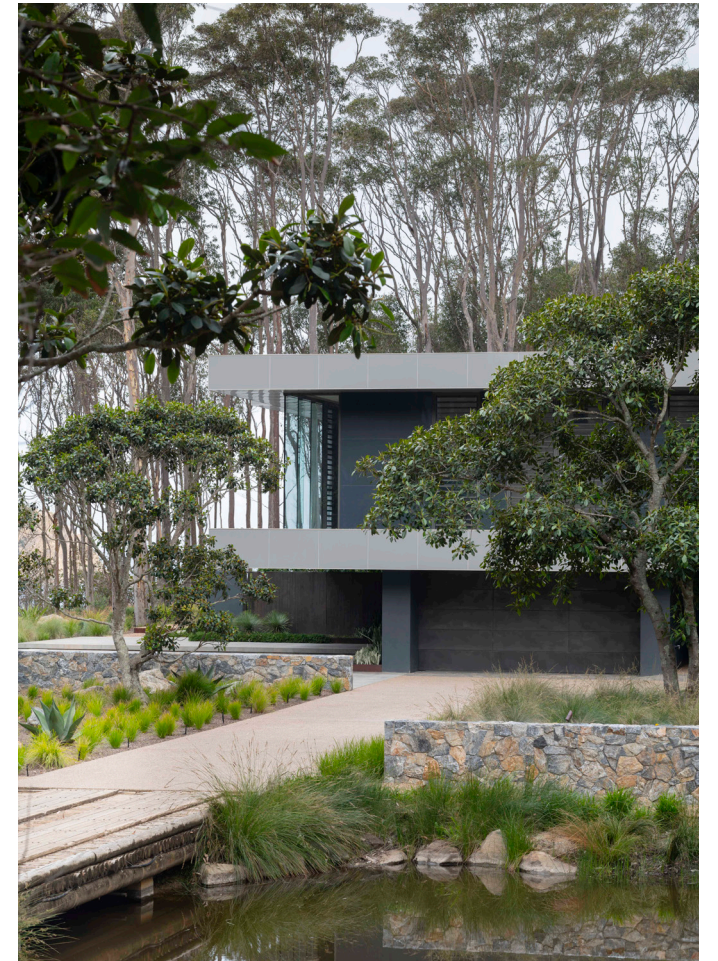


There are endless opportunities to take in the breathtaking coastal scenery as you journey through the stunning new garden.

The structures included a series of retaining walls in stone and stepped terraces in Corten steel, finished with locally sourced gravels. These elements invigorate the garden by serving as steps and paths or simply returning soil depth to areas affected by erosion. More than functional, they also embrace the natural aesthetics of the site, the russet hue of the Corten steel highlighting the dark coffee-coloured sap of the surrounding spotted gums and the engineered block walls, clad in stone to emulate the surrounding boulders. Robust materials were selected throughout to ensure little to no maintenance was required.

Injecting architecture into the garden was an essential part of the new design. “There were no destination points or any clear ability to circulate,” explains Matt. “The client wanted a variety of seating areas or points of interest, with a network of paths to encourage circulation across the undulating site.”

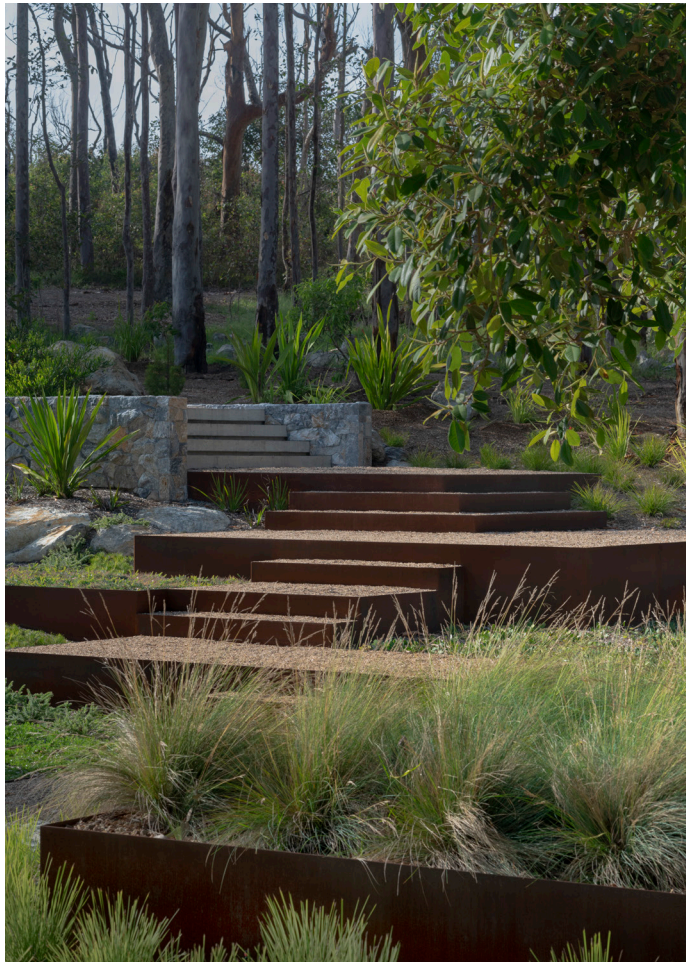
Entering the property, one crosses a wooden bridge spanning a large dam, a transition that indicates there is something magical about the property beyond. Being the first impression, transforming the dam was essential. Its proportions were enlarged, and the margins planted with



