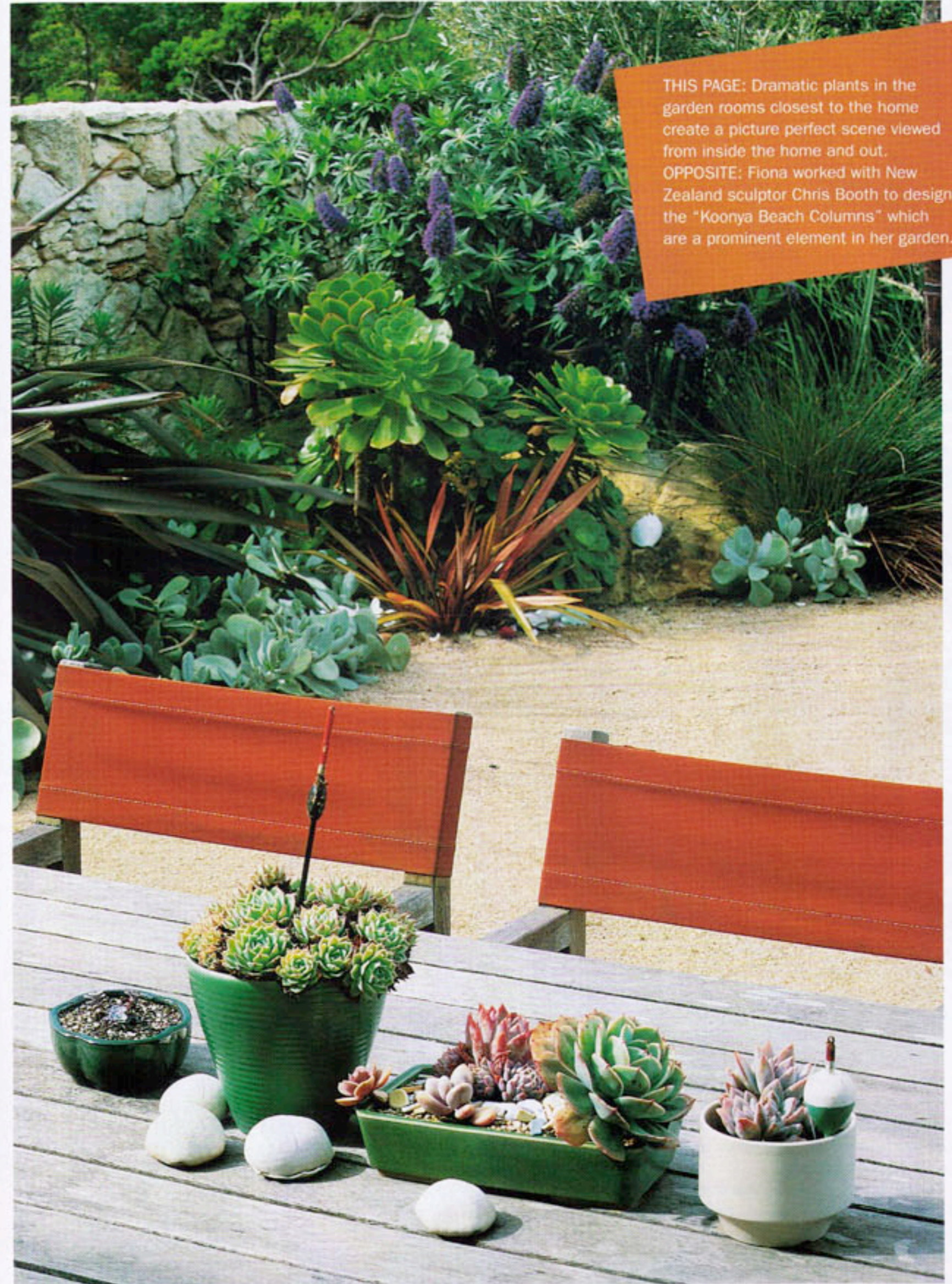
