

ideas outside

GO ON, IT'S THE WEEKEND, SO GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

148 **Garden makeover**

A sustainable garden designer works his green-fingered magic on a boring backyard

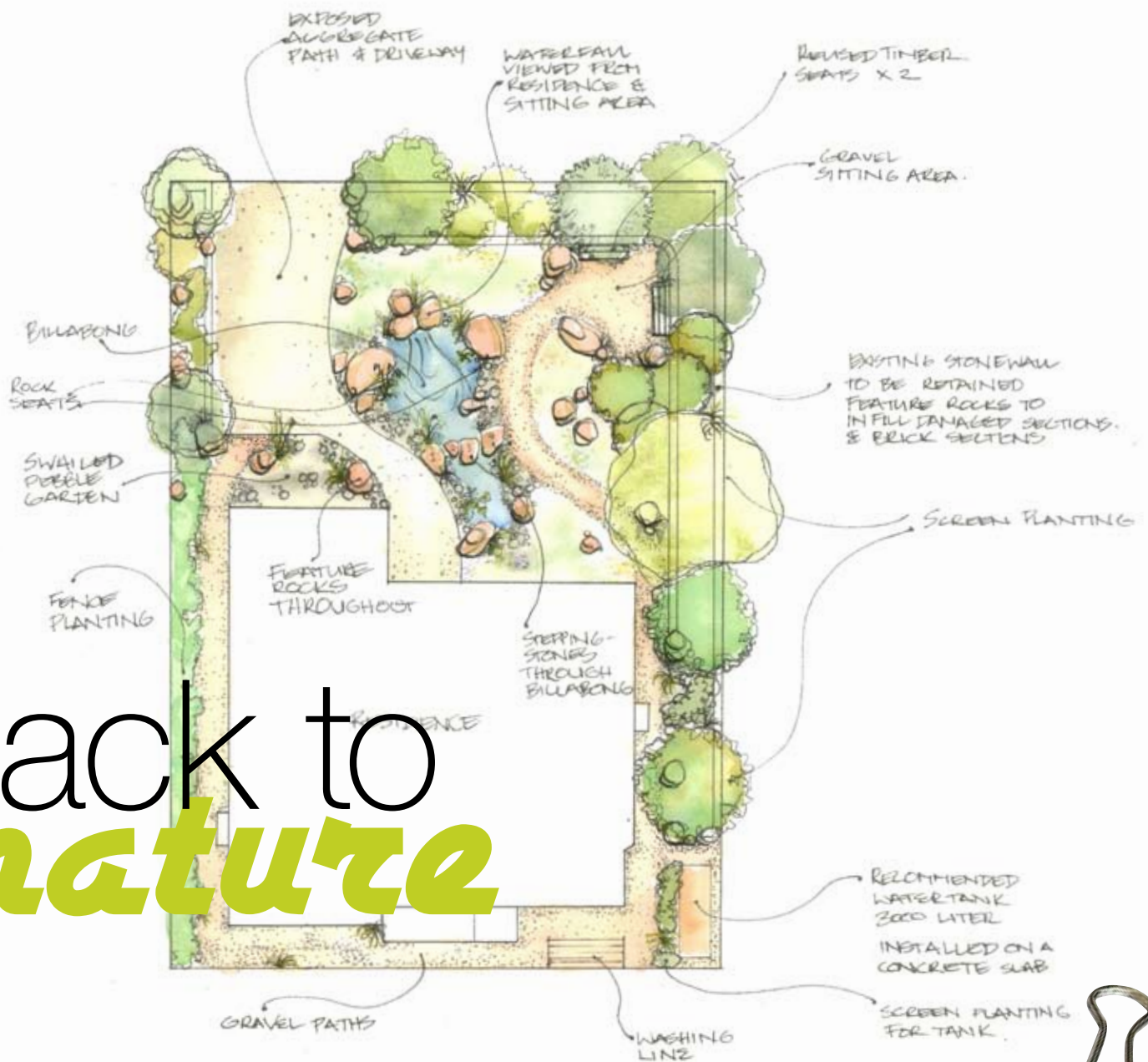
154 **In the garden this month**

For a blooming lovely summer you need to plant your bulbs in winter

Suburban sprawl

It's hard to believe now, but just two years ago this lush, low-maintenance garden in Melbourne was a flat patch of lawn. *Turn the page to find out how it was transformed into a gorgeous, green patch of paradise.* →

back to *nature*



A suburban garden is transformed into a lush, waterwise and **sustainable oasis**

BOX HILL, a suburb in eastern Melbourne, is known today for its diversity and bustling atmosphere, and for its convenience to the city due to the rail link – not as a suburb particularly well known for its bush gardens or eco-sensitivity. That’s why this garden is all the more special and unique.

It’s just a normal-sized backyard adjoined to an average 1950s property, yet with a billabong and a diverse range of plants that attract local wildlife, the essence of the bush is very much alive here.

