

## GOING WITH THE FLOW

### DESIGNED BY HUGH MAIN

FROM A BEACHFRONT GARDEN CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF COASTAL, TO A RIVERSIDE LOCATION WHERE THE PLANTING SCHEME PROVES THAT A DROUGHTPROOF GARDEN IS ANYTHING BUT DULL



The challenge for Hugh in this garden was to make it as enticing as the view (below left). The planting scheme is a mix of exotic and native drought-hardy plants. Clipable plants such as westringia, helichrysum and teucrium are pruned and coaxed into organic, amoebic forms that wrap and wind their way around the tree trunks and the sculptural plants such as *Agave attenuata*, yuccas and cordylines (right and far right).

As we hurtle headlong into the modern world, the effect we have on the environment becomes an unavoidable issue. With populations swelling, space is disappearing, and so too are many of our natural resources. Practising restraint and conservation on both a global scale and a local level are more important than ever: preservation needs to become habit. For many places in the world, the most fundamental of resources — water — is the number one concern.

The issue of drought is one that will never ever go away in Australia. In theory we know this is the driest continent on earth, but for some reason we'd really rather not accept it as a fact. One of humankind's most notable abilities is our capacity for denial: sometimes it works in our favour as a survival mechanism, and at other times it's our greatest downfall. In the case of drought, denial just leaves you thirsty. Gardens and gardeners get a lot of flack for being big water guzzlers. On the whole most gardeners (in Australia) are acutely aware of water conservation, but even so the temptation to splash water around when things get a bit dry is too hard to resist.

All this is definitely changing. There are big moves afoot to promote and encourage the planting of drought-tolerant plants. This doesn't mean, as many would assume, purely native plants; it also includes a wide range of plants that come from dry climates such as the Mediterranean and southern Africa, creating the potential for some pretty terrific planting schemes and combinations. Once we let go of the idea that it's all got to be verdant, green and flowery we'll start to see some dynamic, energized and original planting schemes that are much more in touch with an Australian aesthetic than ever before.

For Hugh Main, this dry issue was one of the overriding considerations for the rejuvenation of a waterside garden overlooking the Port Hacking River in New South Wales. Rather than seeing this as a constraint, Hugh took it as an opportunity to prove that drought tolerant doesn't mean dagsville.

Initially the biggest handicap this garden faced in starting its new life was the view, not from the garden but from the house: it was a stunner. From the main upper deck this house looked out over a mesmerizing view of river and national park — so mesmerizing that you'd momentarily lose all motivation to make the trek down the slope through the garden and finally to the water's edge. However, getting as close as





possible to water (and preferably in it) is an urge always too strong to resist, so inevitably the downhill journey would be made. Very simply, Hugh's challenge was to make the journey as beautiful as the destination.

This garden is a great example of going with the flow. It was a matter of working with the site and the things affecting and influencing it (including low rainfall) rather than against them. The rough goat track that led down to the water's edge was simply refined with a new concrete path and the crumbling sandstone retaining walls were repaired and reinstated.

Ultimately, though, it is the planting scheme that makes the garden a success, ensuring that it sits comfortably and harmoniously within its distinctly Australian surrounds.

As a starting point, Hugh had a mature canopy of native trees including banksias, angophoras and eucalypts to work with. Adding to this was a matter of selecting a palette of plants with foliage colour and texture that matched and blended with the signature tones of the existing native trees and neighbouring national park. Among the plants that Hugh chose to work in with the silvers, grey-greens and olives were *teucrium*, *westringia*, *helichrysum*, *raphiolepis* and *artemisia* — his choice also influenced by the drought tolerance of each and every one of these plants.

It's one thing to select a list of plants that satisfy these requirements, but it's another altogether to put them together in an aesthetically sumptuous plant combo experience. The thing that sets Hugh's efforts apart from what could have been a stock standard 'drought-proofed' garden is the way he's turned the entire planting scheme into one big sculptural feast. The plants have been controlled and manipulated to strike a perfect balance between strong form and points of focus.

The attentive pruning and ongoing shaping of the shrubs, particularly the small grey-leafed *helichrysum* and the *westringia*, is the most captivating part of the whole scheme. These sculpted shrubs take on the most sensuous amoebic forms as they wrap and wind their way around tree trunks, sandstone boulders and each other. Punctuating these organic shapes are the pointy, strappy leaves of architectural plants including good old *Agave attenuata*, *doryanthes* and *yucca*.

In the early spring the garden is given a colour injection with the spectacular blue flowers of *Echium fastuosum*. It's quite a sight, but as the attention-grabbing blooms fade, the skilful play of muted colour, form and texture ensures this garden is an inspiring place to be any time of the year, perfectly at peace with everything that surrounds it.

The water's edge is too good to resist, so visitors have to be coaxed off the upper deck of the house and away from the view (left): the garden is now as beautiful as the destination. Hedging plants like *helichrysum* (left) and *westringia* are predominantly silver and grey in colour, blending well with the eucalypts, sandstone outcrops and the concrete used for the steps (left and top right). The spiky form of *Yucca filamentosa* (centre right) is used as a contrast to the organic shapes of the pruned shrubs.

