



HELEN YOUNG

Every little bit counts

WHAT TO DO WITH A SMALL, STEEPLY SLOPING SITE

designed the curves of the gardens to reference the curve of the full-length butterfly roof,” says garden designer Janine Mendel, whose clients for this project in Perth were looking for something more adventurous than their previous traditional home.

The business couple had engaged architects Klopper & Davis to design a modern house that maximised their relatively small and steeply sloping site in Swanbourne, on the coast in the city’s west. “The main living areas are upstairs to capitalise on the views over the playing fields of Scotch College, so the garden had to look good from above,” says Mendel. “That’s where my gardens really shine – when you can see the underlying structure.”

Her involvement began in 2015 when the site was “just a big hole in the ground”. The house plans defined three garden areas: the verge garden, entry courtyard and sloping rear garden. Each had its own challenges. When Mendel presented her concept plan to the clients they gave the go-ahead straight away, despite the budget being higher than expected. “They

loved everything about it and could see the value,” says Mendel.

The verge garden is all about structured, waterwise plantings. A grass tree is surrounded by low groundcovers – *Eremophila* ‘Kalbarri Carpet’, *Scaevola* ‘Purple Fanfare’ and prostrate rosemary, with silver cushions of *Leucophyta brownii*.

The entry courtyard is effectively a roof garden, as it sits over the garage and has just 15cm depth of soil within the low curved wall that defines it. At its centre is a weathering steel grass tree sculpture that the owners had bought. The colourful, textural succulents include *Cotyledon* ‘Silver Waves’, blue chalksticks (*Senecio mandraliscae*), *Sedum* ‘Gold Mound’ and black *Aeonium* ‘Schwarzkopf’. “We couldn’t believe how quickly everything grew in that tiny bit of soil. It already looks lush,” Mendel says.

The rear garden is more complex, yet tranquil and inviting. An angled blade wall bisecting a curved retaining wall spills water into a stream of river stones. Layered bluestone platforms and composite decking double as occasional seating, and a covered





alfresco area provides lounging space. Two entry points allow circular movement through the garden. “The challenge on a small, sloping block is to get the levels right,” says Mendel. “Steps take up space, so every step needs to have another purpose. If you don’t get the proportions right, you end up with tiny unusable spaces.”

The plants that soften the structural elements are an eclectic mix, chosen to add a sub-tropical feel to Perth’s hot, dry summers. The purple leaves of *Cercis* ‘Forest Pansy’ teamed with lime *Gleditsia* ‘Sunburst’ are a favourite combination; both trees have spreading canopies to provide shade in the future. Also starring is a 1.2m-wide bowl filled with succulents as colourful as a coral reef. “If you want to make a statement, it’s better to be too big than too small,” advises Mendel.

Her clients are delighted: “Janine understood our concern that in moving to this smaller property we would lose the connection we value between house and garden. Her design for the rear garden cleverly makes it seem so much bigger than the space she had to work with.”

Q&A

What’s the best way to apply used coffee grounds to my garden?

Don Frayne, Perth

Fresh coffee grounds are high in caffeine, chlorogenic acid and tannins that inhibit seed germination and growth of plants, especially seedlings. Caffeine is toxic to beneficial fungi and bacteria in the soil, and to aquatic organisms. However, when composted for three months, spent coffee grounds are beneficial. They improve soil structure, increase water and nutrient holding capacity, and contain useful levels of nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, magnesium and copper.

Our new blue birdbath, positioned in part shade, is not being used by any birds, including our resident honeyeaters, sparrows and doves. Why?

Bruce Maxwell, Hervey Bay, Qld

To feel safe to use water, most birds need good visibility from perches nearby and protective shrubs to escape to. Pedestal birdbaths in the open are safe from cats but exposed to predatory birds. Water at or near ground level fits birds’ natural instincts, and moving water holds most allure. Different birds prefer different depths and edge widths of water bowls. Glazed birdbaths can be too slippery; stones in the bottom give better footing. Keep the water fresh.

What potted plants will give us lots of colour over a long time?

Tracy, Balranald, NSW

Geranium ‘Big Red’ is one of my favourites for large, intense red blooms most of the year; ivy-leaved geraniums are good, too, for trailing over pots. Others include dwarf ‘Bambino’ bougainvilleas, dwarf hibiscus, salvias, ‘Flower Carpet’ roses, mandevillas, dwarf oleanders, and some of the new, more perennial hybrids of petunias such as Happitunias and Calibrachoas.



Send your questions to: helenyoungtwig@gmail.com or Helen Young, PO Box 3098, Willoughby North, NSW 2068. Website: helenyoung.com.au. The best question for March wins the Husqvarna PW125 electric pressure washer worth \$179. husqvarna.com/au