



NATIVE BEAUTY

A home and garden that blends seamlessly into the sand dunes and bushland of the Mornington



Peninsula is a triumph of aesthetics and sound ecology. PHOTOGRAPHER: EARL CARTER EDITOR: HELEN REDMOND





Natural partners, PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT: walls made from local limestone make a strong link between the house and the landscape. RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: succulents, euphorbia, aeoniums, echiums and the yellow knobby bloom of *Aeonium arboreum* surround a New Zealand totem. In the guest bungalow, panels of sheer silk from Cloth suggest a bedroom wall. The bungalow's external walls are clad in Tech 2000, a rough-sawn plywood, stained tea-tree green. The interior of the main house reveals a mix of local and recycled materials: walls of Besser block clad with local limestone, floors of recycled New Zealand Kauri pine, painstakingly scrubbed and de-nailed; exposed galvanised steel trusses contribute to the open flow and stained pine ceilings define the living space. THESE PAGES, OPPOSITE: timbers recycled from old piers form terraces in the rear courtyard, which features flat gravel surfaces, clumps of native grasses planted to rustle in the breeze, and a self-seeded moonah trimmed into a sculptural ball. She-oaks form unlikely topiary. THIS PAGE: the guest bungalow kitchen continues the use of limestone and timber, with a pitched pine ceiling that follows the gradient of the land. The 1950s German dining table and chairs are a local second-hand shop find.

Blending in, OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: a pair of Tiwi totems stand sentinel at the stone-lined entrance; adjustable louvres afford protection from prevailing winds while giving ocean glimpses. *Koonya Beach Columns*, a cluster of limestone pillars by New Zealand sculptor Chris Booth, is silhouetted against the sky and the waters of Bass Strait. In the living room, a copper canopy defines the hearth on a cantilevered, concrete bench which runs the full width of the wall and extends beyond the full-height glass windows onto the northern terrace. Anchored by poles of galvanised steel, Booth's sculpture sways in the wind.

MUCH OF THE EARTHWORKS for Fiona Brockhoff and David Swann's house in Sorrento on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula was done by hand. It made the job tougher, but that wasn't the issue. "We wanted to protect what was already growing here," Brockhoff says, simply. "We wanted to tread softly on the land."

Having bought the sandy, wind-buffed land near Bass Strait, Brockhoff, a landscape designer, was keen to create a house of strong architectural merit while remaining sensitive to the site. Over the years, in anticipation of building her house, she had amassed photographs, made notes and even bought a load of New Zealand kauri pine recycled from an old wool store. It was when she met Sydney architect and builder Thomas Isaksson that Brockhoff knew she had found a compatible collaborator. "Tom and I think very similarly," she says. "Often I'll go to say something and Tom has just said it."

Brockhoff and Isaksson designed the house over one weekend in 1994. The next year, he moved from Sydney to build it, while Brockhoff coordinated, expedited and occasionally pitched in. Guiding the project was a strong desire to link the house to its surrounds. The copper roof, chosen in consideration of the harsh conditions, follows the slope of the land. Vertical cedar siding is stained dark with an organic oil to recall the creosoted houses of the 1940s and 1950s.

Wherever possible, locally sourced and recycled materials were used, to look at home in the environment. Wave-sculpted timber reclaimed from old piers now forms retaining walls and raised vegetable beds in the garden. Local limestone was used for walls built by Brockhoff's partner, David Swann, a landscape contractor whom she met when the project was already underway. As they evolved, Swann became more creative, adding small graduated stacks of stone in the interstices – now a personal signature. Swann also made garden pavers from local shell grit and bits of beach glass, which Brockhoff has collected since she was a child.

The design for the home draws on Brockhoff's childhood, which she spent in a 1950s Melbourne house strongly influenced by architects Robin Boyd and Harry Seidler. "It was a very modern house in a street of older styles," she recalls. "Now I've gone back to what's comfortable for me and what works."

Not only does the house work, it is built according to strong environmental tenets. In winter, the sun is below the eave line and floods the living areas with light and warmth; in summer it's safely above the eaves. Windows throughout are either thickened glass or are double-glazed and, to the west, are tall and narrow to limit exposure to summer heat and winter gales. Rainwater is collected in tanks, a composting toilet minimises water use and contributes to soil improvement, and solar panels heat water for a bath in a tub with views of wind-rumpled seagulls.

The garden has presented its own challenges (see page 202). Much has been an experiment, says Brockhoff, "since I hadn't gardened on top of a sand dune in a south-westerly gale before". One rule has remained unchanged (with the exception of the orchard, a vineyard of pinot noir grapes and the vegetable garden): if it needs watering, it doesn't stay. Instead of a conventional lawn, Brockhoff has surfaced garden areas with local gravel. While the back courtyard is planted with species indigenous to southern coastal areas, the front terrace has been permitted specimens from similar climates and conditions. Flowers that would detract from the view are discouraged. Instead, interest lies in form, and with hues that blend with their surrounds.

The main job now, says Brockhoff, is pruning. "A lot of people think that you plant natives and turn your back. Yes, they'll survive, but they can look like something the dogs dragged in." In fact, part of Brockhoff's experiment is to play with the natives. A surprising pair of topiary she-oaks (*Allocasuarina*) wouldn't look incongruous on a Victorian veranda, and a moonah (*Melaleuca lanceolata*) that self-seeded in the courtyard has been trimmed to a tight, sculptural ball.

As the site settles into its surrounds, Isaksson is gratified by the result. "Now that the planting has matured, it is becoming more difficult to say whether the landscape forms a backdrop for the architecture or vice versa," he says. "Either reading would be a success as far as I'm concerned." **DEBORAH BARTLETT PITT**
The garden (Karkalla) will be open on January 25 and 26, 2003, as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme. Details, (03) 5428 4557 or 1902 261 026. Fiona Brockhoff Landscape Design, (03) 5984 4282.



LIVING GARDEN



The garden of environmentalists Fiona Brockhoff and David Swann marks the return of native form, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: walls of local limestone made by Swann. A fence of tea-tree stakes on the edge of a terrace; drought-resistant succulents were sourced from similar climates. Coastal she-oaks (*Allocasuarina verticillata*) are trimmed to form topiary in the rear courtyard. Bocce balls on a raked-gravel terrace. The rear garden is given over to species native to this part of the coastline – *Correa alba*, *Stipa stipoides* and moonah (*Melaleuca lanceolata*) – clipped into shapes that merge into the surrounding tree-covered dunes. For more on this house and garden, see page 150.

SENSE OF PLACE AMONG THE EXPOSED DUNES OF VICTORIA'S MORNINGTON PENINSULA, A GARDEN OF NATIVE AND DRY-CLIMATE PLANTINGS BLENDS EASILY INTO ITS SURROUNDINGS

