Design

LEVEL BEST

A sloping site presents a rich opportunity, says the designer of this multi-dimensional Sydney layout.

TEXT BY **ELIZABETH WILSON** v PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN PAUL URIZAR** & **JASON BUSCH**

TIGER TERRITORY
A mass planting of tiger grass (*Thysanolaena maxima*) forms a thick screening hedge along the length of the pool and "creates the look of a private tropical jungle", says Matt. "When you're in the pool you're enclosed by greenery, which is just beautiful," says Clare.

FAB FERNS
At both ends of the pool, coin spot tree ferns (*Cyathea cooperi*) add their soft, feathery lime-green fronts to the mix of foliage greens in this garden. A hedge of sweet viburnum (*Viburnum odoratissimum*) along the retaining wall (below) is designed to be kept clipped at the same height as the wall.

DRAGON'S DEN
This dragon's-blood tree (*Dracaena draco*) is Clare's favourite plant in the garden; she admires its "sculptural, gnarly and interesting" form. It's underplanted with *Liriope muscari* 'Royal Purple'.

FOLIAGE STATEMENT
Indian hawthorn (*Rhaphiolepis indica* 'Snow Maiden') forms a hardy hedge overlooking the barbecue area. Walls in deep-hued Murobond Dark Knight appear to recede, bringing foliage colours into sharp focus.

ON THE SURFACES
Matt has used travertine tiles to surround the pool and mark out the entertainment zone. The benchtop is concrete sheeting and the cabinetry is stained pine, both cost-effective materials.

Matt Leacy
LANDSCAPE DESIGNER AND DIRECTOR, LANDART LANDSCAPES

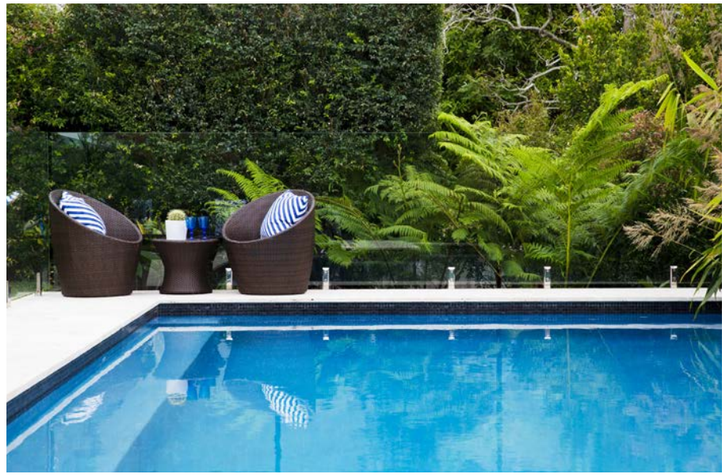
"This garden pulls you in like the surf on a 35°C day," says Matt. "Even though it can basically be captured at first glance, it is intriguing and inviting, and draws you into it. The level changes make it feel a lot larger than it actually is."

THE BRIEF

With two young children and busy weekday lives, the owners of this Sydney garden, Clare and Peter, were keen to create a private universe where the whole family could unwind. They turned to landscape designer Matt Leacy with a brief to create "an escape". They wanted the new scheme to incorporate a pool, a play area for the children and low-maintenance plantings.

Pre-renovation, the garden was a large 250m² site that dropped 2.5m to the back fence. "The garden was disconnected from the house and there was a patchwork of shrubs and trees," says Matt. In his design, Matt has worked with the gradient rather than against it, creating an interplay of two levels. The top level is an expanse of lawn that flows seamlessly from the back door of the house to the deck of the pool. Both the lawn and the pool deck are connected by stairs to a lower-level 4.5x6m entertaining space, featuring a shaded dining table, bench seating and barbecue.

"The pool is out-of-ground, creating the sunken entertainment area," says Matt. "It's a completely private and intimate space, hugged by plants." >



< IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

Matt chose lush foliage plants in rich textures and hues to create this tropical haven. "Clare and Peter wanted an exotic garden, so we planted some exotic species and added a contemporary twist," he says. "The palette combines deep greens with splashes of lime, purple and grey-green foliage to add visual interest." Matt and his team transplanted many existing trees and ferns already growing on the site, including some of these coin spot tree ferns. The hedge growing behind them is a small-leafed lilly pilly (*Syzygium luehmannii*).

Give me shelter

This shade structure, cantilevered over the dining area, is in spotted gum and powder-coated aluminium, with an airy slatted roof. Benches with flip-up seats conceal handy storage space.

