

SAND RITES.



SET IN STONE

Nestled among sandstone cliffs, this garden incorporates hardy plants to withstand the sea spray

WORDS **CYBELE MASTERMAN** PHOTOGRAPHS **MICHAEL WEE**



Opposite: The barbecue, in a small outcrop, showcases the clever approach of designer Hugh Main, who found ways to keep the garden entertainer friendly. Above and below: Stonemason Glen Brooks chose to include sandstone to match the tones of the existing rocky foundation.

For thousands of years, people have waded the shores of Watsons Bay (just an hour from central Sydney) cooling off, collecting shells or fishing, and for eons before that, wind and water have weathered the rocks in this coastal garden.

Keen to respect the sense of history, the owners of this patch of land made a feature of the sandstone outcrops – their vision was to mould the incredible foundations into a more user-friendly garden, a space in which to entertain, relax and enjoy the view.

They turned to landscape designer Hugh Main of Spirit Level because of his respect for the site and the way he embraced the natural elements of the environment. Rather than embark on a battle against the unforgiving salt spray and coastal breezes that can wreak havoc on exotic plants like azaleas and camellias, Hugh wanted to celebrate what it means to live on the coast of Australia. Thus he used a variety of fauna native to the area, all the while using the existing trees – a gordonia, tuckeroo and fig – for their shade and structure. The family immediately fell in love with his vision.

The biggest challenge in Hugh's grand plan was to re-create the weathered and imposing shapes of the local environs, while expanding the outdoor living areas. "To improve on nature is impossible – the hardest thing is to try to replicate it," he says.

The design

As you step off the sand through the white-picket fence, a stone path that bypasses the boatshed trails into a sensitively thought-out garden. A bronze balustrade leads up into the canopy of the area, and along the way, the steps and a sandstone wall at the top gently curve to mimic the stratification of the area's time-worn cliff faces. →





Above, left and right: Sculptural hedges of coastal rosemary and softer sweeps of euphorbia 'Diamond Frost' happily thrive, relishing the sea breeze. Below and opposite page: The soon-to-bloom flowers of *Delosperma cooperi* fit perfectly into the generously planted seaside garden.



Stonemason Glen Brooks' artistry is clear, as the naturally uneven stones are fitted together like puzzle pieces for a seamless staircase that echoes the stone faces that surround the garden.

Off to the side and down a concealed path to a natural rock ledge is an important place for the family. "There are various spots in the garden where you can sit and think, read or just enjoy the view," says the owner. It's like a little Arcadia, a secret place to observe nature from, with a cascading fig tree for company. "We prune the fig to thin it, so it's not so heavy, and encourage it to drape like that," says the owner.

Above the lawn is a show-stopping terrace that meets the house. The natural sandstone ledge was ground down flat and filled with paving where needed. Like most of the major landscaping and stone masonry in the garden, this grinder work was done after the cottage had been knocked down and while the new house was being built.

"The garden was a challenging site, but the owners were always very approachable. It felt very much as though we were working together, but relatively little needed to be discussed at great length," says Hugh. This mutual understanding between him and the owners, combined with the fluid design approach of utilising the existing environment means that Hugh shrugs at the idea of major changes in the process. "There weren't really any, because everything was about responding to nature and finding the right things for the right places."

The family personally selected all the sculptural elements that feature within the garden. Hugh fondly recalls how they seemed to appear in the perfect spot like some sort of apparition. "All the pieces were collected quite randomly over a number of years. →



**"To improve on nature
is impossible - the
hardest thing is to
try to replicate it"**

Hugh Main, Landscape designer



The family tended to purchase items that they loved and find a home for them later," he says. A somewhat serendipitous strategy, which never fails to succeed; as if to prove the point, kookaburras regularly visit the gordonia tree to eye off their reclaimed-metal likeness.

The natural look

Embracing nature's beauty is the guiding principle for this garden's shape and evolution. The hands behind the craftsmanship remain invisible, letting nature play the starring role. Case in point is the romantic grey-green coastal rosemary hedge that edges the terrace. It appears windswept, drawing upon the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*. "This type of clipping means stepping back and following the natural lines – thinking about what plants do in their typical environment," explains Hugh. He has used a variety of plants, like *Delosperma cooperi* and banksia to re-create the texture you see in the wild. Plus there are plenty of herbs and rosemary in the mix, because, "you should always have rosemary next to a barbecue."

