

## WOMEN IN DESIGN

# Fiona Brockhoff

Immersing herself in nature provides daily inspiration for this landscape designer.

STORY ELIZABETH WILSON / PHOTOGRAPHY MARTINA GEMMOLA

There are perhaps a handful of contemporary Australian landscape designers with an international profile: Fiona Brockhoff is one of them. Her garden, Karkalla, in Sorrento, on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, has featured in publications around the world. "This garden is special because it represents my philosophy on gardening," says Fiona. Located just 150m from Bass Strait, the property is buffeted by strong winds and has sandy, nutrient-poor soils. Yet Fiona has created a beautiful, resilient garden using local indigenous plants and sustainable gardening techniques. "It's about gardening closely with nature and responding carefully to the site conditions," she says.

Fiona grew up in a modernist home surrounded by architectural plants: *Echtums*, yuccas and cordylines. She studied at the Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture and worked for landscape designers here and in the UK, including the famed John Brookes, before launching Fiona Brockhoff Design in 1997. Today she works throughout southeastern Australia.

Fiona would love to see more female garden designers and horticulturists. "The work is multi-faceted: it incorporates a love of design, a passion for plants, spending time outdoors and working closely with people to help them design an important part of their lives," she says. "It's also an occupation that can be juggled with raising a family." ▶

▶ TO SEE MORE OF FIONA'S DAY, HEAD TO [homestolove.com.au/houseandgarden](http://homestolove.com.au/houseandgarden).

Fiona Brockhoff Design,  
[fionabrockhoffdesign.com](http://fionabrockhoffdesign.com)

## H&G INSIDER

Fiona's partner is David Swann, a civil engineer whose landscape construction company builds many of her designs. Together with their daughters Ella, 17, and Yasmin, 14, they divide their time between homes in Melbourne and Sorrento. The Sorrento house, built by the couple in 1994, is set on 1ha, half of which is managed coastal indigenous bushland, the other half a vineyard, orchard and veggie garden. Bordered by the Mornington Peninsula National Park, the home is solar-powered with composting toilets and recycled greywater. "We try to tread lightly on the earth," says Fiona.

7.30am

### MORNING WALK

"When I'm in Sorrento, my day typically starts with walking the dogs," says Fiona, seen here with Jack Russells Bonnie and Bruce. Bushwalking is also a regular family pastime. "I love observing plants in their natural habitat."

9am

### HARVESTING HOMEGROWN VEGIES

Ella (left) and Yasmin help Fiona harvest vegies for dinner. The 150m<sup>2</sup> veggie patch contains raised concrete troughs filled with herbs, kale, rocket, lettuces, peppers and eggplant. Dahlias are the only flower Fiona grows. "They're outrageously bright and gorgeous."



*'I aim to match plants to the environment rather than changing the environment to suit the plants.'*



12pm

### ITALI.CO CAFE, SORRENTO PIER

After dropping Yasmin to the pier, Fiona grabs a rare coffee. "I tend to have coffee at home, so this is a treat."



10am

### PLANTING EXPERIMENT

"This is a new species I've been trialling," says Fiona, planting a ribbon of *Diets* 'White Tiger' at the side of her home, where the soil is very exposed and nutrient-poor. "So far, it's proving to be a very versatile little plant and the bonus is a white flower in summer." ▶

## H&G INSIDER

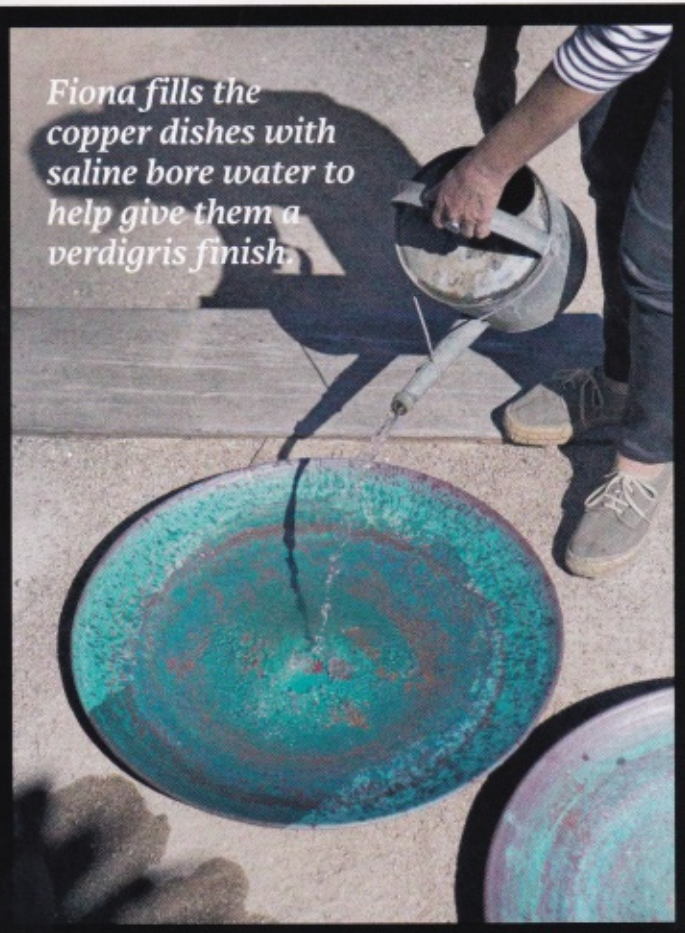


### 1pm

#### ANTIPODES BOOKSHOP & GALLERY, SORRENTO

Fiona drops by her local bookstore/gallery to check stock of her birdbath designs sold there. "I couldn't find beautiful, simple birdbaths, so I designed some myself," she says. Made from copper, Fiona designs the birdbaths in a range of styles including flowers, toadstools and sleek dishes.

Fiona fills the copper dishes with saline bore water to help give them a verdigris finish.



### 4pm

#### SITE VISIT

Fiona meets David at a property where they're building a garden. "There are always construction details to discuss, such as whether the levels are accurately represented on the plan."

### 3pm

#### TIME FOR A WALK

With her daughters home for school holidays, Fiona divides her time between family and work. Here, she takes a mid-afternoon walk with Ella on their gravel driveway.

### 2pm

#### BACK IN HER HOME OFFICE

Fiona hand draws the concept design for each garden before a colleague converts it into a digital format. Outside the office window is Fiona's favourite tree, a large *Banksia integrifolia*. "Its bark is beautiful, it always has a flower or a cone on display and birds love it."

