

# RETURN OF THE NATIVES

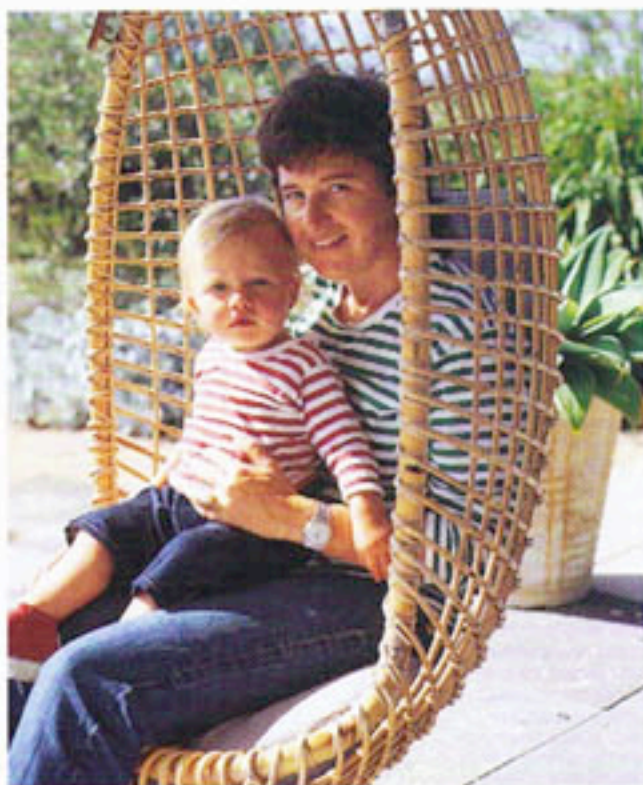
On a challenging site beside the sea, a family garden has emerged that makes full use of the local materials and plants that were to hand. ANNE LATREILLE is captivated by its creators' skilful blend of style and substance.

**S**EASIDE 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. '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. 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 talented pair (he is an engineer with a bent for hard landscaping) have created on one hectare an evocative, productive living space of great beauty. So calmly does their garden rest in its environment that you feel it has always been there.

It is a *mélange* of gentle hues: silver, grey, cream, buff, soft pink, burgundy, myriad greens, a flash of yellow. Garden



Fiona Brockhoff and daughter Ella relax in their climate-friendly 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 won't find a green lawn, although Miss Brockhoff is considering

introducing golden, feathery wallaby grass, *Danthonia* sp, indigenous 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 and nestle among shrubs.

The entrance is stunning. A simple wire gate swings off stylish timber pillars infilled with pieces of limestone. The long narrow drive is gun-barrel straight, with roller-coaster rises and falls. Not only are these 'bumps' traffic-calming devices, they 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, 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 bench on the sunny terrace, and run right into the house to tie it to the garden.

Somehow all the colours look right when paths are surfaced with gravel from a local quarry. Walls of local stone really set off indigenous plants. Miss Brockhoff



David Swann's landscaping with reclaimed timber is exemplified in these steps



The 1960s-style energy-efficient home is glimpsed beyond walls of local limestone



Indigenous plants in the courtyard include *Leucophyta brownii* and *Stipa stipoides*

## AT HOME BESIDE THE SEA

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 heugelii* West Coast Gem, *Banksia integrifolia*, coastal daisy *Olearia axillaris*, silvery cushion bush *Leucophyta brownii*, coast everlasting *Ozothamnus turbinatus* and spear-grass *Stipa stipoides*. Conservation was a motive in planting them, as some species face local extinction.

This garden looks uncontrived, an impression that belies a certain amount of manipulation and work behind the scenes. Miss Brockhoff constantly assesses the way different plants perform, and presently is experimenting with topiary on native plants. Not for her the traditional close clipped *Buxus* species—she's 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 melaleucas, allocasuarinas (she-oaks) and the local moonah, *Melaleuca lanceolata*, into balls and other interesting shapes.

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 action of waves and sand. 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, and their rustic texture.

With the design and construction of their U-shaped house, Brockhoff and Swann aimed for a 60s 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

## SUCCULENT DISPLAYS

Despite her attractive arrangement of small potted succulents on a bench against a limestone wall, Miss Brockhoff prefers to use larger succulents in the open ground and as part of a designed planting scheme. She likes aeoniums, such as the black-flowered *Aeonium arboreum* Zwartzkop, and the tall *A. arboreum* var *Atropurpureum*; and agaves such as *Agave attenuata*. Also 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.'

them to irrigate and fertilise the vegetable garden, orchard, and vineyard of *pinot noir* grapes. However, in the garden proper, plants aren't welcome if they require supplementary feeding, or any watering after the first summer.

'If a plant doesn't survive I pull it out', says Miss Brockhoff. '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.

The garden is punctuated by sculpture. A Tiwi burial pole gives height to the front courtyard. At the back, slender stone pillars by sculptor Chris Booth, named 'Koonya Beach Columns', tower mysteriously above the tea tree. David'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, weathered to verdigris, nestle among grasses and mounded shrubs. The outdoor Christmas tree is a tall, colourful pyramid of abandoned flip-flops collected on beaches.

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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(Facing page) 'Koonya Beach Columns' surrounded by *Leptospermum laevigatum*

(Opposite) *Phormium* Kiwi Dazzler and *Cotyledon orbiculata* Silver Wave flourish in this garden close to the sea