

Gardens

CASCADING GREENERY AND WELCOMING SPACES

Photograph by Nick Watt. Calligraphy by Lesley Workman.

Trailing rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus') tumbles out of planters above beaked yuccas (*Yucca rostrata*) and Asiatic jasmine (*Trachelospermum asiaticum*). Eumundi quandong trees (*Elaeocarpus eumundi*) look down on the courtyard and provide a sense of enclosure. Landscape design by Secret Gardens.

On the RISE

When this house in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs was reimagined, the garden had to step up, too – in more ways than one.

STORY *Chris Pearson* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Nick Watt*

Beside the pool in the rear garden, dragon trees (*Dracaena marginata*), green aloe (*Furcraea foetida*) and low shrubs, such as dwarf pittosporum (*Pittosporum tobira* 'Miss Muffet') and Natal plum (*Carissa* 'Desert Star'), are well suited to the tough, full-sun environment. Mediterranean spurge (*Euphorbia wulfenii*) ensures seasonal colour. 'Sensi' floor tiles in White Sand, Di Lorenzo Tiles. **OPPOSITE** The crisp facade by Marston Architects is complemented by plantings of cowboy cactus (*Euphorbia acurensis* 'Cowboy'), silver spoons (*Kalanchoe hildebrandtii* 'Silver Spoons') and trailing rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus'). Green giant agaves (*Agave salmiana*) sit among blue flax lily (*Dianella caerulea*), beneath an olive tree.



In 2020, landscape designer Henry Chapple-Cox of Secret Gardens crossed the threshold of this Eastern Suburbs house before Marston Architects had worked their magic on the home. Both the garden and house were disjointed, he says. At the rear, the living areas looked directly to a rendered wall, with the rest of the garden, including the pool, a level above and only visible from the bedrooms upstairs. Indoors and out, the only common ground was the formal rigid and boxy aesthetic – exemplified by a lollipop tree on the street ingloriously trimmed into a cube. In short, both garden and house had to let their hair down.

First, architect Pip Marston revitalised the home, which was originally built by the owners in 2001. Within the existing envelope, she flipped the interiors, shifting the living areas from the ground to the first floor to enjoy spectacular harbour views on one side and a seamless connection with the rear garden on the other. Internal walls were removed to allow sight lines right through the home – now you can glimpse the Sydney Harbour Bridge from the pool area – while exposing the unique roof shape, which floats over the living areas. The facade was simplified by removing awkward shapes and angles, and installing elegant cantilevered steps. Not surprisingly, the garden needed a similar reinvention, with Henry relishing the job ahead.

“It needed to be brought to life and loosened up by introducing informality and fun and whimsy to complement the lighter, loftier style of architecture,” he says. But it also had to offer privacy, as this is a built-up area.

Henry started from scratch, retaining just the pool and some concrete planters. He was faced with several challenges: the relative shallow soils on the west-facing site, which was also subject to harsh afternoon sun, and the backyard on several levels, exacerbated by the pool slap-bang in the middle.

Retaining the pool in its original location, he refurbished it with new coping and added a new floating hardwood deck. This creates a large level expanse and connects to a new walkway, leading directly to the living areas on the upper level, which

enjoy wall-to-wall glazing. Meanwhile, what was once a courtyard connected to the erstwhile downstairs living is accessed down a set of elegant cantilevered, precast concrete steps. “Like the deck, they give everything a wonderful floating feeling,” says Henry. And a second entry from the back lane leads directly into the pool area then beyond to the upstairs living areas in the new layout. Timber batten screens add material warmth and protect the owners from breezes and any prying eyes.

New steel planters supplement the original concrete iterations to compensate for the lack of soil depth, while a drip irrigation system with rain sensors was installed to allow for parsimonious watering in a garden that is rarely thirsty.

For the shallow soils and unrelenting afternoon sun, Henry chose hardy, resilient plants, a mix of natives and exotics, with the emphasis on olive trees at the front, and grasses, cacti and succulents, such as agaves and euphorbias, throughout. Along the northern boundary at the back, he planted fast-growing Henkel’s yellowwood hedging for screening, chosen for its lushness but also its movement. “We did not want anything rigid... this moves with the breeze for a looser effect,” he says.

On the opposite side sit low shrubs, such as Desert Star natal plum and dwarf pittosporum, while native Eumundi quandong trees form the lofty backdrop for the entire rear garden. In the lower-level courtyard beside the back of the house, three tough beaked yuccas add texture. Similarly, on the street frontage, blue agaves “add a punch” while blue flax lily “fluffs out the sides of the concrete steps”. Front and back, trailing rosemary tumbles out of planters, tempering the white rendered surfaces and timber screens.

Many of the plants were already mature when craned in and planted, allowing the garden to thrive from day one. What a difference a week made, with the spaces bare on Monday and lush by Friday. “It was an immediate transformation, a light-bulb moment, with an instant difference in lushness and vibrancy,” says Henry. “That’s why I love this job.”

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Secret Gardens: secretgardens.com.au.
Marston Architects: marstonarchitects.com.au.

OPPOSITE *Clockwise from top left* Hardy olive trees (*Olive spp.*) lend a Mediterranean ambience to the streetscape. Cowboy cactus (*Euphorbia acurensis* ‘Cowboy’) and green giant agave (*Agave salmiana*) add sculptural shapes. *Top right* At the rear of the property, cantilevered concrete steps lead to steppers, consisting of ‘Sensi’ porcelain tiles from Di Lorenzo Tiles, and across the lawn. A green vase tree (*Zelkova serrata* ‘Green Vase’) is underplanted with Asiatic jasmine (*Trachelospermum asiaticum*) and flax (*Phormium tenax*). Dwarf pittosporum (*Pittosporum tobira* ‘Miss Muffet’) and Henkel’s yellowwood (*Podocarpus henkelii*) add depth. *Bottom right* By the pool, blue switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum* ‘Heavy Metal’) brings softness to the deck’s parallel lines, and Henkel’s yellowwood (*Podocarpus henkelii*) acts as hedging that moves with the breeze. ‘Architect’ chair, Coco Republic. *Bottom left* Beaked yuccas (*Yucca rostrata*) bring instant personality to the courtyard, while trailing rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* ‘Prostratus’) tempers the rendered walls.



Garden and house are now intimately connected, thanks to a new hardwood deck that flows from the pool to the living area. Paddle cactus (*Opuntia* spp.) adds sculptural form, while blue switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum* 'Heavy Metal') shimmies in the breeze along with the Henkel's yellowwood (*Podocarpus henkelii*) at the boundary, delivering a wonderfully wispy quality to the space and countering the house's angular lines. 'Architect' outdoor lounge chairs, Coco Republic. 'Pogo' coffee table, Tait.