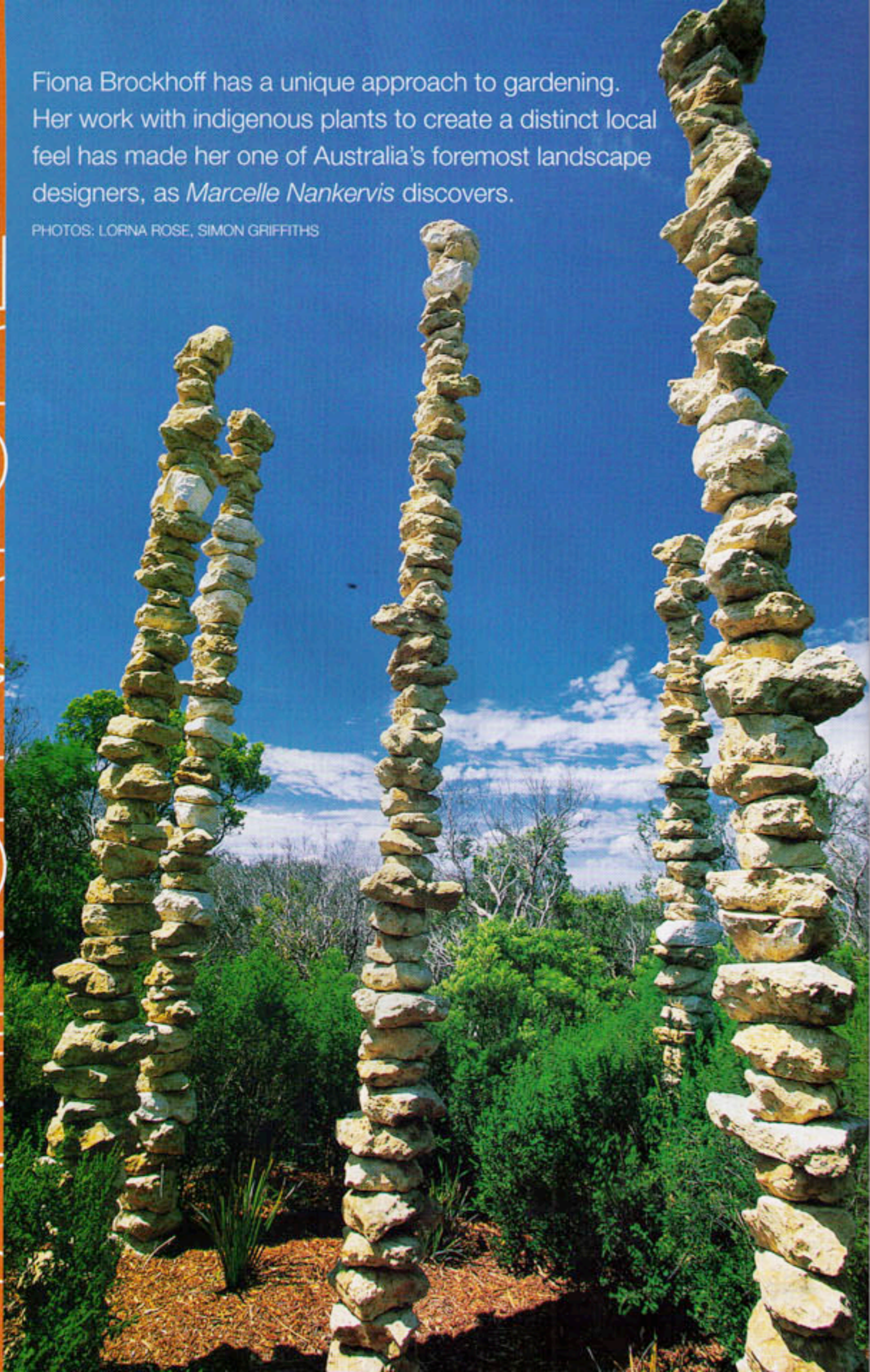


