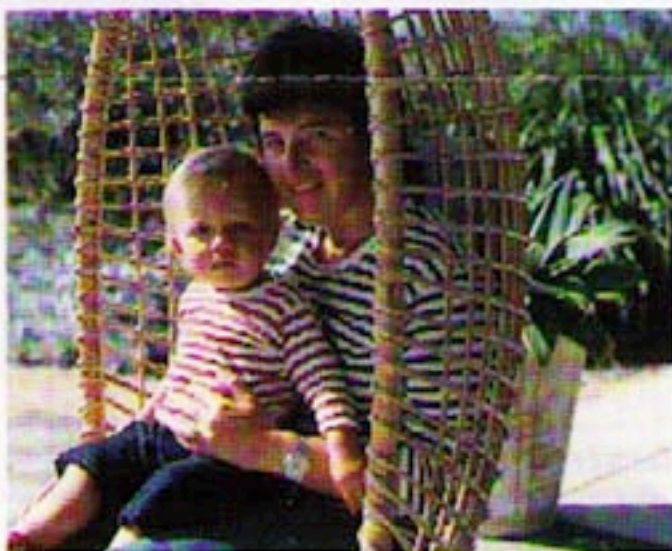


CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS IN A GARDEN DOWN UNDER

A talented couple's ingenious use of local materials, and planting that includes many indigenous species, has created a contemporary garden which feels timeless. ANNE LATREILLE visits just as the Christmas tree—a pyramid of beachcombed flip-flops—is put on display.



1—Fiona Brockhoff and her daughter Ella

SEASIDE gardens in Victoria, Australia's southernmost mainland state, can attract extreme conditions—violent south-westerly storms; hot, drying northerlies. Living near the ocean is dramatic, says landscape designer Fiona Brockhoff (Fig 1). 'The weather comes and goes quickly. Rain only lasts a day, then it's sunny again; and the skies are fantastic.'

For Miss Brockhoff and her partner David Swann, in their Arizona-style house near the seaside village of Sorrento and a stone's throw from stormy Bass Strait, the challenging environment enhances garden-making. In terms of colours, form, plants and building materials, their garden performs happily in any weather. This is because they don't believe in fighting the climate and the topography. 'You must garden with the prevailing conditions, not against them,' they say.

Together, this pair (he is an engineer with a bent for hard landscaping) has created on one hectare an evocative, productive living space of great beauty. So calmly does their garden rest in its environment

(Facing page) 2—Beside the vineyard: *Lomandra longifolia*, *Phormium Kiwi Dazzler* and *Cotyledon orbiculata*



3—On the front terrace, resilient plants include *Cotyledon orbiculata* Silver Wave. The view from the deck chairs is of Port Phillip Bay, with Arthur's Seat beyond

RETURN OF THE NATIVES

An eclectic blend of indigenous and coast-tolerant plants is grown here, including succulents with notable form or colour. Smaller Australian plants include the rush-like *Lomandra longifolia*; *Correa alba*; native hibiscus, *Alyogyne huegelii* West Coast Gem; *Banksia integrifolia*; coastal daisy, *Oleandra collaris*; coast everlasting, *Ozothamnus tuberosus*; silvery cushion bush, *Leucophyta brownii*; and spear grass, *Stipa stipoides* (see Fig 5 for the last two). Conservation was a motive in planting them, as some of these species are facing local extinction.

This garden looks uncontrived, an impression that belies a certain amount of work behind the scenes. Miss Brockhoff constantly assesses the way different plants perform, and currently is experimenting with topiary on native plants. Not for her the traditional, close-clipped *Buxus* species—she is using Australian sea box, *Alyxia buxifolia*, which she describes as 'dark and handsome, hard to propagate but it rockets once it's in the ground'. She is also encouraging allocasuarinas (sheoaks) and the local moonah, *Melaleuca lanceolata*, into balls and other interesting shapes.



4—An outdoor Christmas tree of beachcombed flip-flops behind native hibiscus

that you feel it has always been there, even though some of the plants are exotic imports.

It is a *mélange* of gentle hues: silver, grey, cream, buff, soft pink, burgundy, myriad greens and a flash of yellow. Garden plants, including many indigenous species, grow in controlled mounds, tufts and low cushions, beneath over-arching native trees at the periphery, particularly the coast tea-tree, *Leptospermum laevigatum*. Specimen plants make an occasional statement, but foliage and texture are paramount. There are almost no flowers, and you will not find a green lawn, although Miss Brockhoff is considering introducing golden, feathery wallaby grass, *Danthonia* sp, which is native to the area.

The circuit of paths is made from shell grit or fine gravel, steps are of weathered timber, walls of limestone. Pieces of salvaged driftwood blend with the arching, furrowed trunks of the senescent tea-tree: scattered shells and jewelled pieces of water-smoothed glass spangle the gravel. The visitor might disturb a spiny anteater venturing in from the national park that lies between the garden and the sea, or a blue-tongued lizard drinking from a mussel shell.

