



Outside the box

REIMAGINING A TRICKY SPACE

Sometimes it's the challenges that spark the most successful outcomes. The owners of this hilltop property in Sydney's eastern suburbs wanted a resort-style garden as part of their major renovation – but where to begin?

"The back garden was mostly paving on a slab out from the house and around the old pool, with little in the way of gardens," says landscaper Oliver Sizeland. "Derelict stairs led down to an unused lower area where there was nothing of interest – everyone was struggling with connecting the two spaces." He convinced the client it was worth spending the money to create something beautiful and usable, designing a curved staircase and terraced gardens that link the two areas. The sweeping, circular form, with a firepit at its centre, effectively became the main feature and doubled the size of the rear garden.

Construction took three months, beginning in January 2016 when the property was still a building site. Using Sydney sandstone to clad the walls was a natural choice; tucked against the curve of the wall, a floating timber bench seat provides the couple and their two boys with a private space to enjoy the fire.

The tiered garden beds are generous, offering a close-up view of the plants as you descend to the lower level. "I wanted it to feel like walking through greenery," says Sizeland, director of Growing Rooms landscape design. He used low maintenance plants chosen for their sculptural qualities and foliage colours, mixing blue chalksticks (*Senecio mandraliscae*) with burgundy flax (*Phormium 'Bronze Warrior'*) and green *Myoporum parvifolium*, punctuated by the rosette shapes of *Agave attenuata*. Two dragon's blood trees (*Dracaena*





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Lush: the terraced rear garden and (left) front yard

draco) will make an even bigger statement as they grow. Slender weaver's bamboo, a 7m-tall clumping variety, replaced a row of ageing junipers along the rear boundary. "The clients were worried about the loss of privacy initially, but it very quickly becomes a lush green screen," says Sizeland.

In contrast to the elevated rear garden, which has views to the city, the front garden is below street level and relatively shady. Growing Rooms restored the stone boundary wall and put in lush foliage plants such as giant Madonna lily (*Spathiphyllum 'Sensation'*), tree ferns, *Rhapis* palms, black elephant's ears (*Colocasia 'Black Magic'*), *Aspidistra* and *Philodendron 'Rojo Congo'*. "The bold textures give a bit of impact and are suited to the low light," Sizeland explains. Native violet forms a thick carpet around the path of large sandstone steppers.

Sizeland, who came to Australia from London nearly 20 years ago, likes his company to "do the whole package" from concept to design, construction and maintenance. "I'm really happy with how this project turned out and the clients are thrilled," he says. "It seems to get a bit better every time I visit."

Q&A



HELEN YOUNG

What annuals could I plant, ideally from seed, for winter and spring colour among my summer perennials?

Wilson Oh, Adelaide

It's getting late but you can still sow columbines, calendulas, cornflowers, forget-me-nots, lobelia, pansies, poppies, alyssum, snapdragons, sweet peas and nasturtiums. If you sow into punnets of seed-raising mix and keep moist in a warm spot, they'll germinate faster than in the ground.

I like to collect seeds from flowers, herbs and vegetables. What's their average shelf life?

Anne, Adelaide

Saving seeds is fun and saves money, although not all will produce plants like the parents. Seeds from F1 hybrids won't grow "true to form", nor open-pollinated plants that were cross-pollinated. How long seeds last depends on the plant variety and treatment. If dried and stored in a moisture-proof container in a cool, dark place, seeds may last up to six years. Viability (the ability to produce vigorous seedlings) declines before germination rates decline.

Could I pot up the tomato and pumpkin seedlings that self-sowed in my garden to plant out next spring?

Belinda Kouvelis, Sydney

It's worth trying, if you can keep them warm over winter. In Brisbane, many people grow their tomatoes in winter. Start them in small pots and pot up as needed. They need sun and shelter; adjacent brick walls will help hold heat overnight.



Send your questions to: helenyoungtwig@gmail.com or Helen Young, PO Box 3098, Willoughby North, NSW 2068. Website: helenyoung.com.au. The best question for June wins a pair of stylish, waterproof and lined Muck Boots worth \$129.95 from swannndri.com.au.