





The owners of this Port Hacking riverside estate commissioned Sydney landscape designer Hugh Main from Spirit Level to transform the slope behind their home into a flourishing garden **(opposite page)**. A new path winds its way down to the water, while lawn terraces on either side provide balance and contrast to sculptural beds. On the bank, a deck and diving platform **(below)** encourage visitors to take the plunge.



# NEW HEIGHTS

SMART PLANTING ENSURES THE JOURNEY THROUGH THIS STEEP GARDEN IS AS BEAUTIFUL AS ITS RIVERSIDE DESTINATION

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Situated at the top of the hill, the house (left) takes full advantage of the view overlooking the river to the National Park (opposite page). The journey down to the water is just as spectacular. On either side of the path, mature banksias and angophoras shade sculptured hedges and sharp-leaved yuccas, *Doryanthes* and *Agaves* (detail below left). The silver, grey and olive tones of the tall eucalypts blend naturally with the scenery beyond. The sunlit swimming pool (below), with a makeshift jumping platform, is surrounded by hardwood timber to give the impression of stepping onto a boat deck.



## RATHER THAN INTRODUCE NEW WALLS WITH SHARP ANGLES THE EXISTING SANDSTONE ONES WERE REPAIRED

Gardens with spectacular views are, as a general rule, never as spectacular as their views. Just as living in the shadow of an overachieving older sibling can mean a lifetime of emotional baggage, these are gardens with inferiority complexes. Why make the effort when the view steals the show every time? Add to this a long and steeply sloping site and you have a tricky design problem on your hands. This was the dilemma faced by landscape designer Hugh Main when he was commissioned to reinvent a garden in Port Hacking, New South Wales.

Standing on a balcony at the back of the house, the views over the Hacking River and the Royal National Park are mesmerising. Visitors are easily forgiven for losing all desire to explore the rocky slope below. Thankfully, for the garden's sake, the river's lure becomes too great and in no time at all they're committed to the descent through the backyard to the water's edge. "My challenge," explains Hugh, co-owner of Spirit Level in Sydney, "was to make the journey as beautiful as the destination."

**DECIDING FACTOR** There's a certain irony that exists in garden design. People with level outdoor spaces seek to elevate areas, while those with sloping landscapes often want the reverse. The latter is definitely more challenging. To create flat areas on a steep gradient means building logistically challenging retaining walls and steps. For this garden, designers had suggested grand staircases, imposing walls and rigid planting schemes. In contrast, Hugh proposed a layout that was sensitive to the surrounding Australian landscape.

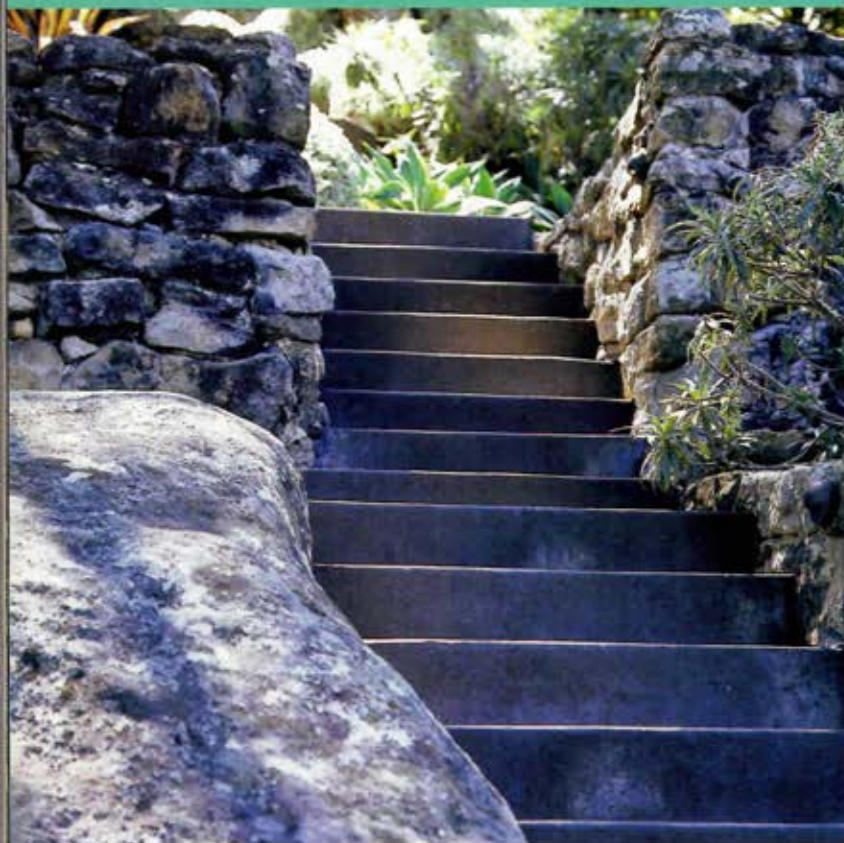
**INITIAL STEPS** As it stood, the backyard was a steep sandy slope with native trees, crumbling sandstone walls and a treacherous track down to the river. Without forcing it into a new direction, Hugh worked with its unrealised strengths. "A rough track that had been selected through years of use was upgraded," he explains. "And rather than introduce new walls with sharp angles and straight lines, the existing sandstone ones were repaired. Their patina blends perfectly with the sandstone boulders scattered around the garden." →







Offering safe descent to the water, simple concrete steps (below) were installed as visual contrast to the naturally aged rock and sandstone retaining walls. Huge boulders are scattered throughout the garden, their form reflected by fast-growing *Helichrysum* (detail below right) and *Westringia*. Clipped regularly to maintain organic shape (right), these hedging plants are coaxed to grow around tree trunks. Tough, drought-tolerant shrubs thrive in the dry conditions and are an example of water-smart planting with designer appeal.



## PLANTS GROWN IN SIMILAR CLIMATES WERE CHOSEN SO THAT THE GARDEN DOESN'T REQUIRE IRRIGATION

**COLOUR CONNECTION** Beyond the confines of the garden, the Royal National Park surrounds are unmistakably Australian. Hugh chose shrubs that would blend with the signature tones of this neighbouring landscape, focusing on silvers, greys, olives and browns. Combinations of native and Mediterranean plants were selected to complement the eucalypts, angophoras and banksias already established on the site. It's this attention to detail that allows the garden to sit harmoniously within its wider surroundings.

**NATURAL FORMS** Foliage colour was an important component of the planting scheme, but it's the sculptured forms that take this garden to the next level. *Westringia*, *Helichrysum*, *Teucrium*, *Rhaphiolepis*, *Elaeagnus* and *Artemisia* have been clipped and coaxed to wrap and wind their way around pathways, tree trunks and sandstone boulders. Their smooth, organic shapes offset the bold, sharper architectural lines of *Agaves*, *Doryanthes*, *Cordylines*, *Echiums* and yuccas.

**SURVIVING DRY SPELLS** In the midst of unrelenting drought, the garden slope has flourished and is living proof low-water plants can be attractive. Created just three years ago, it gives the impression of being a mature garden, due in part to the existing trees, lichen-covered rocks and rapid growth of the new drought-tolerant plants. Hugh explains that the key to its success is in the pruning. If the hedges were left to grow out of control, the effect would be undermined and the design would lose its edge.

**THE RESULT** A garden that had a tough time competing with its neighbouring elements has come into its own. Due to its extensive reference to the National Park, it has overcome any previous feelings of inadequacy. Hugh has ensured the trip from the balcony to the river's edge now has a lot more on offer – a stunning beginning, a glorious middle and a beautiful end. ✦

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