

SAND CASTLE

A WINDBLOWN COASTAL LOCATION PROVES AN IDEAL SITE TO CREATE A QUINTESSENTIAL MODERN AUSTRALIAN GARDEN

WORDS **BRENDAN MOAR** PHOTOGRAPHS **MICHAEL WEE**

Monterey cypress trees many decades old create an incredible backdrop to the house designed by Melbourne architect John Wardle. Fiona Brockhoff saw her role as landscape designer to create a link between the house and the surrounding landscape. The public nature strip, which was once stock-standard turf, was replaced with native plants set amongst sand-coloured crusher dust. It gives a taste of what's in store on the other side of the fence while being true to the indigenous landscape of the Mornington Peninsula.

“MY GARDENS ARE PRETTY STRAIGHT-UP AND SIMPLE – THEY’RE NOT FUSSY. I WOULD LIKE TO THINK THEY RELY ON THE STRENGTH OF DESIGN”

When was the last time you visited a garden and had a sudden rush of patriotism? Not because there was an Australian flag created from red, white and blue petunias, but for somewhat subtler, earthier reasons – the realisation that we live in a wonderfully unique country, a place to cherish and be proud of.

It has never been garden designer Fiona Brockhoff’s intention to send a shiver of botanical nationalism down the spine of those visiting her gardens, but that’s what happens when you pull the Australian garden into the 21st century – proving once and for all that the native garden can be a swisher, more contemporary creature than its predecessor, the 1970s bush garden.

Although a ’70s bush-style garden wasn’t what the owners of this home in the seaside Victorian town of Flinders had in mind, they knew they needed, something much tougher than the exotic gardens they were used to tending. Thanks to a number of recommendations, the owners put their faith in Fiona Brockhoff to create something that would stand up to the tough coastal conditions and be a worthy partner to the stunning yet sublime architecture of the John Wardle-designed house.

Fiona has spent years refining her approach to garden design, most notably in her own garden, Karkalla, located at nearby Sorrento on the Mornington Peninsula. “It was partly developed as a showcase to demonstrate how good indigenous gardens can look,” explains Fiona.

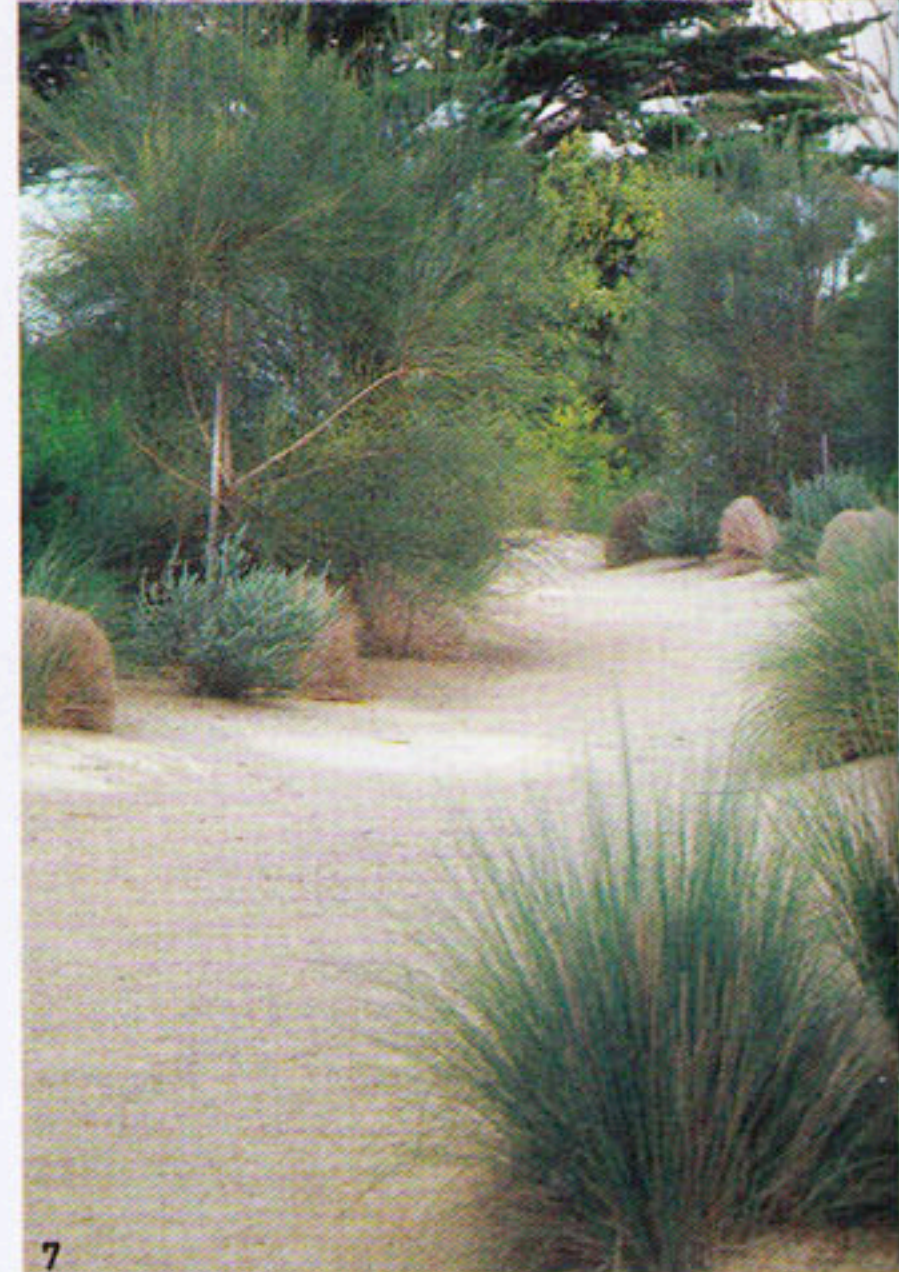
After working with many different garden designers, such as landscape architect John Patrick, and being exposed to classic European gardens while travelling overseas in her 20s, Fiona developed a sound understanding of the fundamentals of design. Coupled with a strong philosophy that gardens should reflect their sense of place, Fiona began creating landscapes that were distinctly Australian in flavour, but with a very clear sense of design shaping them.

