

# INSIDE

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GUIDE TO  
BESPOKE  
JOINERY

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SPRING  
EDIT**  
FRESH  
PRINTS &  
DESIGN  
BUYS

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**eclectic  
kitchen**

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# FROND EMBRACE

With its white-washed masonry and date palms moving in the breeze, this chic rooftop retreat in Sydney's east has a warm, welcoming Mediterranean vibe

WORDS CHRIS PEARSON PHOTOGRAPHY BRIGID ARNOTT



OUT | GARDEN

Dwarf date palms (*Phoenix roebelenii*), sago palms (*Cycas revoluta*), giant taro and cascading prostrate rosemary create softness and a sense of enclosure in the seating area around the fire pit. The decking is tallowwood. Banquette upholstered by local studio Dylan Farrell Design.

**OPPOSITE** Each balcony on the northern side of the five-storey terrace has its own planting theme. On the kitchen level are produce plants such as Persian lime (*Citrus x latifolia*) and herbs, while the level above sports a more formal cloud-pruned juniper surrounded by trailing *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls'.

INSIDE OUT | 135



The view from one of the balconies takes in the vista below. An olive tree (*Olea europaea*) underplanted with *Casuarina glauca* 'Cousin It' provides privacy in the seating area, while *Cordyline glauca* adds lush greenery to the boundary wall, the effect heightened by bower vine (*Pandorea jasminoides*) trailing down from above. Mondo grass is entwined between the pavers in the shower area. The Knoll 'Richard Schultz 1966' sun lounges are from Dedece.

**OPPOSITE LEFT** Behind the banquette is a cosy corner with dwarf date palms, *Kalanchoe beharensis* and prostrate rosemary.

**OPPOSITE RIGHT** Kentia palms (*Howea forsteriana*) provide verticality and shade. Between the granite pavers from CDK Stone is *Lomandra longifolia* 'Tanika'. A frangipani (*Plumeria acutifolia*) underplanted with a *Correa alba* shrub and *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls' softens the masonry. Wall finish, Murowash Natural White.



**R**eminiscent of a romantic rooftop in old Casablanca, this magical hideaway in Sydney's east is cossetting and cosy but moves up a gear and becomes the great entertainer when the owners' friends and family appear. "It's like a Moroccan medina in the way the space encloses, turning in on itself and creating a sheltered garden away from the outside world. You feel like you've stumbled into a personal paradise," says landscape designer Adam Robinson, who created this oasis with architect Jason Gibney.

As part of a five-storey terrace renovation in 2019, Jason crafted the hardscaping while Adam delivered the softness through judicious plantings. With its rendered masonry walls and dwarf date palms now fluttering in the breeze, those exotic echoes of the casbah are complete. "Our brief was to create an experiential wonderland and the feeling of being in a resort, the clients' own sanctuary at home," says Adam. "It was all about the experience, how it made them feel." Before the makeover, they would have been underwhelmed. The garden comprised a swimming pool with planter boxes around it, which reduced the area's size visually and practically. Beyond the pool and above the garage was an elevated sitting area, but the two spaces were poorly connected – with each other and the home.

Jason extended the terrace's footprint, bringing the facade closer to the pool patio, and separated indoors and out with three large glass sliders. "With the panels opened, this patio operates like an undercover poolside lounge space," he says. The entire pool area has been resurfaced with granite slabs and the boxy planters removed, creating space for an outdoor shower to

the right of the pool. "This has broadened the yard and allowed for ground-level intertwining of the hard and soft elements."

Meanwhile, Jason redesigned the garage terrace, stepping it so the seating zone is at a higher level towards the back of the property. "This has reduced the height of the walls bookending the backyard, and gives a sense of the terrace being closer to the pool below," he says. There, he also built a U-shaped timber banquette into the low whitewashed walls surrounding a fire pit. "It's a nod to the hazy summer sunsets experienced on traditional terrace rooftops throughout the Mediterranean," Jason explains. He included concealed planter boxes on the perimeter for screening plants "to provide privacy and intimacy, creating a natural sanctuary".