Fiona Brockhoff has a unique approach to gardening. Her work with indigenous plants to create a distinct local feel has made her one of Australia's foremost landscape designers, as *Marcelle Nankervis* discovers.

PHOTOS: LORNA ROSE, SIMON GRIFFITHS

TAMING NATURE



THIS PAGE: Dramatic plants in the garden rooms closest to the home create a picture perfect scene viewed from inside the home and out.  
OPPOSITE: Fiona worked with New Zealand sculptor Chris Booth to design the "Koonya Beach Columns" which are a prominent element in her garden.

Gardens in the city, country and along the coast offer very different challenges. Fiona Brockhoff has encountered them all and it is through this diversity of experience that she has devised her own garden philosophy and exceptional style.

Standard casuarinas, neatly manicured balls of correa, westringia and melaleuca, together with untamed grasses and sprawling succulents, are just some of the characteristics which make Fiona's designs so popular.

Pruned natives? But nobody trims and shapes natives. Well, Fiona does and it is this creativity that makes her landscapes so unique.

It is through experimentation that she has discovered which native plants respond well to pruning and which do not.

Learning from experience, Fiona has given native plants a look and structure that has previously made so many exotics desirable inclusions in the garden. This has opened up a whole new palate of plants that are perfectly suited to Australian gardens.

Her own garden, Karkalla, provides the perfect environment for experimentation and, while not all of Fiona's methods are successful, the triumphs have encouraged her to experiment with an even broader cross-section of plants. This is something she encourages gardeners throughout Australia to try.

"I want to dispel those myths about native plants and the negative stigma which was applied to them back in the '60s and '70s," says Fiona. "They are adaptable, do well in our climate and can look just as formal as introduced plants. Natives just need to be given a new perspective."

### The designer's garden

While her own garden is designed to meet the needs of her family, incorporating many different garden rooms, Fiona still follows her heart when it comes to the plants which are to be included in her domain.

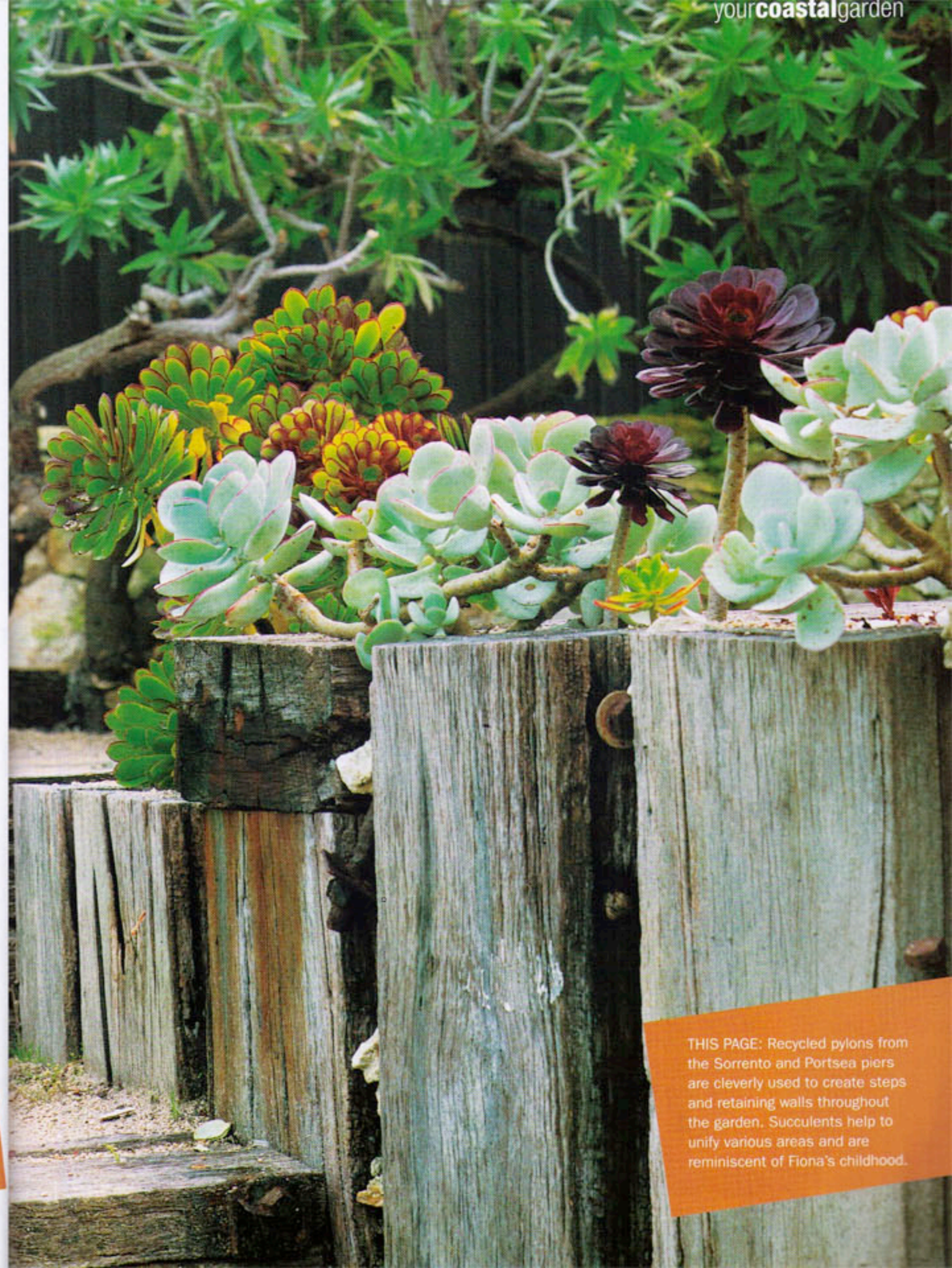
Her garden is not only beautiful but also practical. The areas closest to their home are the most picturesque. These are the parts used for entertaining and outdoor living and contain the most aesthetic plants including olives, banksia, melaleuca, spear grass and succulents.