But this lush, sustainable paradise hasn’t always been in existence. Just two years ago the same block of land was a bland and very boring patch of lawn (pictured right). That was until homeowner Bernadette enlisted the services of Melbourne-based landscape designer Phillip Johnson.

“The garden came about accidentally as I was working with Phillip’s mum,” Bernadette explains. “He came to the house, had great ideas, drew a beautiful →



Bernadette’s uninspiring garden with its patch of grass and scattering of potplants was in desperate need of a makeover.



AFTER: Greener living

The inspirational bush landscape now provides a habitat for local wildlife and makes the house an enchanting place to live. A fast-growing wattle tree (at left) gives the young garden a sense of maturity.



secret sunny spot

Natural beauty

The overhanging lilly pilly, the only plant kept from the original landscape, provides a natural screen, and its berries attract the birds. A beautiful weeping wattle (*Acacia cognate* 'Limelight') softens the rock walling, while kangaroo paws have been planted to add seasonal colour.

plan and I commissioned what I see as a work of art," she says.

Phillip, who has been named as a finalist in the 2010 Victorian Premier's Sustainability Awards, specialises in creating low-maintenance and irrigation-free landscapes. His vision is to recreate habitats that incorporate water capture and conservation techniques, with the majority of the gardens he designs requiring no mains water. "Everything evolves from the billabong – the spring effect," he says.

As Bernadette's property is adjacent to Gardiners Creek, a waterway that's part of the Yarra River catchment, having the billabong extends the habitat corridor for local wildlife, so Phillip's idea works particularly well here. But Bernadette needed some convincing to go with the billabong plan. "I wasn't too keen on the idea at first," she explains, "But I trusted Phillip, so I went with it. And I'm glad I did as it's now the heart and soul of my garden."

The new-look landscape is a truly Australian-style garden, filled with natives, stone walls and secret pathways that use locally quarried stone and paving, lush foliage and low-maintenance grasses. The colour palette is a beautiful contrast of vivid greens, soft blue-greys, striking silvery shades and muted browns. And while there is no billy tea on the boil over the campsite, it doesn't take much imagination to see it.

The garden looks like it has been established for years, yet the only existing plant from the original landscape is a lilly pillly. However, when asked what Phillip would do to the garden with hindsight, he replies, "I'd use more established plants. Plants take time to grow and we felt that, after eradication, prior to construction, the landscape became very open and young."



Billabong beauties

The stones around the billabong are coldstream rock and come from a local quarry, as do the Castlemaine steppers. Billy Buttons (*Craspedia globosa*) and cotton bush lighten the garden with their magnificent silver foliage. →

Time will fill these gaps, of course, and it hasn't stopped Bernadette from enjoying her garden every day. "My favourite area in this small urban landscape is definitely the billabong and the adjacent sitting area," she says. "It's so peaceful. In the rain, on a misty morning when the sun's out, I look out of the window and feel very blessed." →

Greener gardening | Here are Phillip's top tips for developing an eco-friendly, sustainable garden

- 1 **Use local materials**, be it locally quarried stone, hardwoods or indigenous plants, as they have a great sense of place and take less green miles to reach you.
- 2 **Reuse & save** Use materials from the site and try not to export soil or fill – instead, work out how you can incorporate it in the design.
- 3 **Keep water onsite** This could be in a billabong, but equally it could be a water tank. Redirecting water from drains and downpipes is relatively simple.

To find out more info about sustainable gardening and the work of landscape designer Phillip Johnson, check out his website at Phillipjohnson.com.au



texture + TONE

The silver foliated plant (at left) is a prostrate form of Cootamundra wattle (*Acacia baileyana* 'Prostata'), which grows horizontally and still flowers in late winter. The longer tanika grass (*Lomandra longifolia*) adds movement and texture to the walled area.



pebble POWER

Pebbles help retain mulch and form a great transition zone between the garden and planting areas, yet still allow good drainage and help the water flow into the watercourse. They also add interesting colour and pattern to the garden floor.



sun SEEKER

A clearing of crazy paving, at the end of a stepping stone pathway, provides a wonderful sun trap where homeowner Bernadette loves to relax. The outdoor furniture is positioned here to take advantage of the views to the billabong and the wildlife it attracts.



stepping STONES

A dichondra groundcover merges the hard surface of the steppers and is able to take plenty of foot traffic. The light silver foliage of the *Leucophyta brownii* (Cushion bush) creates a striking contrast.



water WORKS

This gurgling spring is formed at the edge of the billabong and is made from Coldstream boulders. "It looks like the water is just bubbling out of the ground, which gives the landscape life," Phillip says.



local SUPPLIES

Sourcing local materials is one of the key design factors for all of Phillip Johnson's designs. In Bernadette's garden Phillip used Castlemaine flagging and Coldstream boulders that were quarried locally. 📍

Water wise

The driveway runoff is captured and redirected to the billabong, which rises and dries depending on the rainfall patterns. Marginal plants like the purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) grow on the silt edges.

