



# Outdoor living

*With spring and summer approaching and the temperature rising, now is the perfect time to extend your liveable space at home by creating an inviting green outdoor oasis.*

Words JESSICA BELLEF

The Australian cultural identity is wrapped up in visions of barbecues, backyards, beaches and the bush. We are a sunburnt country of open spaces and sweeping plains. Living the Australian dream during the 1980s and '70s meant owning a house surrounded by a green yard where you could throw another shrimp on the barbie and bowl a few overs of cricket. This focus shifted in the 1990s as home sizes and workloads increased and our connection to the outdoors diminished. Flash forward to today, where estate homes are built roof to roof and prohibitive housing prices have squashed many homeowners' aspirations. In February this year, *The Guardian* reported an increasing number of young Australians are giving up on owning a house with a backyard as market prices soar beyond their means.

Our gardens may be shrinking, but in this fractured time of global crisis and heightened anxiety a connection to nature has never been more vital. If you are lucky enough to have access to a backyard, courtyard or balcony, filling it with greenery and treating it with the same decorative care you do for your interiors can pay dividends for your mental and physical health. The benefits of gardening and spending time outside have long been reported. All signs point to the fact that exposure to green spaces can reduce the risks of high blood pressure, type II diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Even the tiniest plot can act as a balm to daily stresses.

Sydney landscape designer and horticulturalist Adam Robinson believes a home's connection to the outdoors has a bearing on the quality of time spent at home. "Having a beautiful, well-designed, functional outdoor space is as imperative as renovating a kitchen or a bathroom indoors. It simply makes a world of difference to your lifestyle and feeling of wellbeing and peace." Along with his team at Adam Robinson Design, Robinson creates and nurtures gardens of all shapes and sizes, from petite inner-city balconies to sprawling green idylls overlooking Sydney

Harbour. "Your outdoor space should be a natural extension of your home, the point where architecture integrates with greenscaping," he says. "I don't believe a home is complete without a connection to the fresh air and sunshine, even if it is a small courtyard or humble balcony."

Transforming an outdoor area doesn't have to involve costly or complex landscaping work. Read on for expert advice on creating a green retreat at home, from plant and furniture selection to lighting and decor.

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## Choosing plants

Perhaps you have been avoiding your garden because the plant situation looks less than lively? Don't feel bad — even the most experienced horticulturalist will describe gardening as a process of trial and error that offers surprises throughout the seasons. Countless plant varieties are an overwhelming proposition for botanical novices looking to bring life and texture to a bland outdoor space. You may have visions of a wild English cottage garden bursting with pretty blooms, but it will remain a dream if you live in a hot, dry environment. Increase your chances of garden success by planting species that suit your local climate, the soil, sun and shade situation in the yard and the amount of maintenance you are willing to uphold. This vast topic can't be covered in full within this article, but the following ideas may offer a "seed" of inspiration.

Robinson is a champion of native plants, selecting them for their hardiness and high drought tolerance. "It's very important to choose native plants suited

to growing in your area to increase their survival and growth rates," he says. When you plant native species, local insects and animals thrive. Robinson favours evergreen grevillea, while other native varieties that will impart interesting colour and texture include the kangaroo paw, spotted emu bush, correa and the cheerful Christmas bush. A quick Google search can direct you to your local native nursery, where the staff will guide you with your selection.

For a few alternate low-maintenance options, Robinson suggests:

- Frangipani
- Olive
- Aloe
- Kalanchoe
- Euphorbia
- Rosemary

Succulents are very easy to propagate and come in various forms, textures and colours. Ornamental grasses are fast-growing, water-wise and low-maintenance. They add movement with their graceful forms and are an excellent solution for filling a large space. Creepers and climbers can help conceal ugly fencing or shade an area. Star jasmine is a popular fast-growing vine. It requires pruning and training to keep it contained, but there is nothing quite like the scent of jasmine to herald the start of summer.

Don't forget to factor in fragrance; it's an invisible design layer that can significantly impact the sensory experience of an area. A garden or balcony alive with luscious, natural perfumes will entice and engage. Along with jasmine varieties, you might want to consider gardenia, lavender and lilac. Herbs like basil and mint also produce an intoxicating scent that will spark the senses and draw you in.

## Potted balconies

With many city-based clients on his books, Robinson is an expert in balcony transformations and bringing nature to apartment-dwellers. "It's all about designing a lush, green environment to maximise a client's home and lifestyle with the added challenge of not having any naturally occurring soil to plant into. Pots



Photography Getty Images



*If you are a bookworm who looks forward to getting lost in the pages of a novel each weekend, perhaps a comfy cushioned armchair will allow you to enjoy that time outdoors.*

are everything!" He suggests organising potted plants in neat clusters around outdoor furniture to create focal points and demarcate different zones on the balcony.

