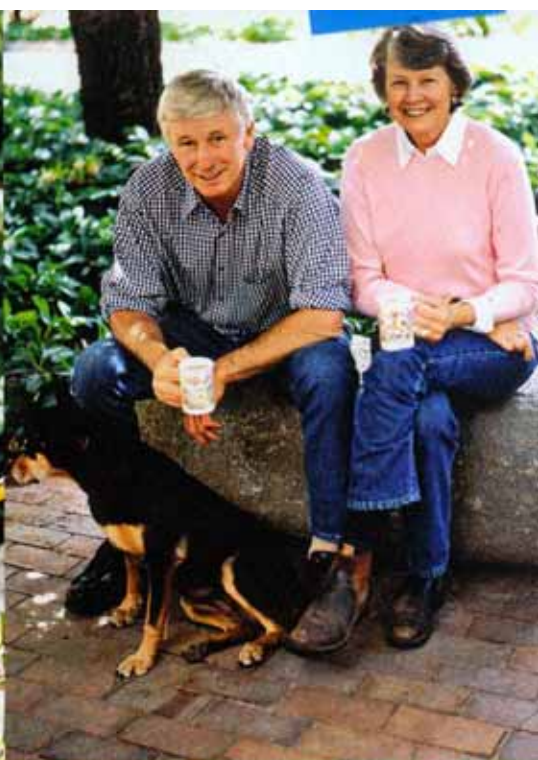


(Opposite page) Lindsay and Michael Main take a break outdoors to enjoy their garden with Chloe, the dog. **(This page)** A once barren home paddock is now a lush haven. Since the garden has had time to grow, a thick *Vitis vinifera* 'Alicante Bouchet' casts dappled summer light onto the brick-paved seating area, and hard lines are softened by such elements as *Buxus microphylla* var. *japonica* (Japanese box) trimmed into green puffballs around the pergola posts.





main attraction

GARDEN DESIGNER HUGH MAIN HAS SPENT MORE THAN TWO DECADES HELPING HIS PARENTS TURN A ONCE BARREN NORTHERN NSW PROPERTY INTO A BEAUTIFUL, PLANT-FILLED OASIS

WORDS BRENDAN MOAR PHOTOGRAPHS MICHAEL WEE

Three decades ago, the house that sits at the centre of this large rural property, 'Roseneath', just outside the northern NSW town of Glen Innes, was devoid of a garden; it looked like a 1950s suburban house plonked in the middle of a barren paddock.

Fortunately, in 1981, the house fell into good hands – Lindsay and Michael Main, the parents of Hugh Main, co-founder of Sydney-based garden design and construction firm Spirit Level. Apart from the welcome shade of a few trees, there was nothing in the way of landscaping to draw you outside. Although the couple never had a grand vision for their outdoor space, they did, says Hugh, "want to make the whole house and garden a beautiful place to live".

During Hugh's visits home to Roseneath, he and his parents would discuss garden strategies and future projects. "It happened slowly," says Hugh, "with bits added here and there as time went on." While most of the ideas coming from their son (who was gaining huge respect and experience in the world of garden design) were adopted, the practicalities of running the farm meant Lindsay and Michael had to tackle the bigger projects at their own pace.

A case in point was the large pergola that flanks the entire northern and western sides of the house and the adjoining built-up lawn area. "This was the single biggest project Mum and Dad undertook," Hugh recalls. "I drew up a bit of a sketch on the back →



"This was the single biggest project Mum and Dad undertook. I drew up a bit of a sketch on the back of an envelope. Then Dad got some of his mates together, pulled out his tractor, and they just got to it"

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Although a simple idea, building up the lawn was key to making the house sit comfortably in the wider landscape, and the pergola, now covered by a sprawling grapevine, has helped to dramatically cool the house in summer and create a much-loved and frequently used space for eating outdoors.

To the Main family, the garden's purpose was never one of horticultural preciousness but rather about enriching the experience of being outdoors. There are now three wonderful spaces that are at their best at different times of the day. As Hugh says, "You can work your way around the house. You've got a little area at the back door that's great in the mornings, an area out the front for lunch and a side garden that's perfect in the evenings."

The planting in this garden has never sought to be overly fussy or complicated. Hugh has experimented with some new plants that he's come across in his professional life, but he says tending to the planting at Roseneath over the years has been a great lesson in

hardiness. Though the summer temperatures for the area don't climb much higher than 28 degrees, cold frosty winters limit plantings to tough herbaceous perennials and cold-climate plants. "Most of the plants have come from cuttings from friends or local nurseries that grow their own stock," he says.

