

FEATURE GARDEN

Reverse psychology

Rather than base the design of her tiny front garden around its view from the street, this Grey Lynn resident did the opposite

Text by Carol Bucknell. Photography by Nicola Edmonds.



“Deep down, I feared the design would be boring because, after all, what can you do with such a small garden?”

Renovations to her Grey Lynn bungalow left Nathalie Morris at a loss as to how to deal with a small but important patch in the front garden. The area could be seen from the lounge and, of course, was on display every time she walked in or out the front door. “So it was really worth putting the effort into this part of the garden,” says Nathalie.

“I think, for a lot of people the front garden is designed around how it looks from the street. I wanted the opposite. We are in a quiet cul de sac and, with the main lounge positioned at the front of the house, I wanted to create an outlook from that room.”

After an online search, she approached landscape designer Kirsten Sach whose ideas impressed her immediately. However, she did have a few initial trepidations. “I think, deep down, I feared that the design would be boring because, after all, what can you do with such a small garden? But when the design came back from Kirsten, it was actually more exotic than I was expecting. I love that I have something quite different to the traditional front garden with a patch of lawn.

Site As part of the renovation, Nathalie’s architect had extended the lounge to the front of the house, which faces the street, and added large bifold windows along that wall of the house. “This allows me to open these windows right up in summer and let the outside in,” Nathalie explains. “The renovations changed the configuration of the entire front of the house, so the patch of garden was a blank canvas. It is only a small pocket handkerchief-sized piece of land, but given how prominent it is from the lounge, I wanted something that I would enjoy looking at.

“I also wanted it to be relatively low-maintenance (so no lawn!) with some kind of pathway to allow access down the side of the house.”

The site was a small, flat square and the brief to Kirsten was to do something interesting with it, using natives and subtropicals that were visually interesting with plenty of texture. Nathalie was particularly keen to see whether the planting could include her favourite tree, the nikau palm.

Style The style of the garden is an intriguing mix of Pacifica and Eastern influences. Nathalie had recently visited Japan and was interested in the concept of Zen gardens that are usually designed to be looked at while seated outside the garden. The Eastern influence is clear as soon as you enter the garden, with schist stepping stones, surrounded by miniature mondo grass, taking you through the tiny space to the side of the house. The Pacifica feel comes from the layered subtropical planting and different leaf textures, and the two influences complement each other perfectly.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE When viewed from the lounge, the densely planted garden is a tapestry of texture and colour. Mature nikau palms act as a focal point while also screening the house from the street. Bifolds open the house up to the garden, making the lounge feel like an outdoor room.





Landscaping The number-one rule for designing tiny spaces is not to over-complicate things, and Kirsten is a firm believer in this principle. “Often too much is squeezed into a small place,” she says. “Sometimes the simplicity of creating a small informal path through planting with layering of plants is all it takes to create a cohesive and well-designed space. Plants are the shining stars in this garden and leaf textures and colour have been contrasted and played off each other.”

Planting A lush port-wine magnolia hedge screens the garden from the road, adding privacy and complementing the traditional character of the house. Under the windows of the lounge is a group of scented dwarf Australian frangipani (*Hymenosporum flavum* ‘Gold Nugget’) while colourful summer-flowering cannas on the side boundary also screen neighbours.

“The blue-flowering groundcover blue star creeper (*Isotoma*) is a really stunning feature in this garden,” says Kirsten. “Its carpet of blue flowers gives you a lovely surprise on entry.”

Nathalie is delighted with the planting, particularly the use of different textures and heights, shapes and colours. “Using a range of different plants for the groundcover has added a lot of visual interest,” she enthuses. “The blue star creeper and mondo grasses have now grown to fully cover the ground.”

“Its carpet of blue flowers gives you a lovely surprise”

Standout features Both owner and designer knew from the outset that the garden needed a special feature as a focal point. Deciding what that should be was not difficult, says Nathalie. “We discussed the possibility of having some kind of sculpture but decided instead to include a mature nikau as I find them very sculptural.”

Kirsten scoured the nurseries, looking for the ideal size and shape, eventually settling on a large specimen that had to be craned into the garden. “It was worth it,” says Nathalie. “I love my living sculpture, especially when the berries come out. The nikau is the standout feature of the garden for me, but I also love the stepping stones and groundcover.”

“Now that the plants are established, the garden looks exactly like Kirsten’s original drawings, with a lush, subtropical feel. I enjoy opening up the bifold windows and sitting reading, looking up every so often to contemplate the garden.” ●



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP

Stepping-stone schist pavers are set into dwarf mondo grass and blue star creeper groundcovers with carefully selected rocks adding sculptural form; the giant leaves of the tractor seat plant (*Ligularia reniformis*); blue star creeper (*Isotoma*) forms a dense carpet; Nathalie loves her nikau palms.

THIS PAGE The contrasting leaf colours and shapes of the native climber *Tecomanthe* (left), canna, mondo grass, black taro and nikau ensure the tiny garden is full of interest.