

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW

Sea change

Holly Kerr Forsyth visits two Mornington gardens that don't battle the elements

SITED within the sea scent of the place the locals call "the back beach" on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula are two gardens that don't impose upon the indigenous bushland, but rather are part of the integrity of the surrounding environment.

Fiona Brockhoff is a landscape designer, who, with Jane Burke, a botanist specialising in coastal re-vegetation, and two other partners, creates restful gardens that don't battle the elements.

The visitor to their adjoining gardens gets a sense that they are completely at home with the landscape within which they are working. Burke's gravel garden is planted with stipas, with the local grass *Poa poiformis* var. *ramifer*, and the cushion bush (*Leucophyta brownii*). The cushion bush has specific needs — good ventilation, humidity and salt — that are met on this site.

"Living on the back beach, we get constant wave-born mists that carry nutrients," says Burke. "These plants are used to this treatment, as well as sand abrasion, and have scales and other adaptations.

"You have to be very careful when you're selecting plants; you can't hop around in the genus. Each species is specific to an area. *Stipa stipoides*, which grows on the steep dunes around here, is fantastic in form and colour, and it's not too vigorous."

So how can the layperson, wherever they live, acquire the knowledge to create an environmentally appropriate garden? Burke advises contacting Greening Australia. "They'll have lists of indigenous growers; but also keep your eyes open.

"If you see something that grows beautifully around where you live, get a piece of it and show it to the nursery. They'll say, 'Oh you live there, do you? I have just the provenance for you.' And buy in tube size because the plants don't transplant easily."

Burke laments the lack of choice offered by some nurseries and the limited choice available to some regeneration schemes. "As soon as the public sees a failure, they say, 'Oh, coastal plants, how hideous; they're all dead.' But with knowledge of the local ecological conditions and with the correct selection, you can get great effects. Like any garden, it has to be maintained — nothing is maintenance-free."

The designers' approach is also practical. "People can be critical if you are not totally indigenous," says Brockhoff. "But we use many West Australian plants."

She loves the native hibiscus, *Alyogyne huegelii*. "It grows by the saltwater streams in Western Australia, so it's salt-tolerant. It has a different leaf colour and tone, which is useful, and a lilac flower. You have to look at plants from a design sense and select them for their form and leaf colour."

Brockhoff designs with the environment, rather than against it. "It doesn't make a lot of sense to me to truck out all your soil, bring in new, foreign soil with



Coast: A thong tree shows life is not always serious in Fiona Brockhoff's garden, above; Jane Burke's gravel garden, left; in Brockhoff's garden, local gravel plays host to *Hebe 'Autumn Glory'*, *Isolepis nodosa* and the grey-foliaged *Cotyledon undulata*, below left; an alternative to English box, *Alyxia buxifolia*, below right

Pictures: Holly Kerr Forsyth

a different set of weeds, plant iceberg roses and box hedges, and pour on the water and the money. Better to work with what you've got and select appropriate plants."

When looking at a new site, Brockhoff first walks around the area to see what's growing well. "Look at what's there — remove coastal weeds to discover the remnant vegetation."

Her design will depend on the client: "Whether it's a weekender, whether

they're elderly, whether they have children, the style of the house — but most of these plants can be used formally or informally."

The sea box *Alyxia buxifolia* is a favourite plant. "It's like English box, but more handsome. It hasn't been used extensively and we are still trialling it."

Brockhoff maintains that there are alternatives to hedging, however. "You can use brush fencing. Or combinations of shrubs and trees will give an informal boundary that may be more relevant to the house."

In Brockhoff's garden, the view is crucial; she wouldn't plant red geraniums, which would distract the eye. "Imposing your design is the wrong word," she says. "It's about marrying the elements, working with what's here. And it's a huge relief to know you don't have to go out and mow the lawns every week. If I am putting energy into the garden it is into the productive areas, the orchard or the vegie garden."

Holly Kerr Forsyth is author of *The Garden Lover's Guide to Australia* and *The Australian Country Woman's Garden*.

The regular columns by Phillip Adams and Jane Fraser appear this week on page 8 inside Review

HOW TO MAKE THIS GARDEN WORK

- Fiona Brockhoff recommends the coast daisy (*Olearia axelaris*), *Correa reflexa* or *Melaleuca lanceolata* for hedging over the popular *Westringia fruticosa*, which doesn't form a dense enough canopy.
- Jane Burke prunes most shrubs in her gravel garden to maintain shape and proportion, and selectively removes more vigorous plants every two years.
- Fiona Brockhoff Landscape Design: (03) 5984 4282.