



HIGH DRAMA

Strong and sculptural plantings set the scene in this steeply sloping garden overlooking Sydney Harbour.

PHOTOGRAPHS ADAM JONES WORDS JENNA REED BURNS

THIS PAGE The grey-green leaves of a dragon tree (*Dracaena draco*) are complemented by the fleshy blue foliage of *Senecio mandraliscae*, otherwise known as blue chalk sticks or blue fingers. OPPOSITE PAGE *Yucca elephantipes* crowd along the top of a rocky outcrop. Below, the stone is being softened by spreading silver-leaved succulents, such as *Crassula ovata*. Bluebird





Rising above the gully that runs between two harbourside homes in Sydney's Vaucluse are the twisting, red-barked limbs of a Sydney red gum (*Angophora costata*). The majestic tree crowns a lushly planted ravine, but years ago it sheltered – daily in summer – a line of nuns filing quietly down to the beach from their convent on the hill behind.

The tree has borne silent witness to many changes, including the ownership of the land on which it stands. Where once there was one home beside the path connecting the convent to the beach, there are now two, designed by Jahn Associates five years ago for two generations of one family. The irregular-shaped parcel of steeply sloping land is roughly triangular in shape, both on paper and in cross-section, and the new houses sit either side of the gully, built on massive outcrops of rock – the same outcrops and ledges selected by the landscapers, Spirit Level, to support sandstone retaining walls.

"We built our walls on the top of existing rock to create some space for soil depth, so we could plant and soften the site," explains Spirit Level director Hugh Main. "Although the buildings are very rectilinear and some of the retaining walls follow those lines, a lot were built on the edge of existing eroded outcrops, so by nature are organic in shape. That's where the separation between the architecture and the landscape begins."

With virtually no level area, it was a matter of creating pockets of earth deep enough to sustain planting wherever possible. Behind the two houses, screening from view what are now school grounds around the old convent, bushy hedges of dwarf New Zealand Christmas bush (*Metrosideros* "Thomasii") and groves of coastal banksia (*B. integrifolia*) underplanted with grass trees and drifts of native flax lily (*Dianella caerulea*) grow behind three-metre-high retaining walls. At one end of this rear boundary planting, three large old existing frangipanis drop their blossoms onto the pool terrace below, while at the other, a rockery garden of hardy succulents, including species of yucca, crassula, senecio and one striking dragon tree (*Dracaena draco*), basks in its hot, west-facing location.



THIS PAGE, TOP African candelabra (*Euphorbia ammak* 'Variegata'). BOTTOM LEFT Silver torch cactus or woolly torch cactus (*Cleistanthus strausii*). BOTTOM RIGHT Panda plant or pussy ears (*Kalanchoe tomentosa*). OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP and BOTTOM The twisting sword-shaped leaves of *Sansevieria trifasciata*, commonly known as mother-in-law's tongue, resemble green flames licking at the sandstone retaining walls. RIGHT Because of the owners' love of the unusual, Spirit Level's Hugh Main chose sculptural specimen plants for many of the garden areas, and contrasted their spiky textures with fleshy ground covers.



GARDEN



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Dark-toned pots planted with sculptural and hardy succulents with cool-coloured foliage were chosen to complement the stone and concrete that features in the architecture. Various species of native aquatic plants, including water snowflake (*Nymphoides indica*) and variegated sweet flag (*Acorus calamus* 'Variegatus') fill the long lily pond separating the two wings of one of the houses.



The cool blue-grey tones of the succulents' foliage complement those found in the stone and concrete that features in the architecture.

Drifts of native flax lilies continue down through the gully planting, under the canopy of the angophora and weaving between the sturdy patterned trunks of cabbage palms to end at another dragon tree. "The client is interested in plants that look different to those you see everywhere else," says Hugh. "She wanted a unique garden and it really was a unique site being so steep and rocky – it was almost like gardening on a cliff. So we had to create little pockets where we could grow visually stimulating and interesting plants. The garden is a sum of many different parts, with each pocket having its own flavour."

With so little accessible earth to plant into, pots were an obvious way to add more greenery, especially on the broad paved terrace surrounding the parents' larger home. Again, species that were strongly sculptural were chosen. Columnar cactuses covered in downy white hair fill one of a trio of pots clustered in a corner of the terrace, their vertical silhouettes mimicking the city's skyline across the harbour. Next to them are barrel cactuses, grown from seed more than 30 years ago. "The grower was so sad to see them go as he thought of them as children," recalls Hugh. "Like a lot of the plants in this garden, they are more like characters than plants."

Slicing through the parents' house to separate the main living area from the bedroom wing and terraces is a long, rectangular lily pond. The architects lined it with white pebbles, but after a few years Hugh convinced the owners to treat it as another garden space and filled it with native and exotic aquatic plants. "It now looks like a natural lily pond," he says.

The team at Spirit Level has been fortunate to continue to maintain the garden since it was first put in, which is why it has benefited from careful additions, such as the water garden and the dragon trees. "After five years, the garden is starting to settle in and soften," says Hugh. "It's that whole thing about a garden not being something you put in on day one and leave – it's something you watch, grow and nurture." 75