

fresh approach

Starting with an enticing entry, this is clearly a garden with a difference, having grown to meet the diverse needs of its owners

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THIS PAGE The path to the front door is lined with aluminium arbours and the paving is non-slip Technifirma Metalbark from Eco Outdoor, softened by kidney weed (*Dichondra repens*) and native viola (*Viola hederacea*) between the slabs. Along the side are lady palm (*Rhapis excelsa*), tractor seat plant (*Ligularia reniformis* 'Designer Verde'), jade plant (*Crassula* 'Max Cook') and silver spoons (*Kalanchoe* 'Silver Spoons'). **OPPOSITE** A planter at the entry houses a twin-flowered agave (*Agave geminiflora*), silver falls (*Dichondra* 'Silver Falls') and snake plant (*Sansevieria trifasciata* 'Green'). House colour, Dulux Monument.



Landscape designer Oliver Sizeland of Growing Rooms really knows how to make an entrance. Fringed with dense foliage and framed in a sculptural arbour resembling a guard of honour, the garden entry to this house in Sydney's east makes its owners and their visitors feel instantly at home. The all-embracing structure and massive pavers create an alluring sense of arrival.

Before he began work on the garden in early 2020, however, the resident family and their many visitors would have felt like anything but VIPs. They were met by a slab of concrete inside the gate, with a plain path leading to the front door at the side of the Tuscan-style house. And then a sloping, patchy lawn at the rear, with a paved area for playing hoops. The saving grace was its mature trees, including two frangipanis and two magnolias, which Oliver was keen to include in his new plan.

Owners Jason and Samantha bought the house in 2009, when their two children, Brendan, now 19, and Jade, 17, were pre-schoolers. "We loved the oversized backyard," says Jason. "It was great for soccer or netball, but as the children grew older, the shortcomings became starkly apparent. It was bland and poorly connected to the house, with the rear patio cut off from the garden." So, there was nothing to draw them out there.

In the brief to Oliver, each of the four sought different things from their new garden. "The kids needed an outdoor entertaining room to have their mates around without being on top of each other, while Samantha wanted a pool," says Jason. "I enjoy gardening, so I wanted beautiful, sculptural plants – not too formal." The couple chose Growing Rooms "because it's plant-driven. I like the way Oliver arranges plants, highlighting them with lighting and hardscaping."

Oliver has created three zones – front, rear and side gardens – with the latter serving as much more than a mere transition between the other two. Initially, the main thrust of the makeover was the rear, he says, with its pool and nearby cabana equipped with bathroom and kitchen facilities, for relaxing with friends.

To remedy the slope at the rear and increase its functionality, Oliver created levels, with broad steps flowing down enticingly from the terrace to a grassed level, more steps taking the owners down to the pool and a second grassed area, and a third set of steps leading to the cabana at the lowest level. Timber-lookalike porcelain tiles were chosen for beside the pool and in the cabana. "Timber next to a pool is a no-go and these will last forever," he says. Enclosing the pool is a freeform limestone

THIS PAGE (top) Beside the new pool are more aluminium arbours and a glass fence to preserve the sense of openness. Technifirma Metalbark paving from Eco Outdoor was used as pool coping and stepping stones in the grassed area. (Right) In the cabana, a deep overhang ensures protection from wild weather. Tide Isle coffee table from GlobeWest. Rug and yellow cushion from Weaver Green; other cushions from Drift Home and Living. Artwork by Miranda Russell, Studio Gallery. **OPPOSITE** Above the pool, the feature wall is Random Ashlar 'Coolum' stone from Eco Outdoor. Pool clad in Lisa mosaics from Ezarri. Behind is a custom concrete bench with Beefeater barbecue. Magnolia trees (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Teddy Bear') soar above a buxus hedge.



BEFORE



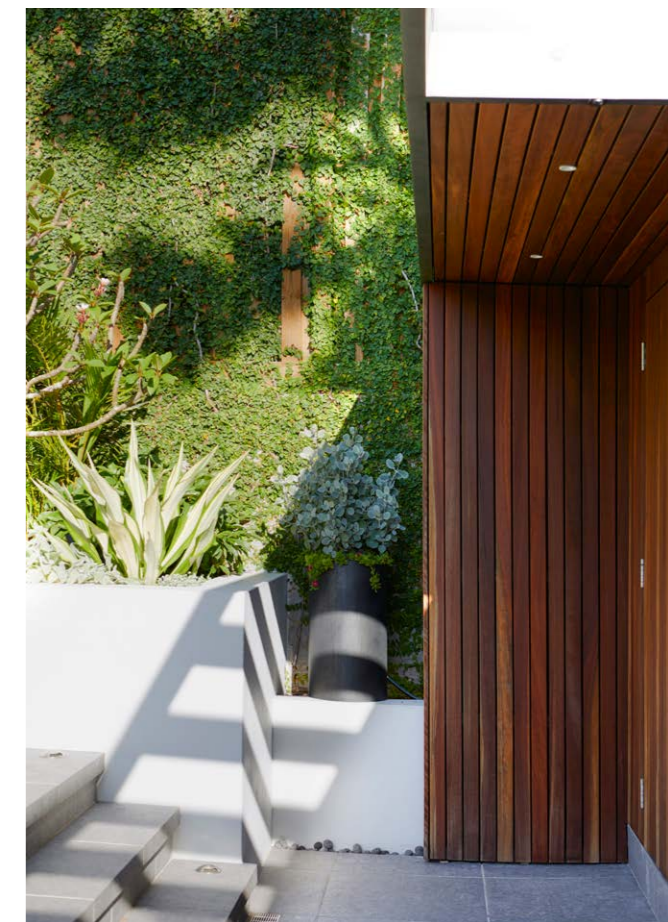
feature wall that echoes the brown and grey palette and creates textural interest. On the opposite side, brick and concrete planters contain an array of hardy plants.

