



# Local heroes

A focus on plants from the Mornington Peninsula produced a garden alive with form and texture

>> Words and photography Tony Fawcett

**S**ue Leeming has experienced most types of gardens, but when she and her husband, Warick, built a striking new home along the Portsea coast three years ago, the time was right to go indigenous.

The contemporary house had been ingeniously designed to blend with the low sweep of the land, so it made sense to landscape with the plants that grow best on the Mornington Peninsula.

A trained horticulturist, Sue wanted something that was immediately welcoming, so friends could drop in and feel at home.

The fact Sue and Warick had lived next door to their new house for 20 years helped immensely. Sue knew the soil, how to use Mediterranean species to cope with dry conditions and salt-laden air and how to protect plants from the icy winds that sometimes whip in from the south.

But what she didn't know quite enough about was designing with, and using, indigenous plants. She needn't have worried. Among her

friends are landscape designer Fiona Brockhoff, and botanist Jane Burke, two people who probably know more than any others about designing indigenous gardens on the Mornington Peninsula. These two Sorrento gardeners have enviable reputations for their work along the peninsula, and Sue knew their advice would be sound.

Today that faith has been repaid, with a wonderfully relaxed garden. Local tea-tree has been encouraged to thrive. Indigenous moonah (*Melaleuca lanceolata*) is used widely, coastal rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*) and pomaderris are clipped, knobby club rush is allowed to fall on to paths and flaxes and native grasses abound.

From a deck, Sue can gaze out over a swimming pool, and a panorama of diverse tone and texture. Yet at ground level the house and garden make minimal footprint on the surroundings.

But it hasn't all been easy gardening. At first Sue was thrown by the scale of the project (the land is 4ha), and the fact it took at least half a dozen on-site visits with Fiona before plans were fully laid.

"Fiona has just been so good in the whole process," Sue says. "I knew I wanted to do mass plantings, but it has been hard to stay disciplined. Every time I'd think 'perhaps I'll have a little bit of that as well' she would stop me."

A favourite part of the garden for Sue is a steep bank beside the pool that has been retained with a tapestry of Australian and New Zealand plants, including *westringia* and clipped moonah.

Around the pool is a cleverly designed weathered-timber picket fence. Timbers from skin-drying racks from an abattoir in the Western District have been used vertically to provide screening for the house.

On the north side is a raised garden, which supplies the couple's salad vegetables. Sue grows roses in a rear corner where they don't disrupt the garden's overall theme. And she included a sweep of cooling lawn, to set off the native grasses and wonderfully gnarled tea-tree beyond.

Sue's garden (49 Duffy St, Portsea) is on show as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme this weekend, January 14 and 15, the same weekend her talented advisers, Fiona (Karkalla - 10 Keating Ave, Sorrento), and Jane (Offshore - enter from 10 Keating Ave, Sorrento), open their gardens. All three gardens will be open from 10am to 4.30pm.

Sue hopes visitors will be able to see how the definition and textures of Australian plants can be used to great effect.

"This is not a flower garden," she explains. "You have got to accept there are no flowers. It's something you view and appreciate from afar."

And it's something Sue Leeming loves dearly.



#### Beautiful blend

The house and garden both merge with the landscape (above left)

#### Lawn of the land

A patch of lawn lies among the indigenous plants (top)

#### Pave the way

Crazy paving runs like a river through the garden (above)

#### Pick of the Peninsula

Sue Leeming's garden shows the simple, rugged beauty of indigenous plants (below)

#### Beautiful banks

Australian and New Zealand natives cascade towards the pool (below left)