Hug it out

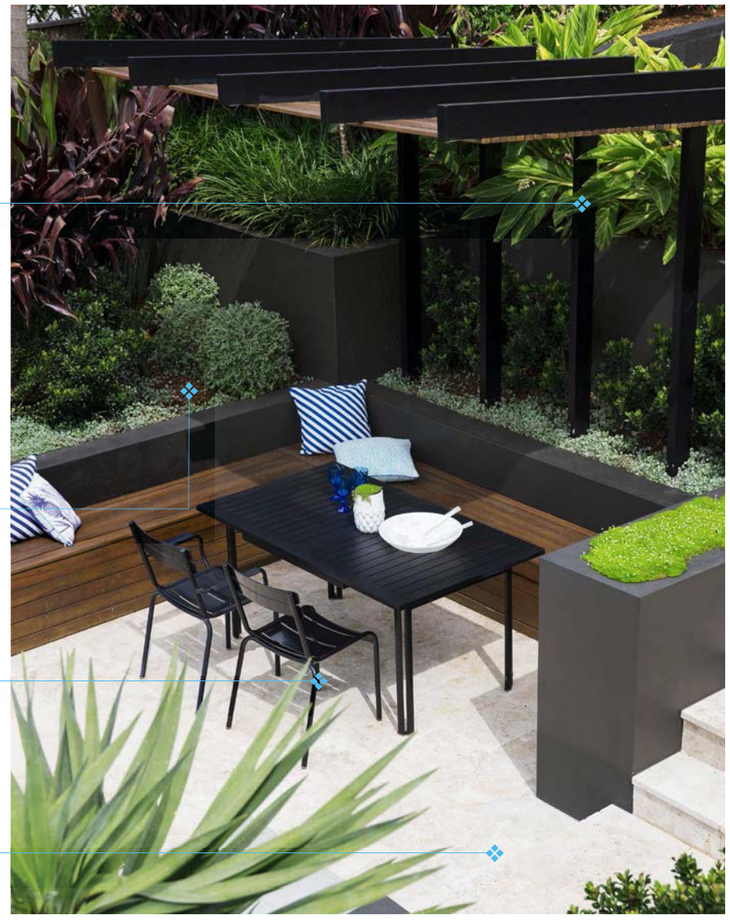
Garden beds 'hug' the space, making it feel intimate. Foliage includes purple-brown *Cordyline* 'Negra' (black cabbage tree), green-grey balls of *Tuecrium* and splashes of tall lime *Alpinia* (ornamental ginger). The groundcover is *Dichondra* 'Silver Falls'.

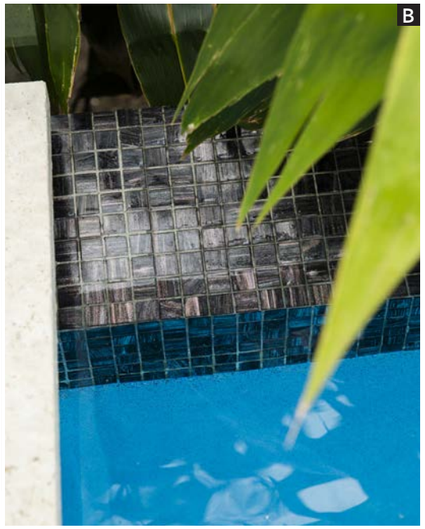
Outdoor haven

"The entertaining area is sunny and protected from wind," says Clare. "It feels incredibly private."

Stone cool

"Travertine is hard-wearing and, due to its density, stays cool underfoot – even on hot days," says Matt.





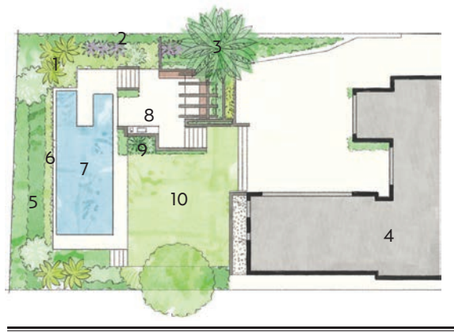


Illustration by Allison Langton.

1 *Cyathea cooperi*
2 *Syzygium luehmannii* hedge
3 Transplanted palm tree
4 House
5 *Tristaniopsis laurina* hedge
6 Tiger grass
7 Pool
8 Dining/entertaining area
9 *Dracaena draco*
10 Lawn

A *Cordyline* 'Negra' is a favourite of Matt's. "I love the broad leaf and changing colours. When it's young it's a chocolatey lime, then turns burgundy."
B For the pool edge and water line, Matt has used glass mosaics. The interior is rendered in Gemtex, a smooth quartz material.
C Growing as a groundcover next to the dining zone is *Scleranthus biflorus*, a lush, moss-like plant in vivid lime. "It's only 30mm high but has as much impact as some of the larger plants," says Matt.
D Matt created a green screen to hide the clothesline by training Chinese star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) along wires.

MATT'S TIPS FOR A SLOPING SITE

- Sloping sites present opportunities for creativity and bespoke design.
- Changes of level create interest and, with the right design, can make small spaces feel bigger.
- Sites like these lend themselves perfectly to creating a really intimate sunken seating area.
- Use bench seats for storage. They can also perform as stairs and hide retaining walls.
- A pool can be a great tool for raising the level of a block, providing it meets council guidelines.

This garden won a Gold Award and Best in Category for residential projects costing $50,000-$150,000, from the Australian Institute of Landscape Designers and Managers (AILDM). #

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