

# shades of green

It's all about choosing the right plants for the right spots, as this thriving garden on Sydney Harbour demonstrates

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**BACK GARDEN** *Syzygium australe* 'Resilience' lilli pilli acts as the pool screening in this vibrant Sydney garden. "The space between the house and pool allowed us to include a "Sir Walter" buffalo lawn," says landscape designer Hugh Main of Spirit Level Designs. Other plantings include shell ginger, a Meyer lemon tree, gardenia, Indian hawthorn, rosemary and *Plectranthus coleoides* 'Nico'.

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**N**estled between Sydney Harbour and the Pacific Highway in Sydney's north is the suburb of Greenwich and this tranquil family home. Its surrounding garden has a romantic allure, enfolding the house with vibrant green plantings and modern outdoor areas to play, dine and swim.

"I don't feel like there are any other houses around," says owner Collette Carroll, who lives here with her husband, two children and their dog. "I get a sense we are in an enclosed green enclave."

For her newly built home, Collette knew she wanted a particular kind of garden - one to look at and enjoy. Seeing how awful the building site looked after the original place was demolished, she realised how much a garden makes a home "whole".

She called on Hugh Main from Spirit Level Designs to create this escape, and her practical brief was simple - something that was no-fuss and low on maintenance. "Getting the designer involved early is why this garden works so intelligently," says Collette. "Hugh was involved from the very start, resulting in a much better plan and an integrated garden."

As for the style, Collette wanted a minimalist look, but it had to be softer than the "rows of structured hedges" she'd seen around. She is drawn to green, white and purple, and these form the tonal palette. The result is structure and romance combined. There are different garden areas, each with its own character and atmosphere generated by the planting style. "This is a really pretty garden," says Hugh. "It's not trying to impress anybody. It's just about being beautiful and letting the plants create a mood."

And create a mood they do. The entrance garden has a dreamy appeal - a beautifully formed frangipani welcomes you at the gate, then it's an easy stroll to the front door, with the path fringed with fragrant gardenias. Yet it's also really functional. The Himalayan sandstone path and stairs lead visitors to the front door, which is tucked just out of sight on the side of the house. Straight-edged *Syzygium australe* 'Resilience' lilli pilli screening visually balances the sandstone walls, with both tempered by pretty, rounded plant forms. Hugh utilises garden elements to soften architectural lines, such as plants spilling over edges and a pebble sculpture with plump curves.

Facing west, a small succulent garden features a mix of shapes and textures. Spiky aloes contrast with smooth-edged jade plants (*Crassula ovata*), their greys and greens punctuated by a dramatic black-leaved *Aeonium*. Large pavers set amid gravel add to the



**EXTERIOR (opposite, top)** The neighbouring nature reserve frames harbour views, with curved *Agave americana variegata* in the foreground.

**BACK GARDEN (opposite, bottom)** A tuckeroo tree (*Cupaniopsis anacardioides*) stands proud on the lawn.

**FRONT GARDEN** A lilli pilli hedge borders the left of the entrance with a frangipani overhead. Blue chalk sticks creep through the front gate, while African daisy and another frangipani soften the sandstone wall. *Delosperma cooperi* ice plant spills over the balcony, with miniature jade (*Crassula ovata compacta*) behind.



textural mix and, when viewed from upstairs, make this a fun and lively area. “It is quite different from the rest of the garden,” says Collette. “It’s brilliant. I love it.” The steppers through the succulents yield access from the front to the barbecue-ready side terrace.

The backyard is the domain of pool and lawn, both simple and geometric, in keeping with the architecture. A low sandstone wall and tall lilli pilli hedge by the pool replicate these straight lines, however, the overall effect is not severe. Vibrant planted borders at the side boundaries create a lushness that relieves the minimalism – and an evergreen tuckeroo tree positioned to one side of the lawn balances the area without obscuring the pool view. Collette is so pleased Hugh suggested this addition. “It’s brought me a lot of joy,” she says. “Last year was the first time birds nested in it – we could see them from my daughter’s bedroom. It was fantastic, seeing their little beaks reaching up with their mother feeding them.”

A pool close to the boundary allows room for a lawn area. The family play with the dog here and, as they didn’t have a lawn before, Collette cherishes it. “There’s something clean and fresh about a lawn,” she says. “I love looking at it from our dining room, and also the way the beautiful sandstone wall frames it so well.”

The side borders display the exuberant foliage of shell ginger (*Alpinia zerumbet*), which masks the fence line and grows self-sufficiently. Its shell-shaped flowers add dabs of highlights, while the shiny gardenia leaves contribute definition, contrast and depth against a green backdrop. Hugh admits he’s known as the “grey-green plant guy” but, belying this, he incorporated subtle colour and flowers here as a reflection of what Collette enjoys. “She encouraged me to be bolder and braver with colour,” he says.

What has emerged is a garden bearing the owner’s character, while still catering for practicalities and featuring design details that make it easy-care, easy to use and very easy on the eye. It’s a welcome part of the “green” in Greenwich. **10**

See more of Hugh’s work at [spiritlevel.com.au](http://spiritlevel.com.au). To view more projects by the house’s architects, Corben Architects, visit [corben.com.au](http://corben.com.au).

## plant palette

Sculptural shapes meet a mix of grey and green foliage for a textural look.



Never never plant (*Ctenanthe 'Grey Star'*)

Frangipani (*Plumeria sp.*)

Silver plectranthus (*Plectranthus argentatus*)

Aloe (*Aloe sp.*)



**FRONT GARDEN (opposite)** A flourishing frangipani adds sculptural interest within the sandstone-clad garden bed. **SIDE GARDEN** The boundary fence separates a murraya hedge in the adjacent laneway from silvery *Crassula ovata* ‘Blue Bird’, and *Dymondia margaretae* groundcover.



**“The materials reference the architecture, ensuring a strong relationship between house and garden”**

HUGH MAIN, LANDSCAPE DESIGNER