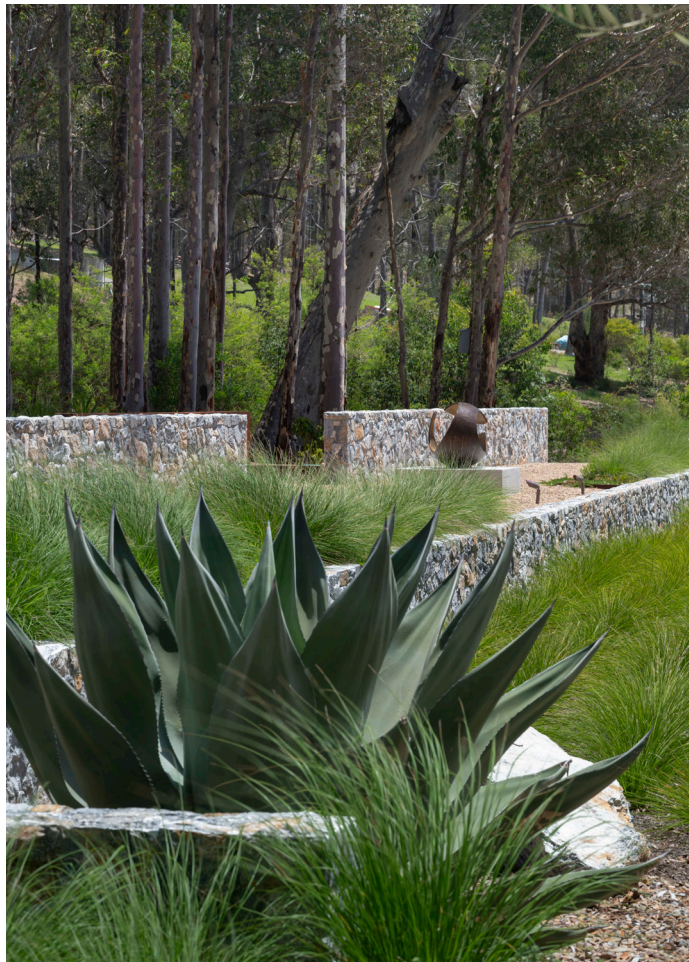
reeds and lomandras to encourage local frog species. Now a highlight of the property, winding paths from the house take one on a journey to and over the dam, with a cantilevered blackbutt deck hovering over the water for evening cocktails. Lights located along and under the paths ensure a safe passage after the sun sets.

Opportunities to take in the breathtaking scenery are plentiful as you journey through the stunning new garden. At the northern end of the property, a deck with seating overlooks the rugged Pretty Point coastline, the deck framed by sculptural forms in Corten steel jutting up out of the grasses, as though the cliffs were all around you. These steel forms are employed throughout the garden, adding character and architectural detail.

Another destination point is discovered at the north-eastern tip of the property. Not for the faint of heart, this area abuts the cliff's edge, constructed with stone repurposed from the previous garden. A favoured spot for the clients, offering stunning views over the water, the zone is formalised by stone flagging and a retaining wall, making it safe to access in all seasons.



For Bracken Garden, Secret Gardens selected plants that were generally drought tolerant, low maintenance and quick growing, with a focus on natives.



The plant selection aimed to create a garden that is generally drought tolerant, low maintenance and quick growing. As such, natives were selected, not only for their hardiness but their subtle beauty. “The native garden has come a long way and is now highly desirable and a key driver for many clients,” says Matt. He describes a “shift in our collective appreciation of our native flora and topography and, to some extent, finally growing up, embracing our natural beauty”.

Endemic species were incorporated, and Eurobodalla Regional Botanic Garden was an invaluable source of information and inspiration. Species were selected to achieve coverage quickly, both to maintain the soil structure and suppress weeds. Myoporum creeps from the garden beds, softening the sharp interfaces, while westringia and banksia provide a midpoint to the visual range.

It was also important to retain the stunning views from the house, so height considerations influenced what was positioned where. Grasses and mat-rushes are used abundantly, their quick establishment ideal for the brief, and their textual forms adding depth and movement.

Substance was needed in the mid-canopy, with little present between grass and tree, so advanced olive trees and Port Jackson figs were craned in for instant scale. Their gnarled forms offer a sculptural aesthetic and green and grey tones that are sympathetic to the surrounding palette. Agaves and cycads are dotted among the grasses for contrast and interest.

Although located some distance from Sydney, the project retains a cutting-edge feel, with Secret Gardens ensuring the architecture of the garden and the geometry of the spaces are not only of the highest calibre but complement the distinctly Australian aesthetic. Realising the potential of this unique site, Matt is excited to see it develop. “It will be interesting to watch it recover over the next five years,” he reflects.

With characteristic design flair and a deep appreciation for Australian environments, Secret Gardens has taken a site devastated by natural disasters and created a luxury hideaway in an incomparable headland position. The design creates many opportunities to savour the breathtaking views, highlighting the site’s natural beauty and providing generous amenity for its residents and visitors.

