



BESIDE THE SEA

This innovative modern garden celebrates the Australian dream of sea, sun and sand

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN PATRICK



IS THERE A TRUE AUSTRALIAN STYLE when it comes to gardening? If there is, Fiona Brockhoff and David Swann's garden, 'Karkalla' at Sorrento may just fit the bill. It's certainly appropriate for its place and time.

Here, plants grow without chemicals and with little supplementary water and the garden blends into its setting in a way that makes identification of the boundary between the garden and the surrounding windblown coastal vegetation nearly impossible. What's more, it's low maintenance yet meets the demands of a young, active family.

Local materials predominate, with an emphasis on timber, limestone and a locally quarried gravel complete with shell-grit. Timber used for steps and retaining walls is recycled from an old pier. With its inground salt and rusted iron bolts, it reinforces the strong sense of place that pervades the garden.

DESIGN LAB

Fiona and David work as garden designers from an office attached to their home, so the garden is an invaluable laboratory for their work: a place to grow plants and try out design ideas.

Planting here is not about flower colour but subtle plays of foliage texture and colour that ensure the garden maintains interest at all times of the year. Much of this planting is native but exotics that suit the environment do creep in, including the sumptuously lime-green-flowered euphorbia (*Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*) and pride of Madeira (*Echium candicans*) on the upper terrace. Both provide remarkable foliage contributions augmented by flower, yet the flower in both cases is as notable for form as it is for colour.

At the house entrance, native *Lomandra longifolia* is enhanced by ricepaper

These pages: 1. Clipped she-oaks make unusual topiarised trees in this predominantly native garden. 2. Designed with minimal water use, the garden features gravelled surfaces interspersed with clumps of native grasses to replace lawns. 3. The water tank stands proudly in the garden. Next pages: 4. These stone columns (Koonya Beach Columns by Chris Booth) stand like totem poles in the landscape. 5. Although mainly featuring native plants, garden owner Fiona Brockhoff has included some introduced plants that need little watering, including these pots of succulents at the front door. 6. The pyramid is made from discarded thongs collected on trips around Australia. 7. & 8. Limestone walling and clumps of lomandra and ricepaper plant make a strong statement at the front entrance. A pair of Tiwi Pukamani poles stand either side of the front door.



plant (*Tetrapanax papyrifer*), agave (*Agave americana*) and sea lavender (*Limonium perezii*). Because of the proximity of the garden to the Mornington Peninsula National Park, Fiona works hard to ensure none of her chosen introduced plants becomes a weed; indeed, she spends considerable time weeding beyond the border of her garden into the park to prevent the invasion of plants like agapanthus, a major weed of this area.

Native plantings dominate the Western Port Bay side of the garden, but not everything here is predictable; for example, the moonah (*Melaleuca lanceolata*) and she-oaks (*Allocasuarina verticillata*) have been clipped into topiary shapes, a common practice with introduced species but rarely encountered with native plants. Here's living proof that, providing sensible selection criteria are met, native plants can be as adaptable in garden use as introduced varieties.

Grasses make a considerable contribution in the form of the spear grass (*Austrostipa stipoides*) and the knotted club rush (*Isolepis nodosa*). Here, too, is a fine collection of native plants, well-used for maximum effect, including the cushion bush (*Leucophyta brownii*) with sea box (*Alyxia buxifolia*), the west coast form of the delightful native hibiscus (*Alyogyne huegelii*), coast banksia (*Banksia integrifolia*), coast daisy (*Olearia axillaris*) and coast everlasting (*Ozothamnus turbinatus*).

This garden design reflects the principle of creating spatial responses to support garden functions. Either side of the house, attractive terraces spread from sliding doors so that indoor and outdoor life blur. Creation of the terraces allows views across the adjacent landscape to coastal areas in both directions. Practical spaces such as vegetable garden, vineyard, herb garden and chicken yard are below the general view so that all contribute to the life of the garden but don't intrude on the visual feast.

Other spaces in the garden include a service area where pier timbers are interplanted with thyme to give a delightful perfume when trampled, a gravel terrace that forms a bocce court.

QUIRKY FEATURES

Above all, the quality most apparent in this garden is the innate style of its owners. Over the years, pieces have been added to the garden to create whimsy, humour and a superb style. There's a spontaneity about the placement of many of these pieces that's absent from gardens created around formal box and fountains. Indeed, Fiona will move some pieces to meet a particular mood or need. Thus the thong pyramid, home to thongs David and Fiona collected on a trip around Australia, can be located where it's needed. Bows for planting also move to offer interest as required.

Other pieces are fixed, though. The Tiwi Pukamani pole used in funeral services in Bathurst and Melville Islands provides a focus to the front terrace. The superb Koonya Beach Columns by New Zealand sculptor Chris Booth was commissioned for the garden in 1997. In it five columns of stone stand gaunt and upright, perfect in scale and feel for their setting, viewed as they are against a backdrop of Bass Strait and surrounding bushland.

The most notable aspect of this garden is that its owners have used imagination, creativity and humour to personalise their environment rather than use pre-manufactured elements that have become so fashionable these days. This gives the garden a welcome sense of individuality and uniqueness.

'Karkalla' reflects an approach to gardening that's likely to be seen more often in Australian gardens. It reflects a sophisticated use of our native plants and landscapes that augurs well for Australian garden design. **OS**

PROJECT DETAILS

Landscape design: Fiona Brockhoff Landscape Design, (03) 5984 4282

