

This backyard retreat in Sydney's Northern Beaches was in need of a serious makeover to turn it into the inviting Aussie bush-meets-beach entertaining zone it is today

WORDS NIGEL BARTLETT PHOTOGRAPHY JASON BUSCH

coastal escape

Matt Leacy and his team from Landart Landscapes had a challenge on their hands in the form of a closed-in garden. They pushed back the retaining wall and put in a set of wide steps leading to the swimming pool to open up the space, and nurtured a wild native garden to create a relaxed vibe.

There must be times when designers look at an existing garden and think, "Why would you even do that?" A case in point was the original backyard of this home in Manly on Sydney's Northern Beaches. Raised above the house, it made the new owners feel claustrophobic and closed-in, with a retaining wall only 1.2 metres

from the rear windows. The top of the wall was home to a row of shrubs, so the lawn itself couldn't even be seen. "The garden overcrowded the house – it felt as if it was sitting on top of you when you were indoors," says Matt Leacy, director of Landart Landscapes. "You looked out of the windows straight onto a wall."

The new owners, a couple with two young boys, wanted a coastal look and to make the garden feel open and welcoming – a place where they could entertain – and where their sons could be seen from the house. Equally important, they wanted to make full use of the swimming pool hidden at the rear of the property.

Matt and his team's first tasks were to push the retaining wall back and sort out drainage problems that meant rainwater often flowed into the house. This involved a lot of excavation work – by hand. "We couldn't get any digging machines in there, so we spent weeks with shovels, mattocks and electric hammers," says Matt.

Once the retaining wall had been moved, the team built a set of steps rising to the garden, leading your eye towards the pool, now visible from the house through frameless glass fencing. "The steps make you want to go up and have a swim," says Matt.

The pool, meanwhile, was a renovation job in itself. "It was 40 or 50 years old and lined with pebblecrete, which extended up to become a curved wall dividing the garden from a unit block behind," says Matt. "So we squared up the wall, clad it in limestone and then retiled the pool."

The pool was surrounded by decking made from dark merbau timber, but rather than replace it, Matt and his team applied a lime-wash finish to blend in with the limestone pavers and steps. "The lighter tones helped create that relaxed, beachy feel the owners wanted," he says. "We avoided the expense of replacing all the timber, and it's better for the environment if you can create a completely new look by recycling the existing materials."

As for the plants, Matt's team started from scratch, keeping only the pine and palm trees already on the property. "We introduced a mix of native and exotic species to tie in with both the local area and with the existing trees, while keeping it all low maintenance," says Matt. The tall pines at the back of the pool provide privacy, and Matt planted lilly pilly hedges along the perimeter to further screen the garden from neighbours.

The front garden has a structured layout, which was dictated by its aspect and the architecture of the house, and is also home to a raised veggie patch. "This spot faces north and the owners were really keen on growing their own food," says Matt. Dramatic dracaena is teamed with bunches of *Leucophyta brownii* 'Silver Nugget' below while native rosemary and liriopie line the border.

In contrast, the back garden has a wild and natural look. "The owners wanted it to have a coastal bushland feel that didn't appear manicured in any way. Instead, they wanted it to be really loose and free," says Matt. This means that some plantings look almost overgrown – for instance, tuckeroo and ozothamnus are flourishing near the built-in seating – while the mondo grass around paving stones set into the side of the lawn is deliberately left unclipped.

The outdoor furniture in the back garden is made for relaxing with a teak table and teak and wicker-weave chairs. "There's nothing too structured or formal in the garden, so we continued that theme with the furnishings as well," says Matt.

To the side of the pool is an existing filter box, hidden behind a large wall. "We used that to our advantage by building bench seating in front of it to create a quiet area that the family can use close to the pool," says Matt. "We also put in a raised planter behind the bench seating to break up the wall a bit."

Matt made use of copper for outdoor fittings, which will add character and acquire a patina over time. "We installed a copper outdoor shower for rinsing off by the pool and the gutter and downpipes at the back of the house are also copper, so they all work together," he says. "They'll last a long time and weather beautifully."

The end result couldn't be more different from before. No longer cut off and separate from the house, the garden is now an open space where the family can play, entertain and relax. **□**
To find out more about Matt Leacy's work, visit landart.com.au.

“The owners wanted it to have a coastal bushland feel that didn't appear manicured in any way. Instead, they wanted it to be really loose and free.”

MATT LEACY, DIRECTOR, LANDART LANDSCAPES

4 key plant picks

Here are Matt's top choices for this relaxed coastal-themed garden



Anigozanthos 'Dwarf Delight' (kangaroo paw) adds fresh and long-lasting colour.



Dichondra argentea 'Silver Falls' is a creeping plant with long, silver trailing stems.



Leucophyta brownii 'Silver Nugget' (dwarf cushion bush) will flourish in a sunny spot.



Westringia fruticosa (native rosemary) shines as a hedging or screening plant.

“The style of planting in the front garden is still random but a little bit more tailored than the back. It has a similar relaxed feel to the back garden with a lot of mixed natives.”

MATT EACY, DIRECTOR, LANDART LANDSCAPES

Landscaper Matt and his team crafted a lush coastal garden around the front of the house, a striking contrast to the charming little raised vegie patch by the window.

© GREAT FRUIT WOODS/STYLING: NATALIE JOHNSON



5 GREAT FINDS

1

Essential Carbon bowl, \$495. Garden Life, gardenlife.com.au.



2

Kontecture X3 watering can, NZ\$175. Garden Objects, garden-objects.com.



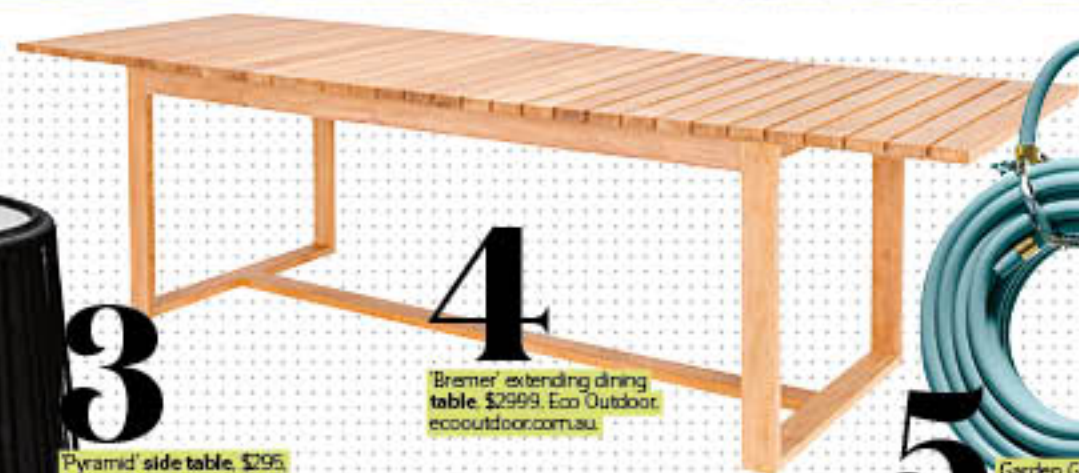
3

Pyramid side table, \$295. Terrace Outdoor Living, terraceoutdoorliving.com.au.



4

Bremer extending dining table, \$2999. Eco Outdoor, ecooutdoor.com.au.



5

Garden Glory garden hose, \$179. Top3 By Design, top3.com.au.