As you move further away from the house, the garden becomes more productive and follows strong permaculture philosophies. Fiona and her partner David Swann have a small collection of Pinot Noir vines for producing their own wine each year. There is also a chook shed, herb garden, vegetable garden and orchard, where they grow everything from banana leaves used for cooking, to peaches, nectarines and citrus. They even have a composting toilet.

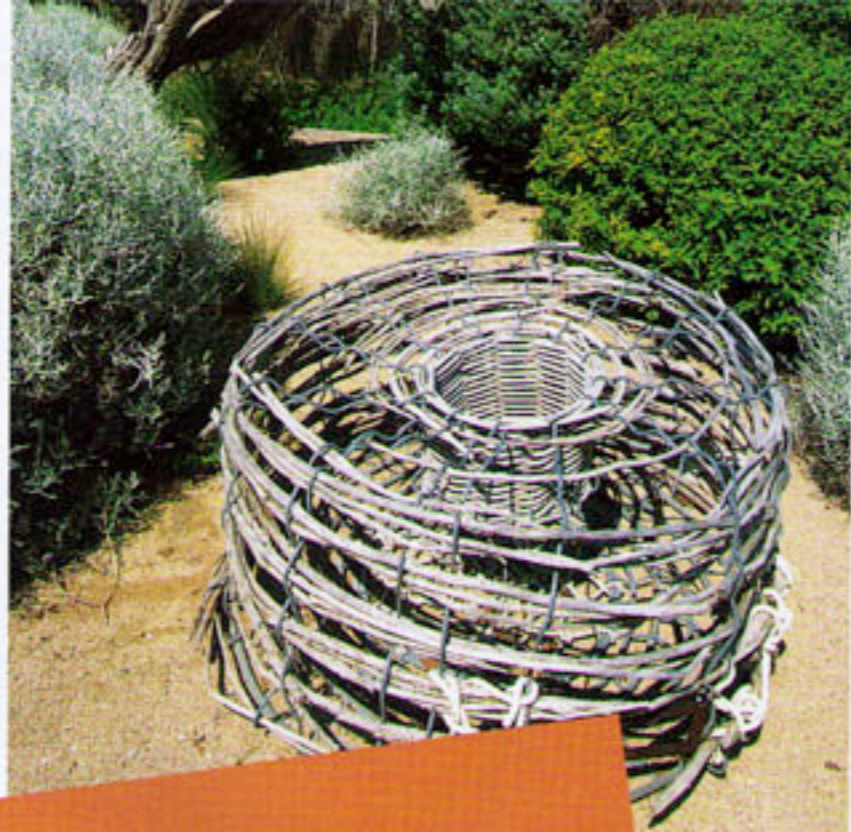
Conservation and environment are major components of the overall garden design. This is very important as the garden adjoins a national park. The aging tea trees are being gradually replaced with moonahs, she-oaks and other indigenous plants, continuing the wildlife