Whether you choose a classic terracotta planter or go with a modern design, it's essential to consider the size of the pot. "Rather than have lots of small, bitsy plants on a smaller balcony, have one knockout oversized pot containing something like a euphorbia, underplanted and softened with old-fashioned rosemary. Go for an unusual plant combination," Robinson suggests. While choosing plants based on their texture, colour and shape can lead to an intriguing and visually pleasing array, go with varieties that can withstand the elements and the level of upkeep you can afford. "Select hardy, water-wise species," says Robinson. He suggests the following pot-loving plants: *Euphorbia ammak*, *Crassula ovata* (jade tree), *Agave americana* (century plant), *Buxus japonica* (Japanese box hedge), and *Kalanchoe beharensis* (felt bush).

To ensure happy planter health, use the best quality potting mix your budget will allow and fertilise your soil in small doses, using manure or a slow-release fertiliser.

### Furniture

The right furniture selection can bring a new purpose to any tired, underutilised outdoor space. Consider how you want the area to function and make a furniture shopping list that accommodates those activities. Is it a space for entertaining or relaxing, or both? If you are a social type who loves to host dinner parties, a suitable dining table will elevate your gatherings. If you are a bookworm who looks forward to getting lost in the pages of a novel each weekend, perhaps a comfy cushioned armchair will allow you to enjoy that time outdoors.

Measure your available space and avoid overcrowding the area with excess furniture or pieces that are too big. If you have a roomier yard or balcony, look at positioning the furniture into practical zones. For instance, place the dining table closer to the barbecue area, and angle a lounge set to take in the views. The goal is to create a balance of greenery and seating, allowing an easy flow and an uncluttered feel. When

selecting the pieces, Robinson suggests taking inspiration from your existing indoor furniture and interiors to create a style consistency between the interior and the exterior.

Comfortable seating is an essential ingredient for an inviting outdoor space, so, where possible, try before you buy. "Comfort is very important, and so is quality," says Robinson. "Outdoor furniture needs to be made of good-quality, durable materials to withstand the wear and tear caused by the elements." Teak is a robust hardwood that performs well when exposed to the elements due to its high natural oil content and tight wood grain. Aluminium is lightweight and rust-resistant, a perfect solution for coastal homes with salty air. When it comes to upholstery, synthetic weaves offer high UV and fade-resistance levels.

### Lighting

Layers of illumination will improve the functionality of an alfresco area and enhance the ambience, creating a welcoming setting that invites people to linger longer. "It makes a huge impact on the look and feel of your garden and enables you to extend the amount of time you can live outside," says Robinson.

Lighting up the space like a stadium is the utilitarian approach, but subtle pops of lighting throughout will add intriguing depth and encourage relaxed social moments. "You need good wayfinding lights for paths, decks and steps for safety, and have good lighting that is bright, fixed and adjustable for tasks such as outdoor cooking and entertaining," says Robinson. To create a magical mood, the designer suggests introducing soft pools of light to cast a warm glow and highlight statement features. "Wall lights are great to wash a space with broad beams of soft, cosy glow. Uplights in the garden softened by foliage will also lift any dim corners, and outdoor pendant lights over a dining table can create a party atmosphere." For easy and affordable lighting updates, place candles in portable hurricane lanterns, add solar path lights or hang fairy lights around seating areas or trees to create a twinkling oasis.

A freestanding firepit works as a light source when it's lit and blazing, and it will also draw people in and create an

irresistible focal point in the yard. Add some comfy seats or stools around the fire, but follow the safety guidelines and position the pit at the recommended distance from buildings or foliage.

### Stylish additions

Many things combine to create a garden's ambience, but the little flourishes can really enhance the space. Interiors are often decorated with objects and textiles selected for their beauty, adding personality and character. The same approach can be applied to your "green rooms", whether your style leans toward vintage patina or you prefer to keep it streamlined and modern. If you spend a little time beautifying the area and making it your own, you will be more likely to use it and share it with others.

Outdoor cushions provide pops of colour and pattern and add soft padding to uncomfortable chairs. Look out for styles made for outdoor use — they will keep their vibrancy and shape for longer. Choose water-resistant or waterproof fabrics, such as coated canvas cotton or Textilene, a woven fabric made from polyester yarn with a PVC coating. Darker colours and busier patterns can help disguise any staining that may occur over time. Freestanding sun umbrellas add a festive feeling and provide shade. Double-check that the width of the opened umbrella can sit comfortably in your space without overwhelming it.

Artwork is often reserved for indoor styling, but it can add creative oomph to any outdoor space. You can choose store-bought sculptures or wall hangings designed to withstand the elements or display salvaged and repurposed objects for a unique, textured look. Pieces made from metal and stone will age gracefully, and there's something to be said for beautifully weathered timber. Position the artwork in a prominent spot for leisurely contemplation, or nestle it into greenery or down a winding path to conjure a sense of discovery.

Robinson incorporates outdoor mirrors in his garden layouts, claiming they are the perfect finishing touch that can elevate the look of a space and make it feel larger. "I have always loved using mirrors outdoors, especially for smaller patios, courtyards and balconies, as they create an incredible sense of depth and the illusion of extra space. They also bring light and dimension, reflecting plant foliage to amplify the lushness of your garden," he says. 🌿

*Jessica Bellef is a Sydney-based author and freelance interior stylist. Find her at [jessicabellef.com](http://jessicabellef.com) or on Instagram @jessicabellef.*

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