



Renovating the garden and house simultaneously has created harmony indoors and out for this Sydney home. For the full story on this garden makeover, turn the page...

Gardens

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF PLANTS AND OUTDOOR SPACES

Complete picture

Recognising the potential in an undeveloped garden scored Sydney landscape designer Nicola Cameron her dream family home.

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BEFORE YOU BUY

If you're a homebuyer and outdoor space is on your wishlist but the budget is tight, Nicola recommends looking for properties with:

- ✦ Clear level spaces to minimise the amount of excavation and retaining required.
- ✦ Feature trees to anchor the garden and provide shade, so you don't have to build shade structures.
- ✦ Good privacy from neighbours.
- ✦ Existing swimming pools that can be renovated (upgrading an old concrete pool can cost between \$20,000-\$40,000).

Nicola's pool renovation included sandblasting the concrete interior, installing white waterline tiles and laying new sandstone coping. Along the boundary, a gabion wall has been filled with sandstone unearthed from the excavation while a row of weeping lilly pilli (*Waterhousea floribunda*) creates a lush privacy screen and evergreen backdrop.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Tigga enjoys the sunny steps: the pink-flowering plant on the right is Canary Island sage (*Salvia canariensis*), the hedge on the left is *Viburnum suspensum*. Archie and Mimi sit poolside. The silvery-green leaves of *Strobilanthes gossypinus*. Out the front, native species include dwarf native frangipani (*Hymenosporum flavum* 'Lushious'), river wattle (*Acacia cognata*), Gynea lily (*Doryanthes excelsa*) and a hedge of *Melaleuca alternifolia*. Tumbling over the large planters are a diverse array of species including burgundy-hued *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop', silvery *Cotyledon orbiculata* 'Silver Waves', *Rhipsalis* sp., *Kniphofia* sp. and *Aloe arborescens*. *Echinacea* 'Double Scoop Lemon Cream'. **OPPOSITE** The family (from left) Archie, Nicola, Mimi and James enjoy the spacious deck that extends off the internal living area. "Gardens are an extension of the home and need to be multifunctional, offering not only a place for children to play but also a sanctuary for adults to socialise and relax," says Nicola.



Savvy homebuyers are familiar with the adage about buying 'the worst house in the best street'. The same wisdom can apply to homes with untamed gardens, says landscape designer Nicola Cameron, founder of Pepo Botanic Design.

"Seeing and realising the potential of your outdoor space will increase the size of your living area, and add value to your home for years to come," Nicola says. She's speaking from first-hand experience.

In 2013, Nicola and her husband James were hunting for a new home for themselves and their children Mimi, now 14, and Archie, 13. Among the homes on their hit list was one Nicola describes as being "in the perfect location, with the worst garden", in the beachside Sydney suburb of Maroubra. It was on a steeply sloping site and the garden consisted of patchy lawn, scrubby plants and an old in-ground pool.

On that initial inspection Nicola couldn't stomach the challenge of it. "I politely handed the flyer back to the agent as I walked out the door and told him it was too hard," says Nicola.

But the following week, when she was working on a design for a client whose garden presented its own challenges, she felt a pang: "I thought to myself, 'if she can see the potential with this place why can't I do the same?'" With renewed resolve - and

"THE REAL-ESTATE AGENT CONGRATULATED US ON OUR ABILITY TO SEE THE PROPERTY'S POTENTIAL." NICOLA CAMERON

pen and paper in hand - Nicola returned to the Maroubra house with her landscaper hat on, and began sketching.

"It had myriad problems," she says, "There were no functional spaces, everything was dated and there was no connection between inside and out."

Major excavation was inevitable. Hefty retaining walls and footings would be

required to create level areas and the 1980s pool needed refurbishing. From her initial sketches, Nicola envisioned a generous entertaining deck at the rear of the home, level with the internal floor of the yet-to-be-designed living space.

Once she'd collected her ideas, Nicola and James - a builder who oversees the construction side of the Pepo business - did their sums and estimated the budget required to transform the outdoor spaces (see 'The Lowdown', over page). They then paid an architect and builder to assess the

house and estimate the cost of the building renovation. Only then did they make an offer on the property, which was accepted. "The agent told us that other buyers had been turned off by the garden," says Nicola. "We secured the property at a price below the market value at the time."

