



city oasis

The gardens of this terrace-style development in Glebe, near the heart of Sydney, were in desperate need of help. Horticulturist HELEN YOUNG explains how a fresh approach and careful plant selection restored the lush tropical feel of these homes.

PHOTO SAM McADAM

Honey locust trees form a canopy above bronze cordylines, duranta, coprosma and pittosporum.

The address I'm searching for is in the middle of a long row of terrace-style townhouses lining a block in the Sydney suburb of Glebe, directly to the west of the CBD. Like most properties in the area, there's a tiny garden space between the street and the front door, the streets are very narrow and the neighbours are near.

After finding the right townhouse, the owner, Julie, welcomes me inside and takes me through the glass doors that open onto her rear courtyard. Suddenly, I think I'm at a tropical resort. There's a glittering blue, 25m-long swimming pool surrounded by inviting deckchairs, barbecue areas sheltered by umbrellas, a green canopy of trees and extensive garden beds that once added to the lush, tropical atmosphere. Their sorry state is the reason I've come here.

Built in 1997, the Glebe Gardens development comprises more than 100 dwellings, which are home to several hundred residents. It covers three street frontages, with the rear of each property opening onto a huge internal communal space. The fourth side is a public park. Once the showpiece of the development, the gardens have deteriorated, their demise hastened by remedial building work and water restrictions that prevent the original sprinkler system from being used. The owners recognise that the gardens need a major upgrade, so they have called for a design that will restore the development's original 'wow factor'.

Challenging brief

I was asked to create a new planting design that would restore and enhance the original lush, resort-style feel of the gardens. The trendy, close-to-the-city location also suggested a design that was a bit 'edgy' and contemporary.

The brief included several exacting requirements. Plants had to be low in maintenance, non-allergenic and require minimal water. They also had to be free of thorns, spikes or sharp edges near the many pathways, steps and paved areas, and not be prone to pests and diseases, or dropping fruit, leaves or flowers. ▶



A combination of old and new plants were used in the garden's planter boxes to dramatic effect.



Frangipani (*Plumeria rubra* var. *acutifolia*) provides colour as well as seasonal variety.



Honey locust trees provide shade, and their seed pods add interest, during the summer months.



Plantings of palms, murraya, agapanthus and duranta around the communal pool create a lush oasis.

The roots of the plants also needed to be non-invasive, as all the garden beds are actually planter boxes that are built above the car park. These raised beds range from 60cm to 1.2m in depth.

Another challenge lay in the fact that the development's two long sides have different aspects, with one side facing west and getting hot sun, and the other facing east, with lots of winter shade. Careful plant selection was essential.

Designing the garden

The first step was to decide which plants to keep. A main avenue of honey locust trees (*Gleditsia triacanthos* 'Sunburst') was kept because it provided an important framework, plus shade and screening. Several dozen large New Zealand cabbage trees (*Cordyline australis*) were worth saving, as were about 30 bird of paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*), 20 large Gynea lilies (*Doryanthes excelsa*), several dwarf date palms (*Phoenix roebelenii*), and lots of oyster plants (*Acanthus mollis*) and clivias.

An expert tree-transplanting company moved these plants to holding bays on site, then emptied the planter boxes before refilling them with a soil mix that was specially designed for the situation. Being halfway between garden beds and big pots, they required a soil mix that's somewhere between a garden soil and a potting mix. We also added a generous amount of Cow & Compost, which is a bulk product consisting of cow manure and compost from recycled green waste.

Plant selections

A list of suitable plants was presented to a committee of interested residents for discussion. With some give and take, a shortlist was approved and the design work could begin. The plants from the original beds were incorporated, but I also wanted block plantings for high impact and low maintenance. However, I needed to overcome the garden beds' straight lines and rectangular shapes, so the design would not look formal and boxy.

The final design is based on diagonals and triangular planting blocks that help give a sense of movement and a more

contemporary look. Colour and texture come mostly from foliage plants, as these tend to be low-maintenance – dianella, flax, yucca, cordyline and shrubs with variegated or coloured foliage dominate. Flowering plants, such as *Agapanthus* 'Black Pantha' and 'Snowball', red hot poker (*Kniphofia* spp.), clivia and liriopie provide colour and seasonal variety, while plants with a strong sculptural shape, such as *Cordyline* 'Red Sensation', *Agave attenuata* and clumps of New Zealand flax, make an impact. Some, such as frangipani, bird of paradise and Gynea lily provide both colour and drama.