The profusion of planting at the rear of the house all but engulfs the small paved area and the clothesline beyond, creating an almost opposite experience to the open lawn at the front of the house. For this rear garden, the planting rationale is honest and to the point. "The plants are there because they are hardy and because they're pretty," Hugh says of his common-sense choices.

All the materials that have been used have a simple honesty. Granite boulders, unearthed when digging out dams on the farm, have been turned into seating and sculptural focal points. The clay paving is all recycled bricks and the pergola posts were sourced locally.

Today, Roseneath is a far cry from its bald beginnings. The garden areas, now that they have grown and softened, have helped transform an unprepossessing house into a charming country home. ❖



The grounds are now so well-established, it's hard to imagine how austere they once were. Plants such as honeysuckle have smothered fences (opposite page, bottom left); others, like the mounded *Viburnum tinus* frame the casual seating (opposite page, right), while *Cupressus torulosa*, behind, is an effective screening device. The seating itself is supported by naturally exfoliated granite, collected from the property's paddocks and dams. White and pale flowers are used throughout: oak-leaf hydrangeas (opposite page, top left), circular hedges of *Escallonia 'Iveyi'* beside shasta daisies (left) and leeks (below left) provide strong contrast to the green of the lawns and foliage. Perspective was added to the grassed area with an extra level, supported and accessed by railway sleepers.





HUGH MAIN

Growing up on a farm meant that working the land was a major part of Hugh Main's upbringing. But after toying with the idea of a career in agriculture, he was drawn to the intimate scale of gardening. "I'd always enjoyed working with Mum and Dad in the yard, so after uni, I thought I'd go and garden for a year," Hugh says. In the late 1980s, he landed a job working for Gaye Stanton, a doyenne of the gardening world at that time, mainly in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs. "What was supposed to last for a year took hold and became a passion," he recalls.

After completing an Associate Diploma of Horticulture at Ryde College in Sydney, Hugh went into partnership with landscape architect Sally King-Scott. In 2000, after Sally had married and moved to the country, he teamed up with Adam Jones, a UK-trained textile artist, and Spirit Level landscape design was born.

"We're trying to add as much art into our gardens as we can," says Hugh. "Design is a collaborative process, with me, Adam and Richard Belkan, a landscape architect who works with us, all having different roles."

When Hugh first started out in the industry, he found there was a definite formal European garden aesthetic that people wanted. "The style of gardens we are trying to do now is much more in tune with the broader Australian landscape," he says. "We use local materials and more native plants, so that the gardens feel right and look natural. I can't stand fake."

To see more of Spirit Level's work, visit www.spiritlevel.com.au.

The family stones

One of the garden's loveliest features is the granite boulders that have been collected on the property and dragged into position. Granite erodes slowly, resulting in a surface that only becomes smoother and more beautiful over time. The rocks' placement under trees looks so natural that Hugh says it's as if they "found their own way there".

"There are a couple of rocks we put under a plane tree as a memorial to one of my sister's horses, and we fiddled around with those for a bit until they looked right, but we weren't too precious," he explains. "The garden is all about people enjoying it – not about being showy or trying too hard."

Through the grapevine

A verandah with a pergola wraps around the northern and western sides of the house, and growing over it is an ornamental grapevine (*Vitis vinifera* 'Alicante Bouchet'). The vine provides shade in summer but, in winter, when its branches are bare, sunlight filters through to help warm up the house.



IN DETAIL

ideas from the Glen Innes garden

Perfect perennials

57

The perennials in this garden feature hardy plants, many grown from local stock, which ensures their survival in a tough climate

1. *Leucanthemum x maximum* (shasta daisies): A suckering, clump-forming plant with large, showy, white daisy flowers.
2. *Allium tuberosum* (garlic chives): As well as being grown for their edible leaves, these bulbous plants are also appreciated for their heads of small, fragrant, star-shaped white blooms.
3. *Gaura lindheimeri*: Gaura is commonly known as butterfly bush because of the way its dainty pale-pink flowers are held above the foliage on long stems, as if hovering in mid-air.
4. *Nepeta x faassenii* (catmint): A spreading groundcover to about 300mm-450mm tall and wide, with small, wrinkled, grey-green leaves and spikes of pale-lavender flowers throughout summer.



"IT IS A COUNTRYWOMAN'S GARDEN – SO THERE IS SOFTNESS AND SOME COLOUR, BUT NOTHING IS TOO INTENTIONAL. AS FAR AS THE PLANTS ARE CONCERNED, IT'S MORE ABOUT WHAT HAS SURVIVED"