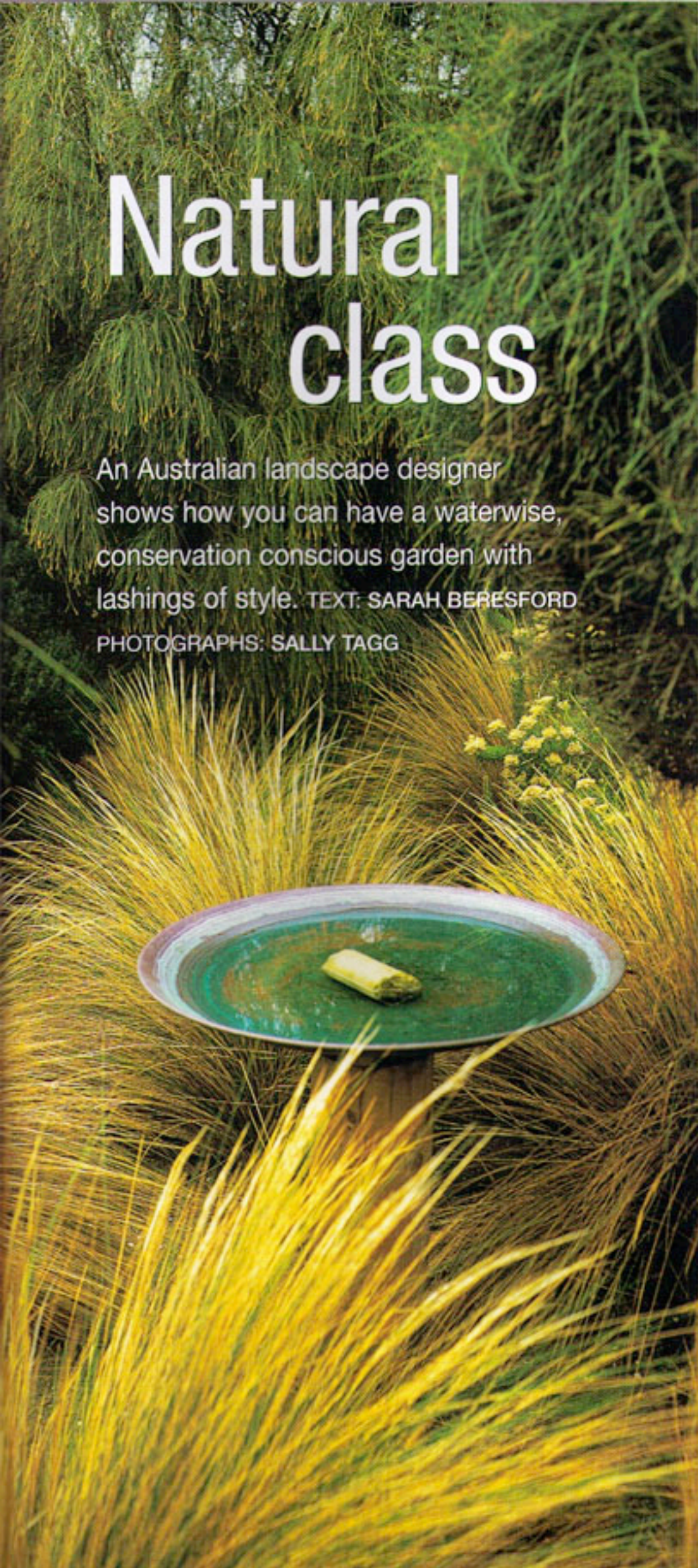


Natural class

An Australian landscape designer shows how you can have a waterwise, conservation conscious garden with lashings of style. TEXT: SARAH BERESFORD
PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY TAGG



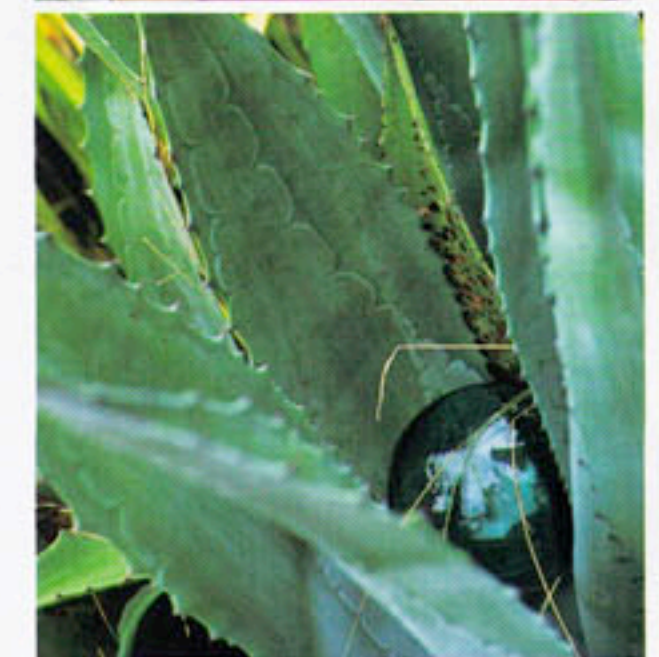
BY DESIGN

Based in Sorrento, near Melbourne, landscape designer Fiona Brockhoff claims that her garden is “partly experimental and accidental”. If this is the case I’d like a head-on collision of the kind that results in a garden like Karkalla.