Stepping stones and pebbles lead the way down the side of the house, which create the impression of traversing a stream, edged with *Lomandra 'tanika'*, bangalow palms and peace lilies. The path curves in a cool, shady spot with a bench. Like all the other spaces in the garden, it plays its part in expanding the living areas of the home. This place of quiet contemplation has been adapted to meet the changing needs of the family.

"The family gets great pleasure from the garden, particularly from the way the plants with their various shades of green work with the sandstone," says Hugh, and he believes the relationship between the stoic stone and flourishing plant life will continue to improve. "For me, a good garden only gets better with age."

The front entrance introduces this balance beautifully. "Because there is no view to frame, we made the plants more prominent," says Hugh. The textures used guide the eye through the layers, from the generous ginger leaves at the back, to the ethereal euphorbia 'Diamond Frost' ground cover that meets the sandstone slabs. The massive stones have a dignified presence without needing to shout, instead they seem whisper to guests: "Relax, you are in the right place." ❖
For more information about Hugh Main's landscaping projects, or to get in contact, visit www.spiritlevel.com.au. For more information about Glen Brooks, contact him at glen@brookstone.com.au.



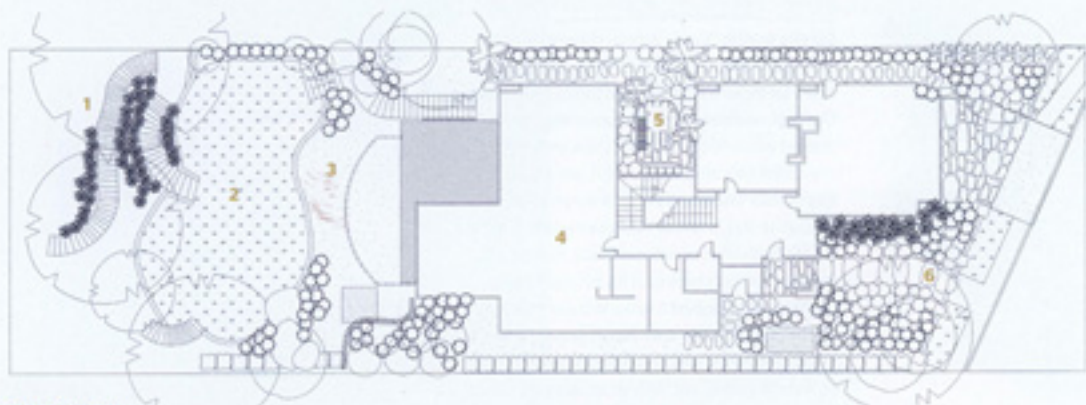
summer garden must-haves

A tree, even in the smallest garden. It will provide, "Shade, soul, sculptural elements and character," says Hugh. Choose one that suits your outdoor area's size and aesthetic.

A herb garden with some rocket. Herbs like rosemary, sage and thyme love summer, and will give any salad or barbecue a lift. Their fragrant aromas will keep the air zesty and fresh.

A table that does not need to be moved. "Nothing can survive under a table so you need to pave and make sure there is space around it to allow for spill out after the meal," says Hugh. "The table itself doesn't have to be amazing, you can just change your tablecloths depending on the occasion or mood."

Above: The sinuous form of an abstract metal sculpture from the owners' collection complements the backdrop of water. Opposite page: A meandering staircase features small breaks in the rocky incline and a chance for leafy greenery, creating a soft contrast to the hard-wearing stone.



GARDEN PLAN

1 Steps to water 2 Main lawn 3 Sandstone rock shelf 4 House 5 Courtyard 6 Front entry garden



sun-loving plants

Eureka lemon "Every garden should have this sun-loving tree. It provides shade, and most importantly, lemon for gin and tonics," says Hugh.

Coastal rosemary A hardy native that can be shaped into a hedge and will cope with hot, dry conditions and pretty much any situation.

Euphorbia 'Diamond Frost' A shrub that can be clipped to size, it flowers constantly and is great for partly shaded or full-sun areas. Its verdant foliage conveys nothing of its durable nature.

Delosperma cooperi A ground cover that will generously cascade down walls and survive the driest conditions and produce delicate daisy-like flowers. It grows best with an abundance of sun.