The entrance is sensational. A simple wire gate swings off stylish timber pillars infilled with pieces of limestone. The long, narrow drive, with low native shrubs encroaching, is gun-barrel straight, with roller-coaster rises and falls.

Not only are these bumps traffic-calming devices, they also move the visitor through the landscape to create a real sense of arrival. The gravelled forecourt presents a range of options. Straight ahead, to the small pond? Hard left to the vineyard? Or half-left to the front terrace (Fig 3), through an inviting opening in tall stone walls? David Swann has faced the walls with random pieces of creamy white local limestone. They define the garden space, anchor a sitting bench on the sunny



5—The rear courtyard is planted with plants that are indigenous to the area: silvery grey cushion bush, *Leucophyta brownii*, and spear grass, *Stipa stipoides*

terrace, and run right into the house to form a spine that ties it to the garden.

Somehow, all the colours look right when paths are surfaced with gravel from a local quarry. And walls of local stone really set off indigenous plants. Miss Brockhoff and Mr Swann have taken this a step further by using timber reclaimed from local piers for steps and retaining walls. When piers are being renovated, Mr Swann gets the old beams, seasoned soft silver by the

SUCCULENT DISPLAYS

Despite her attractive arrangement of small potted succulents on a bench against a limestone wall (Fig 9), Miss Brockhoff prefers to use larger succulents, in the open ground and as part of a designed planting scheme. She likes aeoniums, such as black-flowered *Aeonium arboreum* Zwartkop, and tall *A. arboreum* var *Atropurpureum*; agaves, such as *Agave attenuata*; and silver 'elephant's ears', *Cotyledon orbiculata*, and the cultivar Silver Wave. 'Some designers use succulents *en masse*, but I like them as feature plants. They make a strong statement among the fine leaves of the indigenous plants, and they stand up well to the echiums. I love their silhouettes. And, of course, they are hardy.'

action of waves and sand. These are between 7–20ft long, 12in wide and 6in deep. No shaping is required, just cutting to length with a chainsaw. He likes their versatility, their ability to blend with gravels and low plants such as woolly thyme, their rustic texture and clean lines, and the way they look instantly at home in the landscape.

With the design and construction of their U-shaped house (Fig 6), Miss Brockhoff and Mr Swann aimed for a 1960s mood and also for energy efficiency: water heating is through solar panels; run-off is stored in tanks; lavatories are self-composting. This careful husbanding of resources helps them to irrigate and fertilise soils that are poor in nutrients, in the vegetable garden, the orchard, and the vineyard (Fig 2) of *pinot noir* grapes. However, in the garden proper, plants are not welcome if they need leeding or watering after the first summer.

'If a plant doesn't survive, I pull it out,' Miss Brockhoff says. 'I have a passion for hibiscus but it was no good here. I thought cannas would work, but they didn't.' She will cut off flowerheads if they don't fit in. As a designer, she thinks constantly of the bigger picture. She lived and worked for several years in the country and this, she says, gave her a real feeling for the openness of Australia. 'We've got beautiful views here and if you put on too much colour, then it conflicts. I grow dahlias, but only in the vegetable garden, which is hidden away.'



6—The design of the house evokes a 1960s mood. In the foreground, an aeonium and *Phormium tenax* Purpureum backed by an olive tree



7—On the front terrace, a *pukumani* burial post of the Tiwi people emerges from behind a clump of *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*



8—*Koonya Beach Columns*, 1997, by the New Zealand sculptor Chris Booth, surrounded by the coast tea tree, *Leptospermum laevigatum*



9—A collection of potted succulents bakes in the sun against a wall made of local limestone. *Phormium* Kiwi Dazzler is visible behind

I do let the echiums flower at the end of winter when it's a bit bleak.'

The garden is punctuated by sculpture. A *pukumani* burial post of the Tiwi people—*pukumani* refers to the state of bereavement for the person who has died and the accompanying ceremonies—gives height to the front terrace (Fig 7). At the back, slender stone pillars by New Zealand sculptor Chris Booth, named *Koonya Beach Columns* (Fig 8) tower mysteriously above the coast tea-tree. Mr Swann's timber-edged

vegetable garden is put together like a fine piece of inlaid furniture; Miss Brockhoff's stylish shallow bird-baths of spun copper nestle among grasses and mounded shrubs. The family's outdoor Christmas tree is a tall, colourful pyramid of abandoned flip-flops (Fig 4) collected on beaches in the north of Australia.

It is paradoxical that in this contemporary yet timeless garden, whose sustainable philosophy is surely the way of the future, you are not conscious of the presence

of the designers, even though you find yourself marvelling at their caring and expert handiwork. It is a work in progress; Miss Brockhoff now finds herself wanting to simplify in places, pare it back. 'I know it's a cliché,' she says, 'but I'm sure that in garden design, less is more.'

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