



*dream*  
**DESIGN**

words **DEBBIE McDONALD** photography **JASON BUSCH**

Given the freedom to create something unusual, a designer uses striking elements to rejuvenate the grounds of an impressive Spanish-style home, overlooking Sydney Harbour

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As a garden designer, being told by a client that there's no brief and the design is all up to your imagination may sound like a dream job, but how do you find out what your client really wants? Fortunately for Peter Fudge, he had come across clients who hankered for something exciting, so the challenge was on.

Trish and John Lloyd have lived in a Spanish Mission-style house in Sydney's Clifton Gardens for more than 20 years. The garden had become overgrown, with large cypresses, camellias and rhaps palms obscuring the house and blocking sunlight. So, in June 2012, they invited Peter to visit.

"They wanted to do something a bit strange, a bit different," says Peter. "They live in this awesome house, and wanted the garden to be just as exciting, so the brief was quite open. You don't usually get an opportunity like that. I was able to use plants I don't often use, in a way that I don't often use them."

## genius design

The first thing you notice, walking up to the terracotta-painted house, is a most magnificent prickly pear beside the front doorway. Trish believes it is at least 60 years old, and it was one of the few plants that had to be retained. Peter took this ancient cactus as his inspiration. "The wonderful prickly pear set the scene, so I took it as my lead for the style of the garden," he says. "I could describe it as a prehistoric garden. It reminds me of Jurassic Park."

Where there was once lawn in the front garden, gravel now acts as a path, weed suppressor and mulch. Plants are not massed in garden beds – instead, they rise up through the gravel. They have been chosen for their sculptural forms,



## GREAT GARDENS

### POINT OF VIEW

**Clockwise from left**  
There are spectacular water views from the back garden; spiky flax and agave contrast with a neatly clipped box hedge and rounded groundcovers; a stone patio provides a sun trap; grasses and low-growing succulents spill over the sandstone steps.



### HEART OF GOLD

**Previous page** This giant prickly pear is at least 60 years old, and holds special memories for the family. It's one of the few original plants retained in the garden; the pool house has been designed to blend with the rustic feel of the house.

such as three *Dracaena draco* trees, which will eventually form dramatic shapes in keeping with the style of the house. An olive tree is being left unpruned to find its own silhouette, and smaller succulents, such as 'Silver Spoons', spill over the new sandstone retaining wall.

The front garden, however, gives no hint of the drama that unfolds in the back garden. Curved garden beds wrap around a central lawn, with a pool and pool house to the right, and there are courtyards to sit in on either side of the house. The garden is spectacular, with fantastically shaped plants repeated to give unity and encourage your eye to move through the garden – rather like 'joining the dots'.

Then you look up, and there's that view. It's hard to know which is better – looking across the harbour, or looking through the tops of the nearby Sydney red gums (*Angophora costata*). The view doesn't detract from the garden, and vice versa; they seamlessly enhance one another, which is part of the genius of this garden design. This is helped by Trish and John's understanding of how plants can work with, rather ▶



**PERFECT BLEND**  
Left Plants such as succulents and grasses match well with the Spanish Mission-style house. Below There's seating throughout the garden, including this outdoor dining setting.



"The front garden gives no hint of the drama that unfolds in the back garden"

than detract from, the beauty of the surroundings. "We don't mind views filtered by plants, so we didn't want plants cut to the ground," says Trish. Peter also had a hand in this. "He's really captured the surrounding landscape. When you're in the heart of the garden and you can't see any other houses, it's like the bush is all part of our garden."

**winning combinations**

Although the effect is dramatic, the number of plant species is quite constrained. Species needed to thrive in this warm, sunny, coastal microclimate with no irrigation. Possums had decimated the camellias and maples in the original garden, so they wanted plants that were unpalatable to possums.