Teddy Bear magnolias occupy the planters beside the pool (avoid deciduous trees near pools, Oliver advises, as leaf fall can be a pool owner's nightmare). On the opposite side, the raised planters include a diverse mix of natives and exotics, including native rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa* 'Jervis Gem'), jade plant (*Crassula undulatifolia* 'Max Cook'), she-oak (*Casuarina glauca* 'Cousin It'), kalanchoe (*Kalanchoe orygalis* 'Silver Spoons') and tractor seat plant (*Ligularia reniformis*), selected for their dramatic foliage contrasts – both in shape and colour – as well as hardiness, which is great for a site exposed to sun and wind.

At the front, Oliver replaced a forbidding solid-masonry fence with a more-welcoming slatted option, teamed with a glass-covered gatehouse – the hard- and softscaping complementing the chunky lines of the home. “The lush garden offsets the architecture, and I cut garden beds to create a nicer journey to the front door,” he says. Two *Michelia alba* trees stand sentry beside the gatehouse, alleviating the many straight lines.


Strikingly, the side passageway features an arbour leading to the entry, “creating a sense of transition and framing the view. We came up with the idea of a pergola beside the pool first, then it just showballed,” says Oliver. “The arbour and pergola introduce height and scale, and that subtle repetition creates a solid connection between the two gardens.” At the entry, he has included massive pavers interplanted with kidney weed (*Dichondra repens*) and native violet (*Viola hederacea*) ground cover and fringed with large-leaved plants in contrasting foliage, such as tractor seat plant (*Ligularia reniformis*) and broadleaf lady palm (*Rhapis excelsa*). Counter-intuitively perhaps, Oliver has not festooned the arbour with trailing plants, opting to leave it plain and sculptural.

ABOVE At the bottom of the garden, the cabana's kitchenette and dining area is an entertainer's dream. Grey Technifirma Metalbark paving from Eco Outdoor shares the floor with Timber Look tiles from Amber. Bar fridge by Rhino. Quay ceramic dining table, King Living. Catalina dining chairs, Coco Republic. Plantings include frangipani, silver spoons, Mauritius hemp and lamb's ear. **OPPOSITE** The before shots beautifully illustrate the plain, bare canvas that landscape designer Oliver Sizeland was presented with. All he could see were garden spaces that were packed with potential.



After the sun has gone down, the garden takes on a magical ambience, starting with the entry, where Oliver has directed spots up the arbour so the sense of arrival is even more dramatic. A profusion of LEDs, including pathway lights, step lights, spotlights and ambient lighting, are peppered front and back, allowing the family to savour the garden day and night.

“I love the entry and how the paving is broken up with the arbour and lush plants. And the open cabana, which, like the arbour, is a clean sculptural element. I am incredibly proud of this garden,” Oliver admits.

“The backyard now gets an enormous amount of use, the pool in summer, the spa in winter, and the cabana is an outside room that we use year-round,” says Jason. “It was a stroke of genius reconfiguring those stairs to the back garden, making them oversized and leading directly off the terrace. We couldn’t even see the garden from the house before. Now the steps draw us outside and we can’t keep away.” 

Growing Rooms is at growingrooms.com.au and [@growingrooms](https://www.instagram.com/growingrooms)

THIS PAGE (clockwise from top left) The front garden, showing a white timber bin store in the background. Entry to the bathroom in the pool cabana, screened by spotted gum. Steps leading from the rear garden to the house, also made from Technifirma Metalbark, with integrated lighting.

OPPOSITE View from the pool cabana towards the custom concrete bench that houses a Beefeater barbecue. Plantings include crepe myrtle, lady palm, silver lady fern, tractor seat plant and peperomia. Plants in the pot, which is from Garden Life, include twin-flowered agave and baby rose.



plant palette

Layering lush yet hardy species has created inviting pathways from front to back



- 1** Tractor seat plant
(*Ligularia reniformis*
'Designer Verde')
- 2** Silver falls
(*Dichondra repens* 'Silver Falls')
- 3** Lamb's ear
(*Stachys byzantina*
'Silver Carpet')
- 4** Dwarf native frangipani
(*Hymenosporum flavum*
'Gold Nugget')
- 5** Lady palm
(*Rhapis excelsa*)
- 6** Silver spoons
(*Kalanchoe* 'Silver Spoons')



The side path leading to the entry is lined with arbours and garden lights. Its Technifirma Metalbark paving is from Eco Outdoor, softened by interplanting in kidney weed (*Dichondra repens*) and native viola (*Viola hederacea*). Planting at both sides of the path includes lady palm (*Rhapis excelsa*), tractor seat plant (*Ligularia reniformis* 'Designer Verde') and jade plant (*Crassula* 'Max Cook').