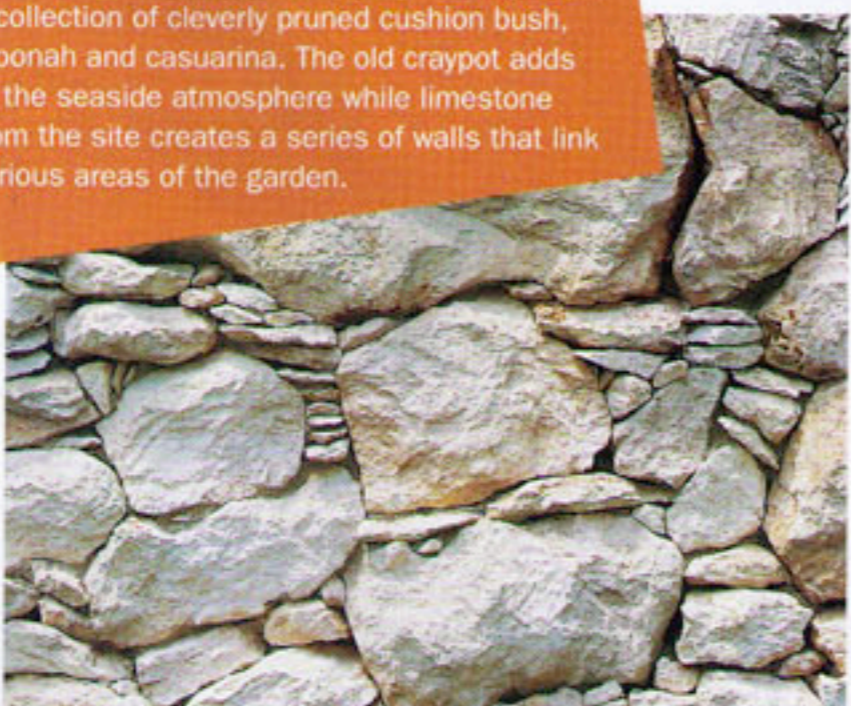
ABOVE: *Aeonium arboreum* 'Zwartkop' is a dramatic accent in the garden. BELOW: The terrace offers the perfect place to entertain and features local limestone walls created by Fiona's partner, David.



THIS PAGE: Recycled pylons from the Sorrento and Portsea piers are cleverly used to create steps and retaining walls throughout the garden. Succulents help to unify various areas and are reminiscent of Fiona's childhood.



THIS PAGE: Clockwise: The formal courtyard is a collection of cleverly pruned cushion bush, moonah and casuarina. The old craypot adds to the seaside atmosphere while limestone from the site creates a series of walls that link various areas of the garden.



corridor that extends from the surrounding bushland area creating a haven for birds, animals and insects.

The hard landscaping elements throughout the garden are also empathetic to the surrounding environment. David, a talented landscape contractor, has created a series of bold limestone walls that help to link the house with the landscape. Paths are covered with crushed rock from a local quarry and the wooden pylons used in the paving and for retaining walls throughout the property are recycled from the two local piers which were recently renovated at Portsea and Sorrento.



## Fiona's TOP 5 tips

- 1 Work with what you've got – do not fight your site. Use your soil and climate to help determine what will grow best. Also, look for local materials to utilise where possible to marry the garden with the surrounding landscape.
- 2 When looking at indigenous plants to include in your garden, go for a walk around local

parks and reserves. This list will be a useful guide when selecting plants for your own garden.

- 3 Don't be afraid to combine native and indigenous plants with exotics, providing they have similar requirements. The results can be breathtaking. Make your own rules, as various styles and types of plants can be combined successfully.
- 4 Select a few plants for each area in the garden and repeat these to add to your garden's continuity. Choose a ground cover, small and mid-size shrub that will work in most areas successfully.
- 5 Experiment. If at first you don't succeed, try again. Not all ideas and plant combinations you try will be successful, but what you learn from your failures will only enhance your experience. And when you do succeed, the results are unique and your own personal triumph.



ABOVE: Erupting from the surrounding bushland, the "Koonya Beach Columns" help to unify Fiona's garden with the surrounding coastal landscape, while being empathetic to the native bushland. BELOW: Creative fencing is a passion for Fiona and David. Here, they have recycled some old eucalypt saplings that were once used for drying hops on a farm in northeastern Victoria.



Fiona's garden philosophy can be applied in any garden situation—even when the gardener has a passion for very different plants.



