



Coastal charmers: Species indigenous to the area form the basis of this garden in Flinders, Victoria

Picture: Holly Kerr Forsyth

Thriving by the seaside

A FRIEND who takes her regular morning exercise in the historic Victorian town of Flinders has long admired the planting on the nature strip that dresses a garden close to the coastal cliffs. This garden, which is based on species indigenous to the area, has spilled on to the footpath, so that passers-by can enjoy strolling through a small forest of the black she-oak, *Allocasuarina littoralis*.

The mulch of a tiny gravel (mined at a local quarry) that covers the ground becomes a series of gently winding paths because of the arrangement of these fine-leaved pine-like trees. "People walking on the footpath have the sense that they are walking in the garden," agrees the owner. There is also a strong sense of location: of connection with the sand, the salt and the sea nearby.

The house, built of zinc and western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*), fits snugly into this landscape. Close to the front door, two long-flowered marlock (*Eucalyptus macrandra*) arch over clipped spheres of *Correa alba*, with its beautiful emerald-green leaves with their soft grey undersides. Indigenous to the southeast of Australia, this evergreen shrub looks particularly striking with nearby pots of the silver-leaved succulent *Cotyledon orbiculata*.

Retaining walls, constructed from ironbark sleepers that have been left to weather to silver, mark changes in levels in the garden. The gravel forecourt drops away to an expanse of lawn planted with tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*), a hardy, fast growing grass that copes with a range of conditions. Tufts of the nobby club rush (*Ficinia nodosa* syn. *Isolepis nodosa*) display their rust coloured flower heads around the perimeters.

The western side of the property is protected by a dense green stand of *Cupressus macrocarpa*, the

HOLLY KERR FORSYTH GARDENING



conifer long planted throughout the region to provide protection from high winds. With the benefit of five days of tree surgery, this mature stand is cathedral-like and contributes greatly to the atmosphere of the garden. Beneath, the ground covering *Myoporum parvifolium*, commonly called creeping boobialla, flowers with white stars. Lime green coastal saltbush (*Rhagodia candolleana*) accompanies it, thriving in the dry shade, conditions that would be too difficult for most plants. To the east of the house, stands of *Eucalyptus leucoxylon* 'Rosea' burst into clusters of pink scented flowers each summer.

A swath of the fine-leaved native willow myrtle (*Agonis flexuosa*) combines with the new burgundy-hued flax (*Phormium* 'Anna Red') to provide a backdrop to a mass of 'Yellow Gem' and 'Orange Cross' kangaroo paw; they love the hot and dry climate and are perfectly happy in the face of salty breezes. Growing to about 2m in height, these cultivars are long lived if given plenty of sun and good drainage.

Loose hedges of the chef's hat correa (*Correa baeuerlenii*), which grows to about 1.5m and bears green bell-shaped flowers through autumn and winter, create structure throughout this easygoing garden. As well, a small-growing callistemon blooms with soft apricot bottlebrush flowers. The callistemons, like many native shrubs, need clipping about twice a year to keep them dense and to prevent them from becoming woody and straggly.

The feature trees and shrubs in this garden, which was laid out in the autumn of 2003, were nursed through their first two years. Plants in the garden beds and in pots are watered weekly in summer. "The idea was a garden of plants that were native to the peninsula," the owner explains. "And low maintenance, low water usage." And it is beautiful, restful and peaceful.

The native birds agree.

PRUNINGS

✿ Kangaroo paw breeder Angus Stewart advises all varieties can suffer from fungal diseases that cause leaf blackening, the result also of poor drainage, water or nutrient stress, or frost damage. "Kangaroo paws will survive harsh conditions of drought and nutrient deficiency but to reach their full potential they benefit from a regular moisture supply and moderate levels of fertiliser," Stewart says. Use a complete plant food in autumn and spring for multiple flowers on each stem. "And, contrary to popular belief," he says, "kangaroo paws are not particularly phosphorus sensitive." Shorter varieties such as the pink 'Bush Pearl' and the red 'Bush Inferno' also provide spectacular flower displays but demand excellent drainage. Grow them in pots if your soil is heavy. And be on guard: snails and slugs also love them.

✿ You can read more about the beauty of our tough native grasses with their fascinating seed heads, intricate flowers and often soft and distinctive foliage in Nola Parry and Jocelyn Jones's *Native Grasses for Australian Gardens* (New Holland, \$24.95).



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