Connecting all the spaces, granite tiles extend from the lower level of the house into the backyard and up onto the garage terrace, as well as the access stair. While extremely hard, the granite is also soft underfoot, warm in winter, and cool in summer. The balustrades consist of blackened steel with a natural wax finish, while the external masonry walls were painted in Murowash, with sand added for a bagged textured effect.

In bringing a soft touch to Jason's hardscaping, Adam was presented with pros and cons. "It was a large garden for a terrace, north facing and offering a lovely outlook from all levels of the home, but being a sun-trap was a mixed blessing," he says. "It gets hot, so the plants would need to be tough." And while the hardscaping provided an inspired canvas for Adam's botanical brushstrokes, it also presented him with challenges. "It was a lot of concrete and granite and little else," so he needed to create holes within that for his plants. Furthermore, in the sitting area

## PLANT PALETTE

Palms, hardy shrubs, lush ground covers and trailing specimens create a fabulously layered hideaway



Prostrate rosemary (*Rosmarinus 'Prostratus'*)



*Cordyline fruticosa* 'Glaucá'



Mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus 'Nana'*)



Giant taro (*Alocasia macrorrhiza*)



Bower vine (*Pandorea jasminoides*)



Pride of Madeira (*Echium candicans*)

above the garage, deep roots were out of the question. The solution was a clutch of dwarf date palms, the larger ones of which had to be craned in. They provide a sense of enclosure and foster the garden's resort vibe. "As the owners are from Queensland, they loved palms because they move with the wind and create movement. These are slow-growing, smaller palms with shallow roots, important with the garage underneath."

Continuing the frond theme, he also craned in two mature kentia palms, which he planted beside the pool in the shower area and underplanted with mondo grass between the granite pavers. "Breaking up the hardscape with plants allows this space to read like a garden," says Adam. "This area functions as a pool breakout area for lounging in the sun or enjoying the shower."

As well as tropical plants, Adam also included Mediterranean specimens, including an olive tree (to provide privacy in the seating area) and trailing rosemary, together with exotic succulents such as mistletoe cactus and echium. A towering boundary wall is drenched in green, thanks to tension mesh on which Adam trailed *Pandorea jasminoides* vines that deliver year-round vertical verdure with seasonal flowering. Tall and narrow cordylines below add to this abundant green.

Meanwhile, each level of the house has a balcony dressed with plants that frame the lush oasis beneath. The kitchen balcony is filled with edibles for cooking, while the balcony above has a more formal look created by a cloud-pruned conifer and underscored with buxus balls for 'neatness'. "The plantings are layered and quite minimal," Adam summarises.

"We've given our clients a rock-star resort feel, somewhere visually stunning to enjoy their time out," he adds. "It's a unique oasis that mixes luxury and glamour with laid-back chic." **10**  
See Adam's work at [adamrobinsondesign.com](http://adamrobinsondesign.com) or [@adamrobinsondesign](https://www.instagram.com/adamrobinsondesign). Jason Gibney Design Workshop is at [jgdu.com.au](http://jgdu.com.au) or [@jgdu\\_](https://www.instagram.com/jgdu_)

At the end of the pool, the different levels are immediately apparent, with the stairway leading up to the U-shaped seating area, steps leading down to the garage, and the patio slightly below the pool. A frangipani (*Plumeria acutifolia*) underplanted with *Correa alba* and trailing *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls' marks the edge of the pool terrace. Viscount White granite pavers from CDK Stone.

**OPPOSITE** A corner of the produce garden, on the balcony abutting the kitchen area. Lemon (*Citrus limon*), *Rosmarinus officinalis*, sage and basil are all at hand for the keen cooks in the family. Custom planters designed by Adam Robinson Design and made by Ideal Edging.