Renovations to the home and garden began simultaneously and took six ▶



THE LOWDOWN

The investment required for a garden like Nicola's would be:

DESIGN FEES
\$15,000-\$20,000

DEMOLITION \$25,000

HARDSCAPING
Walls, decking, paths, fences
(including automatic front gate),
\$120,000-\$140,000

SOFTSCAPING
Soil improvement
and planting, \$60,000

IRRIGATION & LIGHTING
\$20,000

POOL RENOVATION
Sandblasting, tiling and
new coping, \$30,000

**TOTAL (CONSTRUCTION
& PLANTING)**
\$250,000-\$280,000



“IT WAS IMPORTANT TO CREATE OUR OWN RESTORATIVE OASIS WE COULD SHARE WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS.” NICOLA

months. In the 11x5m back garden, Nicola's priorities were to create level and open areas; improve the flow between the house and pool (to alleviate a height difference of 2.4m); and screen along the north-western boundary, which was overlooked by neighbours. She also wanted to provide a patch of lawn for their dog, Tigga, and install an outdoor shower for her family of surfers.

In total, 25 tonnes of sand and builders' rubbish were removed from the back garden alone. The excavations unearthed a lot of golden-toned sandstone which was put to good use as the 'filling' for a gabion wall along the rear boundary. Behind this stone wall, Nicola planted a row of weeping lilly pilly (*Waterhousea floribunda*) to create a high screening hedge.

Post-excavation, the back space is divided into three level areas: the lowest level is a 6x3.5m entertaining deck made of spotted gum extending off the rear living area, the middle level accommodates an outdoor shower deck and the top level contains the pool, deck and a 3x5m rectangle of lawn for Tigga.

To link the bottom and top levels Nicola designed cascading retaining walls that

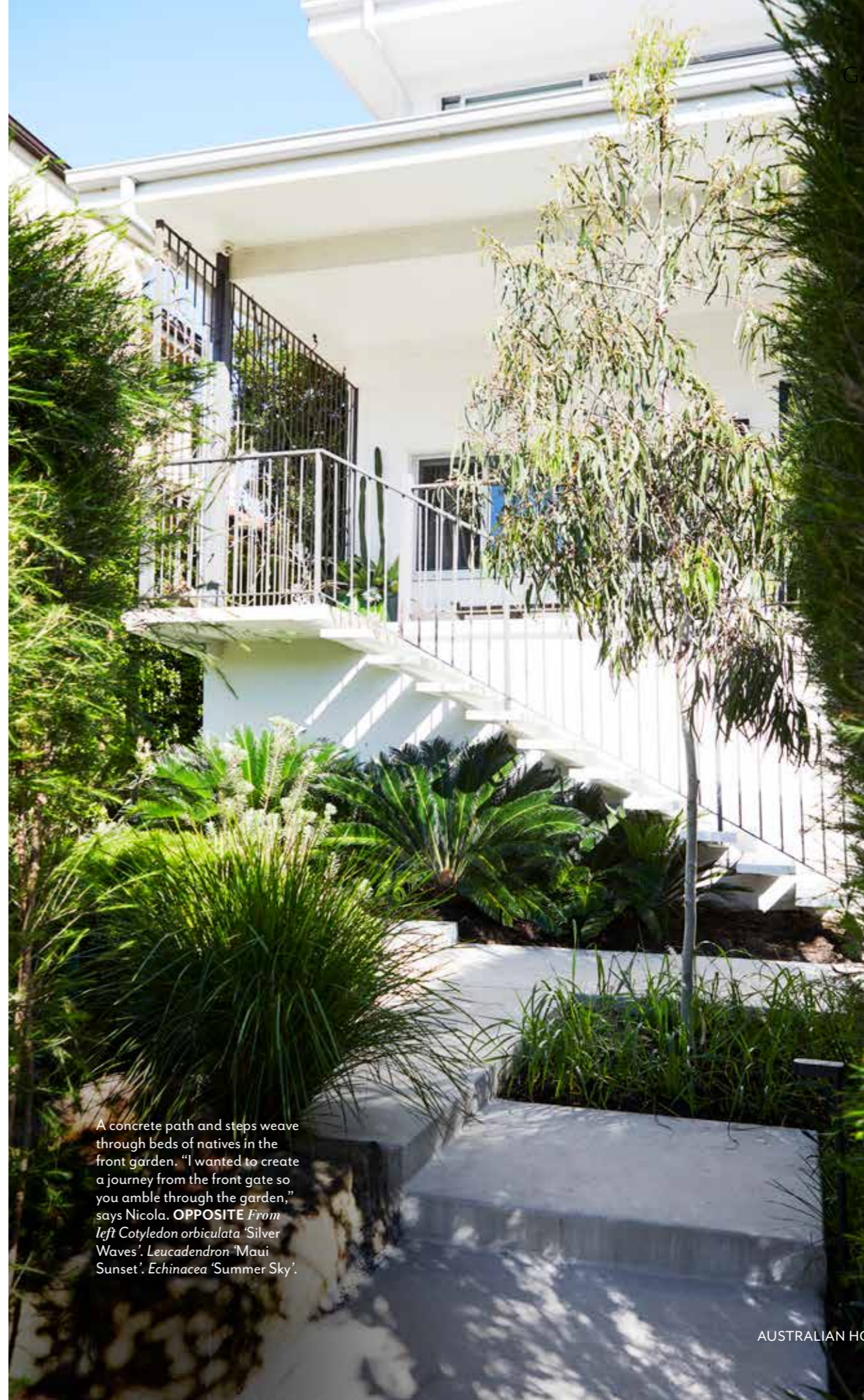
serve as two gigantic planter boxes stretching across the width of the deck. In these she planted a glorious mix of plants that spill and tumble over the walls. “We wanted to look out from the house and see the garden,” says Nicola. “This location is exposed and can feel windy, hot and dry at times so it was important to create our own green restorative oasis we could share with family and friends.”