Sitting atop a hill overlooking Bass Strait, the house is impossible to miss. Apart from the dramatic backdrop of Monterey cypress trees, the thing that brings many a passerby to a standstill is the nature strip outside. Below wispy canopies of casuarinas and young eucalypts are balls of clipped *Westringia fruticosa* and *Correa alba*, plus naturally domed grasses such as *Poa poiformis*.

Choosing plants that naturally possess strong structural characteristics (and giving definite shape to those that don’t via pruning) is a simple but effective technique that Fiona uses to inject a sense of ‘design’ into her planting. “The spherical forms give you something to lock onto visually and make sense of it all,” explains Fiona.

By creating a habitat for native birds and fauna, the garden in fact becomes an extension of the local ecology. Another element that is so important in Australia is that the plants require no artificial watering – they rely solely on local rainfall for their survival.

Stepping inside the front gate, the stand of Monterey cypress creates an amazing cathedral-like sense of scale. Below them, the paving that leads around from the front entrance – oversized slabs of roughly edged granite – responds accordingly by being equally massive in scale. Though the paving was chosen by the architect and underway when Fiona became involved with the garden, →



1. The blue-coloured succulent *Senecio repens*.
 2. Spheres of grasses such as *Austrostipa stipoides* (in the foreground) and clipped native shrubs *Westringia fruticosa* (at the rear) are given plenty of space and create artful plant compositions.
 3. The curving timber retaining wall delineates two different areas – above, an upper passive space where you can appreciate the plant material up close, and below, the lower lawn.
 4. Strappy plants such as this New Zealand flax contrast perfectly with the spherical plant forms.
 5. Large slabs of rough-edged granite paving combine with the groundcover *Myoporum parvifolium* ‘Purpureum’ to form a simple treatment that leads to the front steps of the house.
 6. *Dianella tasmanica* was mass planted to create a low hedge.
 7. The nature strip planting is enjoyed by locals and visitors alike.
 8. Monterey cypresses add dramatic scale to the property.
 9. Shiny purple berries of *Dianella tasmanica* add a splash of colour to the garden.





"I love its simplicity," says Fiona of the house **(above)**. "It floats above the landscape yet is firmly 'anchored' at the entrance end." Fiona's aim was to retain the sense of openness and clarity of space from this angle. "That's the way approaches to front doors should be - you shouldn't be distracted by the planting." The upper deck of the house, which opens off the living room, is screened by three agave plants **(left)** backed by perforated panels of Corten steel. Corten is a type of metal that doesn't rust - rather, it oxidises slowly to a dull grey-brown colour. An outdoor dining space between the huge Monterey cypresses and the house **(bottom)** is protected from the onshore winds that Flinders is renowned for.

her planting design ensured this sense of space wasn't compromised. Simply treated with a swathe of *Myoporum parvifolium* 'Purpureum', a small purplish leafed groundcover, the proportions and scale are reinforced.

On the opposite side of the house, Fiona was responsible for everything else. A levelling issue was solved with a timber retaining wall built from massive hardwood sleepers laid vertically. "If that wall had been put too close to the house, there wouldn't have been a comfortably sized platform for the house to sit on," says Fiona. "Any further out, and there wouldn't have been a useable space on the bottom level."

The upper platform adjacent to the house echoes the planting approach used on the nature strip, but here there is a greater variety of plants including some exotics such as New Zealand flax and the succulent *Senecio repens*. With a dislike for over-planting, Fiona ensures each plant has plenty of space and air around it. This is only enhanced by the sandy-coloured, earthy surface of compacted crusher dust, providing a clean background against which to contrast the structure and form of each carefully selected and placed plant.

Fiona describes her gardens as "pretty straight-up and simple", creating spaces and places where people can feel comfortable doing precisely what they want, whether it be "getting into some hard-core gardening or lounging around drinking wine".

They may be simple, but consciously or otherwise, Fiona's gardens capture an essence of life and landscape that is uniquely and beautifully Australian. ❖ Fiona Brockhoff and her partner David Swann regularly open their garden Karkalla to the public as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme. For more information, contact Fiona Brockhoff Landscape Design on (03) 5984 4282.