THIS PAGE: A well-manicured correa surrounded by the chalky blue of *Senecio serpens* breaks the line between two dramatic landscape surfaces. OPPOSITE: The bold geometric shape of the swimming pool is softened with a serpentine pool fence and mounds of tufted plants.

## A client's perspective

Whether she is designing a garden for a client or helping a friend, Fiona is careful to let their individual personality and passion shine through in the final design. Fiona previously worked with her neighbour, botanist Jane Burke, to help marry their two gardens together, while also continuing the wildlife corridor throughout both their properties. She also recently worked with another friend, Sue, on her garden in the neighbouring township of Portsea.

Previously a traditional gardener with English roses and clipped box hedging, Sue wanted her garden to be at peace with the surrounding environment. However, she still wanted some of those more traditional elements. "I think it's great I now have all these natives, but that I can clip them," says Sue. "I feel the entire garden was a true collaboration because I would suggest something and Fiona would interpret it and make it work. I like to think that from my humble beginnings, Fiona made it grand."

Working with the natural landscape, Fiona begins at a new site by cleaning up and neatly trimming and shaping



LEFT: Continuing their passion for unusual fencing, David and Fiona have combined recycled old timbers from an abattoir in Portland, Victoria, with copper pipe to create the unique fencing featured here, at the entrance to the garden and around the pool. ABOVE: Repetition is the key to garden continuity. Heavily pruned correas, together with sprawling senecios and tufts of spear-grass create an interesting yet simple picture that is full of colour, with not a flower in sight.

## ABOUT THE DESIGNER

After completing her studies at the Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture (now the Burnley Campus of Melbourne University), Fiona practiced landscape design from Melbourne's inner city suburb of Prahran before moving to Albury on the New South Wales border. Here, the size of the garden was irrelevant but

coping with drought was a major concern. After three years experimenting with drought-tolerant plantings, she and her partner, David Swann, moved to Sorrento, where her new challenge was the nutrient-poor coastal soils and exposed seaside conditions of Victoria's Mornington Peninsula.



any established trees that are to remain. This helps to give the garden age and structure, blending the old and new elements of the site.

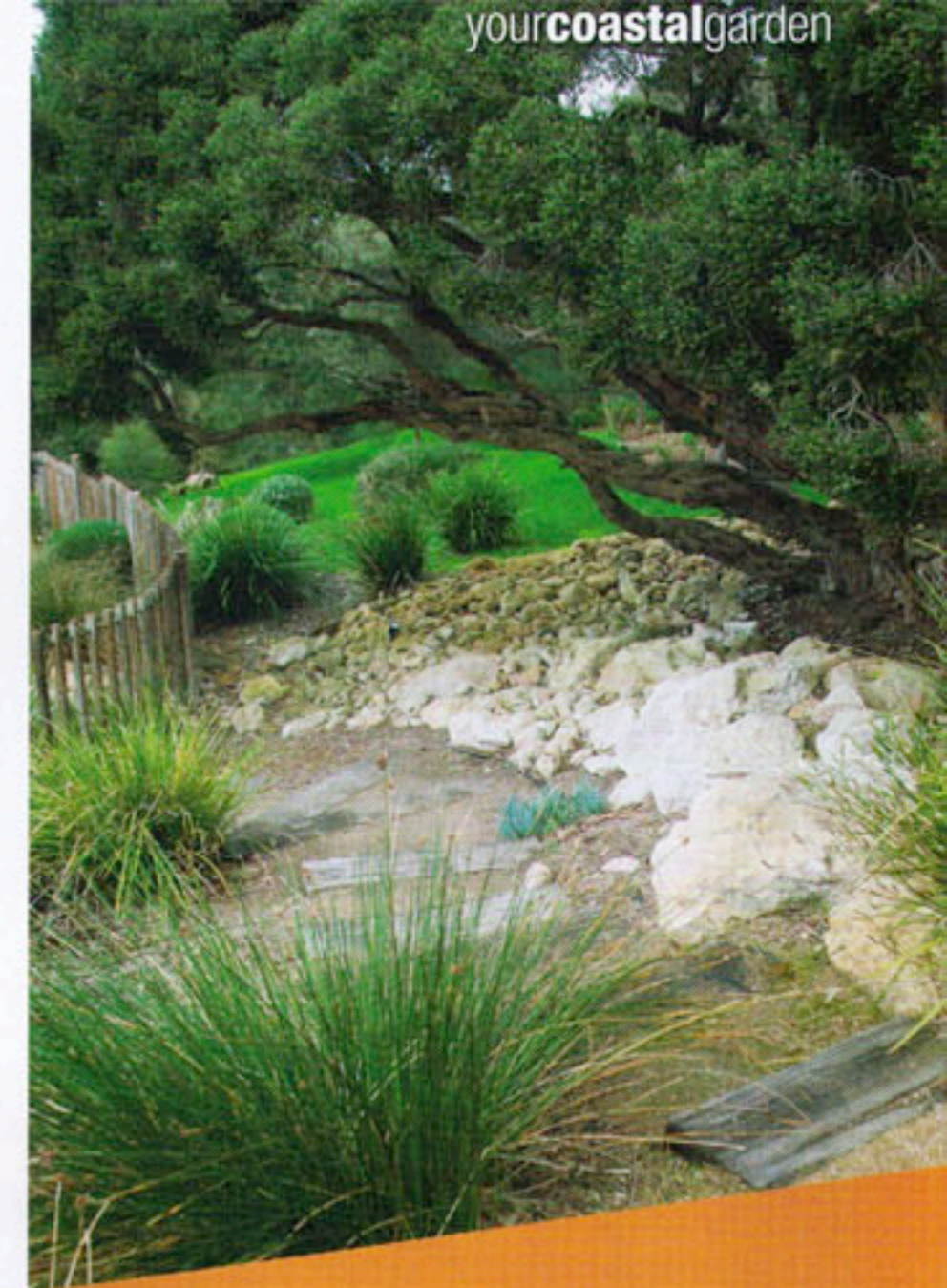
In Sue's garden, the large moonah beside the swimming pool was an element they wanted to keep, but it required a little work. Wayward growth was removed and the trunks tidied up to expose the architectural stems. Stones from the site, which were revealed when the pool was excavated, were then arranged beneath the tree to form what Fiona calls an "earth blanket". It turns what could have been just an old tree and bare earth into a magnificent focal point. It was also important that the garden take in the borrowed landscape, making it difficult to distinguish between where nature stopped and the garden began.

