



Opposite Kerry in the beautifully manicured front garden. Above The small blue flowers of groundcover *Isotoma fluviatilis*. Right The front garden stops passers-by in their tracks – people often linger to admire it. Below The pavers and plants create geometric patterns.



## blank canvas

A once plain, sloping space was ripe for clearly defined outdoor areas filled with beautiful plants

Text by **Carol Bucknell**. Photography by **Sally Tagg**.

finding a garden that was untouched was a big drawcard for Kerry Butler when it came to buying a house.

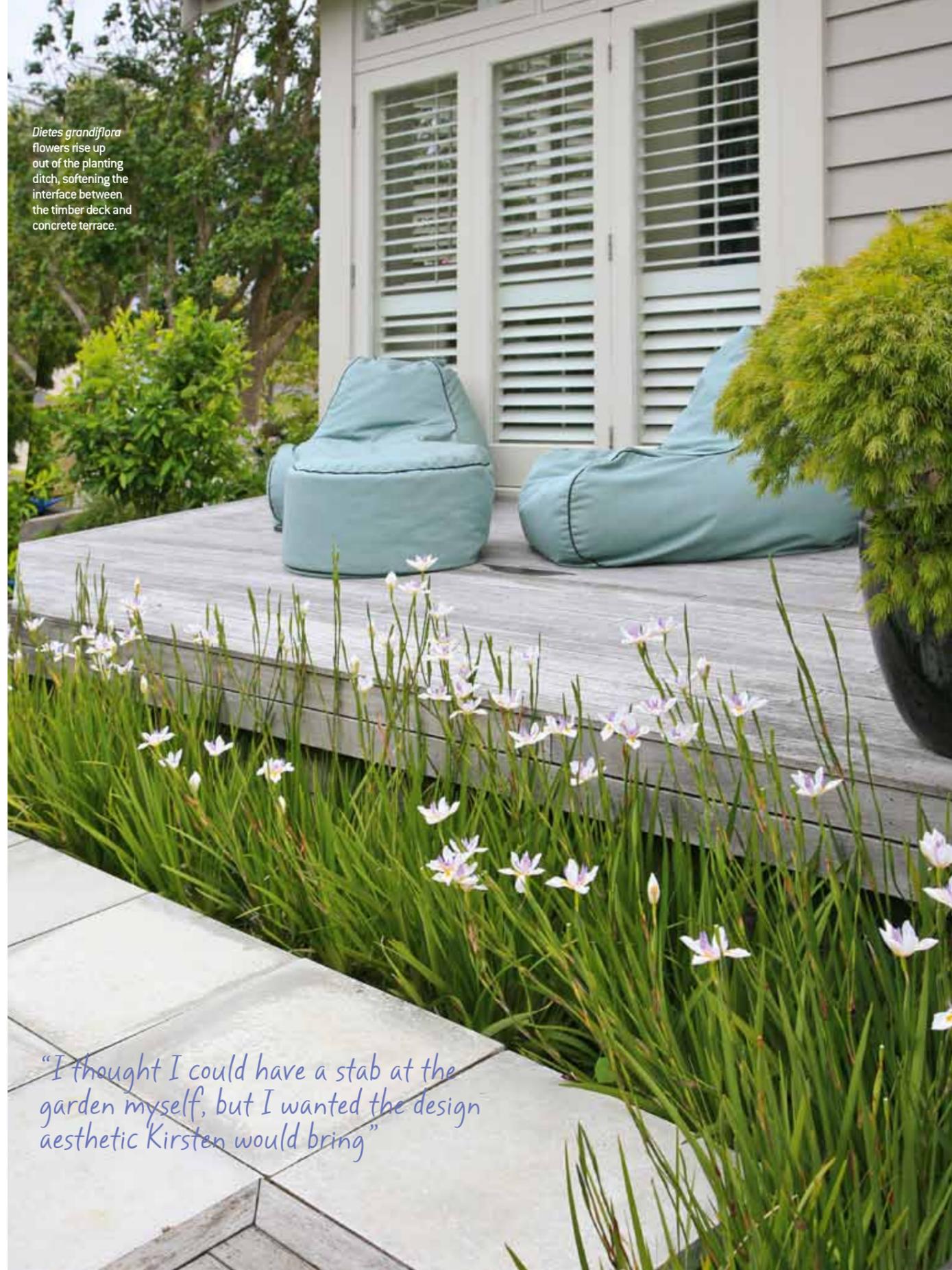
"I've always been an avid gardener, but haven't had the opportunity to create a garden from scratch, to put my stamp on it," she says of the Auckland property she and husband Travis Atkinson bought two years ago. "For the bloke, [the drawcard] was the double garage!"

