

Life

CUTTING EDGE



HELEN YOUNG

Two to tango

A GORGEOUS HOLIDAY HOME NEEDS A GARDEN TO MATCH

It's a vision that stops traffic, thanks to the glass-walled pool there on the top floor for all to see. But this crisply designed house, commanding a fine view over Avoca Beach on NSW's Central Coast, has an arresting garden to match, full of fashion-forward plants that generate an excitement of their own.

Adam Robinson, a designer who specialises in urban courtyards, balconies and rooftops, drew up the design for a family member – a Sydney-based lawyer building a holiday house for his extended family, who wanted “something interesting”. The garden needed to complement the house's contemporary style and soften the building materials of rendered concrete, aluminium and glass. Most importantly, it had to be low maintenance.

The difficult 556sqm site drops 14m from top to bottom, a gradient of about one in three. “We created some retaining walls to terrace the front garden and allow for the driveway,” says Robinson. Those walls are core-filled block for



strength, but clad for looks with Crackenback free-form sandstone. “The irregular shaped stones give a more organic feel than square pieces,” he explains. “The natural colour and texture variations also help soften the impact of the walls.”

Local landscaper Dylan Steele of Eden Landscapes was responsible for making it happen, from construction to soilworks and planting. The house build was well underway when he started in August 2014, meaning materials for the back garden had to be craned up to the back of the site. All the excavation work had to be done by hand, including levelling to create a lawn area in a late change to the original design. But





Bold: the sloping garden is as striking as the house



Photography Brent Wilson

getting a mower up and down the stairs was always going to be a problem, so in fact it's a synthetic lawn, guaranteed to look green all year, without help.

Despite the retaining walls, much of the garden area still slopes, meaning water drains away quickly. For plants to survive here they need to tolerate dry soils, hot sun, and the salty, windy conditions of the coast. Succulents, bromeliads, grasses and coastal natives form the backbone of the planting scheme, selected primarily for their foliage colour and texture.

Steele added some of his favourite plants to the original design, such as *Casuarina* 'Cousin It', a mat-forming groundcover that

appears to flow down the walls. Among the hero plants are dragon's blood tree (*Dracaena draco*), Mauritius hemp (*Furcraea foetida*) and Imperial bromeliad (*Alcantarea imperialis* 'Rubra'). Seasonal flowers come from Indian hawthorn (*Rhaphiolepis* 'Oriental Pearl') and *Kalanchoe* 'Quicksilver', a succulent that sports pretty pink blooms from its silver foliage.

"When you're up in the house there are so many windows and balconies that look over the garden – so I knew it had to look as good from above as it does from below," says Robinson. "You can even see the garden when you're underwater in the pool, through the glass wall. It's just a lovely house to stay in."

I'm moving into my first house soon and need some tips for plants that are safe for dogs.

Katie Penny, Kincumber, NSW

Many plants are toxic to dogs or cause contact dermatitis. *Poisonous2pets* by Nicole O'Kane is an excellent reference book – it classifies troublesome species as irritants, allergenic, poisonous or highly poisonous, with colour photos of the plants and their toxic parts for identification. Common culprits are the fruits of yesterday, today and tomorrow (*Brunfelsia*), seeds of sago palm (*Cycas revoluta*), many bulbs, green potatoes and tomato plants. The weed trad (formerly called wandering jew) causes rashes on most dogs, and weedy castor oil plant is deadly. Indoor plants such as caladiums and dieffenbachias are common pet poisoners. Puppies that chew are most at risk.

If we planted seeds, say for tomatoes, one week apart, would they yield fruit over a longer span of time?

Yvonne G, by email

Q&A

Successive plantings help stagger your harvest, avoiding a glut of produce all at once. For tomatoes, leave three weeks between plantings. You could also grow different varieties that mature at different times. For fast-growing, high turnover crops such as lettuces, Asian greens, radishes and rocket, sow more seeds every week or two.

How do I take cuttings of jasmines *Jasminum azoricum* and *J. mesnyi*?

Pam Fioretti, Adelaide

For shrub-like *Jasminum mesnyi*, take firm, leafy cuttings 5-8cm long between late spring and autumn. For climbing species such as Azores jasmine (*Jasminum azoricum*), use firm, semi-hardwood cuttings 5-8cm long between late spring and summer. Strike in propagating mix and keep warm and moist.



Send your questions to: helenyoungtwig@gmail.com or Helen Young, PO Box 3098, Willoughby North, NSW 2068. Website: helenyoung.com.au. The best question for March wins a set of three hand-forged, German-made, kitchen garden tools worth \$190 from thesentialingredient.com.au.