"Fiona would say to me, 'Look at the horizon and see the soft tufty mounds, we need to replicate those here,'" says Sue.

"It makes the garden feel like it belongs, not only to the house, but to the land. "I wanted the garden to be restful," adds Sue. "You know how you can look at some gardens and think, 'My, this must need a lot of work'. "I didn't want that type of feeling here. I wanted the garden to soothe the soul, and it does."

### A new approach to gardening

Balance is the key to the amalgamation of ideas, concepts and philosophies. Natives do not need to be planted on their own, nor do they need to be omitted from formal gardens. By experimenting and blending different garden plants, Australian gardens can be picturesque, while needing minimal supplementary water, showing empathy to the environment and still having a flair for the dramatic. Leading by example, Fiona is well on the way to dispelling those native plant myths, as well as hopefully encouraging a new generation of gardeners to make their own rules and think outside their own square of land. It's not about changing the concept of design, just the ingredients used to create the final masterpiece.



THIS PAGE: Established trees, such as this moonah, can be made into a garden feature with some strategic pruning and a few recycled rocks. OPPOSITE LEFT TO RIGHT: *Senecio serpens*; a wind-chime made from local driftwood and seaside flotsam; potted crassula is used to link various areas of the garden; close up of the rusted wire orb created by sculptor Jonathon Leahey from Guildford, Victoria; the pale grey new growth of *Metrosideros villosus* 'Tahiti'; slate paving was carefully blended with local gravel to combine the formal and informal elements of the garden; the dramatic foliage of New Zealand flax; abalone shells gathered from local beaches; the vibrant bloom of *Metrosideros* 'Tahiti'.



Fiona and David's garden, Karkalla, is open as part of the Open Garden Scheme on 14-15th January 2006 from 10am to 4.30pm at 10 Keating Ave, Sorrento, Victoria. Offshore, Jane and Peter Burke's garden, is open in conjunction with Karkalla and is part of the same admission fee. Sue's Leeming Garden is open for the first time on the same weekend and is located at 49 Duffy St, Portsea, Victoria. For more information, visit [www.opengarden.org.au](http://www.opengarden.org.au)