The couple approached landscape designer Kirsten Sachs about transforming the bland outdoor area into something special. For Kirsten, it was the ideal project. "I love working with character homes and

creating entertaining areas," she says.

"Having a completely blank canvas as well as a client who is passionate about gardening was a bonus. Also the fact it had a sloping aspect meant I could play around with levels and use them to define the different spaces."

The once uninspiring kikuyu lawn dotted with a few shrubs has been replaced by beautifully organised, multi-level gardens at both the front and back of the property. The new outdoor area is divided into sections to provide a variety of outdoor spaces for the couple and their expanding family (son Lachlan, 2, and a new baby due any day now).



*Dietes grandiflora* flowers rise up out of the planting ditch, softening the interface between the timber deck and concrete terrace.

"I thought I could have a stab at the garden myself, but I wanted the design aesthetic Kirsten would bring"



Above The fine gravel covering the steps leading to the veg plot has become a "psuedo sandpit" for Lachlan. Top right *Dietes grandiflora*. Below Sweet peas flourish in the potager. Left The raised beds are retained by railway sleepers.



One of Kerryn's favourite aspects of the garden is its layout. It's divided into four distinct spaces: the front garden, outdoor entertaining area, barbecue patio and vegetable potager.

"I thought I could have a stab at the garden myself but I wanted the design aesthetic Kirsten would bring," says Kerryn. She discovered Kirsten through her brother Geoff, a builder who had worked on Kirsten's award-winning rain garden at the Ellerslie Flower Show. (Geoff also built Kerryn and Travis' garden.)

Kerryn checked out Kirsten's work on her website and was impressed. "All her gardens had exactly the kind of planting that I like – lush, green and subtropical."

Kerryn also wanted some pretty touches, so Kirsten created a feature of *Dietes grandiflora* in the planting ditch around the terrace. "I love the mass of white flowers in summer," says Kerryn.

In spring and summer the front garden catches the attention of passers-by with the petite blue flowers of the groundcover *Isotoma fluviatilis*, strappy mondo grass surrounding large rectangle paving slabs, and the huge, shiny leaves of tractor seat ligularia (*Ligularia reniformis*). More textural contrast is provided by the tiny leaves of corokia and buxus in the form of hedges and clipped topiary balls.

"We didn't want the usual hedge on hedge with a picket fence, we wanted something more exciting. People are always stopping to look," says Kerryn.



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Kirsten enjoys the challenge of creating defined areas with their own distinct functions, such as the vegetable garden, lawn and entertaining area. “I love being able to work these spaces into my overall design,” she says.

In the back garden the two existing decks weren’t large enough for outdoor entertaining, so Kirsten designed a paved terrace that’s level with the lawn and linked it to the lower deck off the dining room with a timber ‘bridge’.

Because Kerryn wanted a mainly green garden, Kirsten planted palms, taros and other foliage plants, with purple and red accents supplied by the native groundcover acaena and heucheras. Hibiscus and canna flowers provide flashes of pink and red.

Despite having never grown them before, Kerryn was determined to have vegetables in her garden. The raised beds are made from jarrah railway sleepers and there’s a fine gravel surrounding the base, so the potager area doubles as a “pseudo sandpit” in which Lachlan loves to play.

The family spends most of its time in the entertaining area. “We basically live out there. We bought a cantilevered umbrella and it gives us plenty of shade. You can open the dining room doors on both sides so that it becomes one large entertaining space,” says Kerryn.

The outdoor living area looks across the large lawn to wide borders of subtropical plants along the boundaries, which help to screen out the neighbours. “I was able to use a dense palette of plants because Kerryn is such a good gardener,” says Kirsten. “I felt confident they would perform well with her looking after them.”

Having said that, the garden is pretty low maintenance, she says. “Once the planting thickens up, it only needs to be chopped back and tidied up at the end of winter.”

Both client and designer love the different levels of the garden that separate the various spaces without using screens or planting. “It’s also rewarding that this garden is so well cared for,” adds Kirsten.



Above Lush, mainly green subtropical planting around the edges of the lawn screens out the neighbours. Left Tractor seat ligularia is a stand-out plant in both the front and back gardens. Below right Because Kerryn is such an enthusiastic gardener, Kirsten was free to use a large number of different plants, safe in the knowledge that Kerryn would be able to maintain them. Below left Kerryn and Lachlan enjoy a snack at the outdoor table.