The rolling golden dunes of Mornington Peninsula are beautiful and the views from the garden are spectacular, but it’s not the most hospitable environment in which to grow plants. These challenges, however, have been partly responsible for the evolution of the garden.

“I’d designed other coastal gardens but I wasn’t really prepared for how exposed the site is so it’s been a process of putting some plants in and seeing how they do. I’ve always been a fan of flaxes and succulents which are ideally suited to the harsh conditions here.

Left: One of Fiona’s birdbaths among *Poa cita*. Above: A Tiwi Pukamani pole is a feature of the north terrace.



"In fact I'm furious they've become popular because now my gardens look more fashionable," she says, laughing. "I also use lots of Australian natives that are indigenous to this coastal area such as she-oaks (*Allocasuarina verticillata*). Natives got a bit of a bad rep after they were used in landscaping in the '70s. A lot of them have small leaves and they need to be clipped to give them form. They team well with phormiums, cordylines, aeoniums – the bold form is a counterpoint."

Fiona has a few axioms which shape her work and are showcased in the use of plants in her own garden – achieve a lot with a little, don't water

– it just increases maintenance tasks like clipping, don't get stuck on being a purist . . .

"In city gardens you're constrained by surrounding structures, but country gardens should be a response to the landscape. We back onto a National Park and I've worked to blur the boundary between the wider landscape and the garden even though I've got a mixture of natives and exotics. I've taken lots of cues in terms of shapes, colours and textures from the wider landscape.

"I think this garden works because it's not really a seasonal garden, it's foliage based. Flowers sometimes interrupt the

Opposite: Fiona uses many plants indigenous to the SE Australian coast. She says using plants indigenous to your area is key to achieving easy results. The clipped she-oaks keep their form for about six years when they "fall apart" and have to be replaced. *Arostipa stipoides* are shown off at their blonde bombshell best and silver clumps of *Correa alba* highlight the greens.

Left: Fiona makes the bird baths which dot the garden. She intended the garden to be a habitat corridor for birds and water is available in the garden for them all year round.

Above, top: Fiona Brockhoff

Above: *Agave americana* with an old glass buoy.



GOOD EARNERS

Fiona believes in hard working plants that contribute form and style while being undemanding. Her favourites include: *Melaleuca lanceolata*, *Astrostipa stipoides*, *Correa alba*, *Cotyledon orbiculata*, *Euphorbia characias* ssp. *wulfenii*, *Phormium tenax* 'Purpureum'.

Below, from top: *Astrostipa stipoides* and *Correa alba*, *Ficinia nodosa* (knobby club rush), *Cotyledon orbiculata*.



flow; they stop the eye when you should be looking out to the wider landscape – I'm more inclined to chop them off than anything else," she laughs.

The garden is not just an exercise in aesthetics – it works brilliantly on a practical level as a living space for a family with young children. Outside the back door a small kitchen garden is planted with aromatic plants. Woolly thyme (*Thymus lanuginosus*) is a fragrant filler of paving gaps and at the side of the house an outdoor shower is ready to sluice sandy bodies.

Gravel walkways lead to an extensive organic vegie garden in raised beds and an orchard irrigated with grey water is a veritable fruit bowl with

apricot, nectarine, apple, cherry and quince trees. The residents of the chook house, shared with neighbours, gobble up snails, slugs and household refuse and produce eggs and fertiliser.

Still, that's not say that Fiona is content. Like all good gardeners she's feeling a bit restless. "I'm going to pull out everything from the front terrace. I'm ready for a few changes."

Great. It'll give me an excuse to visit again and see the next incarnation. ■

A limestone fascia wall encloses one side of the north terrace and planting in gravel features some of Fiona's "hardworking" plants (see box).

NATURAL MYSTIC

Fiona's partner David Swann is a landscape contractor and built the garden and limestone walls. He has used local and recycled materials wherever possible and these help to make many areas of the garden feel as if they've occurred naturally. Local granitic gravel and shellgrit are used on paths which gives them a casual, beachy feel.

Right: Artwork in the garden also feels very much a part of the wider landscape. Hidden in a corner of the garden, a sculpture by New Zealander Chris Booth, *Koonya Beach Columns*, 1991, could be mistaken for a fantastic natural landform. "I didn't want it to leap out at you," says Fiona about deciding on a site for the sculpture. "It looms up as you walk through the garden when you're least expecting it – there's a sense of discovery when you happen across it."

Below: Beams from a nearby pier which was being renovated have been used for retaining walls, paths and raised beds in the vegie garden, which is surrounded by fencing made from stakes used for hop growing.

