



MIXED BUSINESS

This beachside garden in Sydney is great at multi-tasking – it's a kids' playground, an adult sanctuary and a beautiful piece of landscaping that flourishes in its surroundings

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A view from the front gate of this Sydney home, where silver-grey santolina, olives and coastal rosemary contrast with the glossy greens of *Metrosideros thomasi* and dwarf *Syzygium paniculatum*, with its flushes of pinkish growth. The shrubs were chosen for their staggered flowering times as well as their exceptional drought tolerance. →



Shrubs and groundcovers in the garden are clipped into rounded shapes to reflect the naturally wind-pruned plants on nearby exposed headlands. Regular maintenance reins in the more rampant plants, supplementing the work done by Mother Nature.





The poa grass and tuckeroos down by the boathouse [above] echo natural landscapes nearby. Similarly, the plantings along the wall [below right] and staircase reinforce the colours of the surrounds, even down to the blue *Senecio mandraliscae* reflecting the water.

One phone call is all it takes to get an insight into the lifestyle of the owners of this garden in Sydney's Sutherland Shire. From the moment the receiver is picked up, a gaggle of children's voices can be heard in the background – giggling and playing.

"It's a bit of a kid mecca, here," the owner says, by way of apology. "We have only got two but, most days, there are at least seven or eight children running about the place. We're the hub of the street for the younger set."

It's easy to see why. The main part of this terraced garden is a wonderful fenced-in space that's ideal for adventure. On the lower levels, the boathouse becomes a playhouse, fenced off safely from the pool and nearby beach. Even on wet days, the mostly open-plan second storey of the house looks down onto the garden, keeping the kids connected with the predominantly native plantings and the birds that live in them.

But there are no obvious signs that this is a garden designed specifically with the playful inclinations of children in mind. That very same boathouse, for example, can, with a quick tidy-up, become an elegant venue for evening cocktails. And the colour palette represents a sophisticated set of grey and blue tones, with splashes of bright flowers providing seasonal highlights. Most of the shrubs are pruned into rounded mounds, mimicking the natural wind-clipped shapes of plants on nearby beachside headlands.

"It's a garden that can live multiple lives very easily," says Hugh Main, a landscape designer from Spirit Level Designs who worked on the project.

"The clients are quite sophisticated and engaged with the space, but they also want it to work for the children and their friends – now and in the future," he adds. "So we worked together to create a design that would do that."

The original space was very plain, with a huge concrete staircase marking the main level change down the face of the sandstone cliff to the existing pool. The owner had seen another garden created by Spirit Level Designs and knew immediately that he wanted to employ the team for his own home. "Their work was so in keeping with the site," he says, "I knew it would be perfect for here, where the natural landscape is so strong." →





With access to the outdoor kitchen and boathouse, the pool garden [above] is a family retreat just metres from the house. Its relaxed plantings provide a counterpoint to the formal water feature [below] in the front garden, where Louisiana iris and waterlilies create a classic note.



Hugh's first task was to create separate areas within the garden space. Sandstone walls were put in to reflect the natural cliff, and the old steps were removed and replaced with less-obtrusive stairs that revealed the true nature of the cliff face.

Six stonemasons took three months to construct the walls, then timber decking and panelling was introduced to mix up the materials, before more sandstone, in the form of pavers, was laid to smoothly link the garden's areas to each other.

The front garden is dense and rich, giving the house a sense of privacy while offering a welcoming facade. From here, it moves to the open lawn, with a small courtyard and water feature at the back, before taking a step down to a private garden outside the parent's bedroom. "Sometimes, we just look out from our bed and grin – how good is this?" says the owner.

Down by the pool, the mood changes again, with plantings of poa grass reflecting the spinifex on nearby sand dunes and broad-leaved tuckeroos providing shade for other planting.

Despite its settled appearance, the garden is less than three years old. Hugh chose mature specimens, and the Spirit Level team provides ongoing upkeep to maintain the effect.

"It's the dream situation," says Hugh. "We have clients who are very involved and enthusiastic, so we're able to continue maturing the design to its potential. It's also allowed us to adapt when one or two things have not worked. The lawn trees were originally scribbly gums, but the neighbours complained, so we tried melaleucas, instead, but they just didn't fit. Now, we have olives there, and they're perfect."

For all the attention to detail and style, Hugh's design is not without its moments of levity. A series of tonally similar mounded planes forms a row of 'pillows' down the side of the pool steps, and outside the children's bedrooms, there are sculptural plantings just for the kids.

All of this is pitch-perfect for the family. "The garden represents everything we're about," says the owner. "Every part has its individual story, but it all comes together seamlessly."

"For us, living here is like being on holiday every day. We travel a lot, but when we come home, we take a look around and ask ourselves, 'What were we thinking, leaving this?'" ❖

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