



## Schulz Garden

PORT HACKING • NEW SOUTH WALES

Gardens around multi-storeyed houses have to work harder than others. As well as being looked out onto, they are literally looked down upon, so they need to be interesting in plan view. And, of course, like all gardens they must also appeal to those sitting in and moving through the space.

This Sydney garden, on a steeply sloping block that runs down to Port Hacking, faces south across the water to the Royal National Park. The slope means that the garden is often viewed from above – either from one of the decks fronting the two-storeyed house, or from the uppermost lawn terrace. From any of these vantage points the path that meanders down between two broad bands of sculpted understorey plants to the water's edge carries the eye through a tapestry of colour and texture.

The experience of being in the garden and walking down the path, though, is less about the patterns created by the planting and more about the journey. It's a transition of spaces – from open to closed and back again, twice over. The path wanders downhill from the top terrace, squeezing through a gap in the first sandstone retaining wall, and then setting off on an angle through beds of clipped, textured plantings and under the canopy of a tall smooth-barked apple (*Angophora costata*). Another lawn terrace halfway down the slope provides a breathing space – somewhere to pause and enjoy the view. Cutting through it is another flight of steps that sidles down past a large, smooth sandstone boulder emerging out of the landscape, before the ramped path continues, heading diagonally across the slope again. The understorey planting becomes lower and more minimal before two final flights of stairs deliver the visitor to a sunlit deck

A concrete path, coloured with charcoal oxide to tone in with the sandstone outcrops and retaining walls, zigzags through the sloping garden to the boat house. The spiky silhouette of a Gynea lily (*Doryanthes excelsa*, foreground) is in marked contrast to the soft mounds of clipped liquorice plant (*Helichrysum petiolare*) and coastal rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*).



on top of the boathouse, overlooking a swimming pool and, beyond, the larger expanse of water.

Designed seven years ago by Hugh Main of Spirit Level Designs, the garden's inspiration came from its location and proximity to the national park. When Hugh first visited the site the retaining walls were already in place, sheltered by some towering native trees. But the path that zigzagged down the block to the water's edge was little more than a narrow bush track. Rather than starting again, Hugh decided to leave the rock walls with their weathered patina and follow the same course the track took, acknowledging that after years of use it was obviously the most natural line to take down the hill. The path was re-laid in concrete, with charcoal oxide added to match the darkest colour in the weathered sandstone.

With the trees already in place, Hugh simply concentrated on adding an understorey. Initially the entire garden area was to be planted out but when the owners asked for an area of lawn, a terrace was positioned midway down the slope, providing a podium from which to view the garden and a level playing space for the owners' children. The beds above and below this terrace are filled with a combination of complementary natives and exotics – shrubs, grasses and succulents – that together create an intricate understorey. The shrubs are clipped into soft, organic mounds to mimic the shapes of the sandstone boulders, as well as the way plants are shaped in nature by wind and the busy, though accidental, tip-pruning activity of some birds. It is a formal gardening technique used here to create something quite informal and natural.

Adding some mid-level height are several native blueberry ash (*Elaeocarpus reticulatus*), which are dotted throughout the garden and, closer to the water, New Zealand Christmas bushes (*Metrosideros excelsus*) and Japanese mock orange (*Pittosporum tobira*), which are forming small rounded trees.

The garden isn't drip-irrigated but is mulched twice a year. Occasionally during warm weather when water restrictions allow it is hand-watered, but both the garden beds and the lawn terraces have happily survived this strict regime, sheltered from direct sun by the aspect and the canopies of the mature trees. And when it does rain, of course, they catch and greedily soak up any run-off.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The journey down through the garden to the water's edge offers many opportunities to stop and admire both the garden and the view, framed by angophoras; lichen growing on the natural sandstone boulders; the lawn terrace (laid in soft leaf buffalo) positioned mid-way down the hill soaks up run-off; liquorice plant (*Helichrysum petiolare*).

FOLLOWING PAGES: The garden is successful because of the repeated forms and elements that tie it together, such as the shrubs clipped into rounded organic shapes to mimic the worn sandstone outcrops.