There's a mix of succulents and plants with the same 'feel'. Softer-looking succulents, such as aloe, kalanchoe and blue chalkstick, are mixed with dramatic, spiky agave, yucca and beschoneria, while olives, flax, grasses and palms provide contrasting sculptural shapes. Flowers are not absent, though, with *Rhaphiolepis* 'Snow Maiden' covered in white in spring, white bougainvillea trained up wires against walls, and the evergreen magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Teddy Bear') providing scented flowers in summer. Some lower-growing plants such as 'Silver Spoons' kalanchoe and raphiolepis are planted in drifts and are being clipped to form 'clouds'.

There's no obvious symmetry. Instead, Peter has repeated striking combinations of plants to unify the design. Upright, brown-leafed flax (*Phormium* 'Chief') is partnered with rounded, green raphiolepis and *Crassula* 'Coral'; furry, grey *Kalanchoe baharensis* looks fabulous next to spiky, green

Mexican lily (*Bescheronia yuccoides*); and huge sword-like leaves of century plant (*Agave americana*) are softened by frothy kentia palms (*Howea forestiana*).

**building the garden**

It's hard to believe this garden was only planted three years ago. The exceptional growth is mainly down to soil preparation. Several cubic metres of soil were removed to rid the garden of onion weed. Masses of cow manure was added and used as mulch to enrich the soil, and this is topped up each year. After some handwatering when the garden was young, the plants now thrive simply on natural rainfall, allowing the Lloyds to travel without the worry of their garden dying.

In the front, constructing the gravel garden was a bigger job. Peter explains: "First I decided exactly where I wanted the garden beds, then we laid a 10cm-thick layer of road base everywhere else. It sets like concrete, so that it's firm to walk on. The aim is to keep weeds out, and it helps the 1cm pea gravel stick to the surface. You don't want the gravel too thick - 5cm is ideal, otherwise it's like walking in snow."

The majority of the maintenance is up to Trish and John. "The garden is low maintenance," he agrees. "You can go for months without doing anything, then spring comes and there's lots to do. We potter the rest of the time, and just love it."

When asked if he has any future plans for the garden, Peter replies, "Not really. It's almost the perfect garden - it's nice to be there. It went in well, and they're such nice people. They wanted to do something a bit different, so it was great in every way." Sounds like a dream job.



#1

**design focus**

Take your cue from the many design elements that make this garden work

**1 Embrace the borrowed landscape** by keeping plants low enough that surrounding trees can still be seen, and appear to be part of the garden. Repeating shapes, such as these spiky flax and cordyline, also draws your eye through the garden and out to the bush.

**2 A clipped hedge** glows golden-green in the sunshine, providing a wonderful contrast in form, texture and colour to the surrounding plants.

**3 Tough plants**, such as olive, agave and cordyline, suit the warm, sunny microclimate, thrive without irrigation and don't require much maintenance to look good. When selecting plants, don't be seduced by pretty flowers without researching whether the plant suits your climate, as well as your own needs.

**4 Leaf colours** provide interest, even when nothing is in flower. Look at your hardscaping elements and choose plants to contrast or harmonise with them. Here, the colours of the sandstone wall are reflected in the grey leaves of *Kalanchoe* 'Silver Spoons' and the spiky, brown-leafed flax (*Phormium* 'Chief') behind, while the olives and echium bring grey-green into the palette.



## design focus

#2

### Cloudy, with a chance of meatballs: how to use this particular style of pruning to make your trees unique

A cloud-pruned conifer flanks either side of the pool house, framing the entrance with living sculptures. The Hollywood juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* 'Kaizuka') is ideal for this style of pruning, as it grows 3m tall with angular, slightly twisted branches. You can buy plants already shaped from specialist nurseries. To create your own, select branches to keep, spaced evenly around the tree with one at the top. Next, shape the 'clouds' by removing foliage close to the trunk, and clipping foliage at the ends of the branches into balls. This takes time and patience, as it's best to cut off little bits, stand back to check how you're going, then take off a little more.