Taller plants were used to screen the communal pool area from the residents' rear courtyard gardens. Other areas needed low plants to allow views to the pool or create a feeling of openness.

After a year, the plants are growing well, and privacy is being restored as they grow to the required heights. Owners love the increase in the value of their properties, and residents are enjoying the upgrade, making more use of communal spaces for socialising with neighbours.

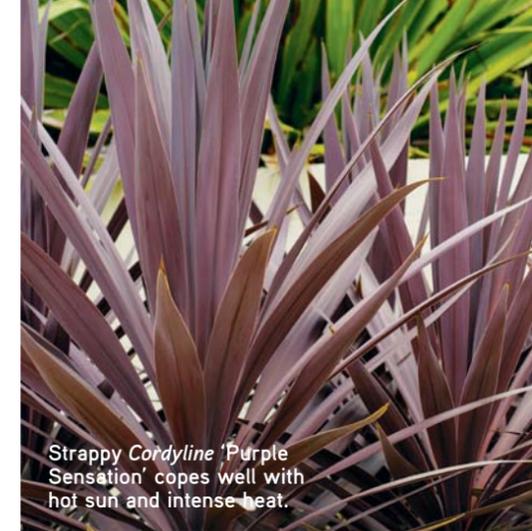
Low maintenance

A bark-blowing truck with a 100m-long hose pumped the mulch to the beds, making the job easy. Applying a thick layer of mulch reduces water loss through evaporation and inhibits most weeds.

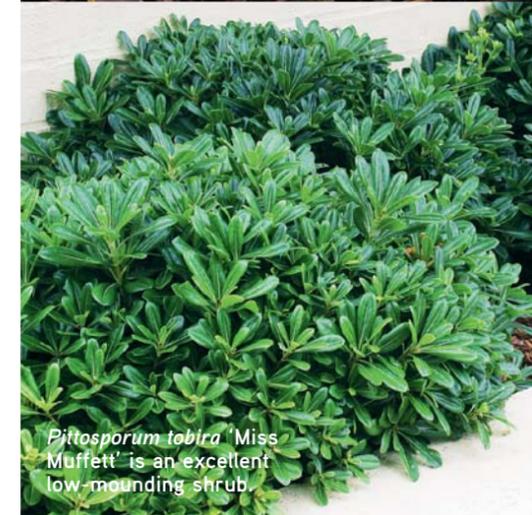
Using plants not prone to pests and diseases has meant minimal spraying, except for Dipel, a non-toxic caterpillar spray, and pet-friendly snail pellets.

Some of the screening plants require regular clipping, but the majority of the foliage plants need little attention apart from tidying up dead leaves. While we chose waterwise plants, and water-storing crystals were added to planting holes, a new drip irrigation system was also installed to ensure the long-term viability of this lush oasis close to the city. ^{GA}

Editor's note: This design has reached the finals of the National Landscape Design Awards, run by the Australian Institute of Landscape Designers and Managers. Winner announced June 21. www.aildm.com.au



Strappy *Cordyline* 'Purple Sensation' copes well with hot sun and intense heat.



Pittosporum tobira 'Miss Muffett' is an excellent low-mounding shrub.

for hot spots

Selecting lush, tropical-looking plants that can survive the hot, westerly sun and reflected heat from paving and walls was the biggest challenge. The standout performers are *Yucca* 'Lemon', an apricot-bronze striped New Zealand flax called *Phormium* 'Maori Chief', *Cordyline* 'Red Sensation' and *C. 'Purple Sensation'*, *Duranta* 'Sheena's Gold', bird of paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*) and *Coprosma* 'Rainbow Surprise'. Native rainforest shrubs such as *Syzygium* 'Cascade' and *Backhousia myrtifolia* are excellent choices for hedging and screening, too.

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PHOTOS SAM McADAM/HELEN YOUNG