When it came to the 11x9m front garden, Nicola wanted to create a sense of journey to the front of the house. “I didn't want to have a straight path leading directly to the base of the steps. It was important to break the view from the gate to the front door, and I wanted to look out of the house through a tree,” she says. The majority of the plantings are native, including lemon-scented gum trees (*Corymbia citriodora* 'Scentuous'), a screening hedge of melaleuca and swathes of grasses, among them *Pennisetum* 'Red Buttons'.

Seeing the potential in their outdoor spaces reaped rich rewards for Nicola and her family. “Now our once-disconnected exterior spaces all flow beautifully with the interior and each other,” she says. **H&G Pepo Botanic Design; pepo.com.au.**



A concrete path and steps weave through beds of natives in the front garden. “I wanted to create a journey from the front gate so you amble through the garden,” says Nicola. **OPPOSITE** From left *Cotyledon orbiculata* 'Silver Waves'. *Leucadendron* 'Maui Sunset'. *Echinacea* 'Summer Sky'.



REALITY CHECK

“People's expectations of renovating a garden are often completely unrealistic,” says Nicola. “They run out of funds after renovating or building the house, and are left with little or no budget for the garden.”

- ✦ The outdoor area shouldn't feel 'tacked on'. If it is, it will devalue the look and feel of the whole property.
- ✦ Landscaping isn't as simple as it looks on reality TV shows! In addition to planning and design, excavation is often required, lighting and irrigation needs to be installed and correct plants need to be chosen.
- ✦ Approach a garden reno in the same way you manage a home build: methodically plan the design and installation.
- ✦ Imagine where the functional spaces should be placed. Consider where the barbecue and outdoor sofa should logically sit and how the outdoor space will relate to the interior of the home.
- ✦ Before you buy, invest in a consultation with a landscape architect or designer who has experience in construction and installation costs.
- ✦ If you're renovating the garden yourself, draw up a plan and do the sums to make sure you don't overstretch the budget and end up with half a garden.
- ✦ Be aware that councils often demand that a professional garden design, produced by a qualified specialist, is submitted along with a development application for a renovation or rebuild.