GARDENS

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This native/Mediterranean garden – part of a refurbishment of a large Sydney property by landscape designer Matt Leacy – sits in perfect harmony with its surroundings. Integral to the design is the massed planting of grasses including *Lomandra tanika*, *Miscanthus sinensis*, *Isolepis nodosa* and the grey/green sculptural plant *Beschorneria* (Mexican lily). Butterfly chair from The Design Hunter.

Photograph by Jason Busch. For Where to Buy, see page 196.

NATURAL ATTRACTION

Old and new, tropical and native blend to magnificent effect in this expansive Sydney property, writes **Elizabeth Wilson.**

Laurie and Christine Sellers' garden is teeming with life. As cockatoos screech overhead and water dragons scamper across the lawn or splash into the pool, it's clear this is a place in synch with its surroundings. At certain points, it's difficult to see where their garden ends and the surrounding bush begins – a blurring of boundaries that has evolved more by design than accident.

The couple bought the 2ha property on the northern outskirts of Sydney four years ago. Laurie, an IT executive, was on the cusp of retiring, but they were not interested in downsizing. They were looking for acreage, views, space to entertain and somewhere to soak up an outdoor lifestyle. This property, located at the end of a quiet road and bordered on all sides by bushland, fulfilled their wish list.

The entrance is via a driveway that circles around their two-storey home to an upper garden of terraced lawns and ribbons of foliage designed around outcrops of sandstone. From the rear of the house, expansive views extend beyond the boundary, through sweeps of angophora and eucalyptus, to the heritage-listed ›

'MOST OF THIS NEW GARDEN IS LOW MAINTENANCE, WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT YOU NEED IN A PROPERTY OF THIS SIZE.'

MATT LEACY, LANDSCAPE DESIGNER

Ku-rin-gai Chase National Park. "As soon as we came through the front gates, it felt right," says Laurie of their decision to purchase the property.

A drawcard was the massive pool at the bottom of the garden. Formerly a dam, it was concreted by previous owners and converted into its present 20x30m saltwater pool, which holds an extraordinary 600,000L of water. "A lot of first-time visitors don't realise it is a swimming pool," says Laurie. "They think it's a lake."

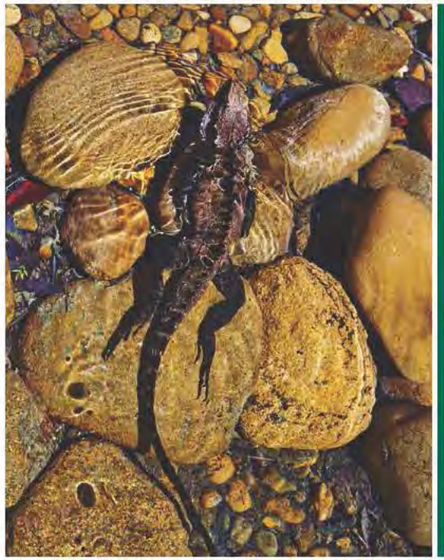
While the couple was thrilled to own acreage, they soon realised it came with challenges. "When we first arrived, I found the size of the garden intimidating," says Christine. "Also, we couldn't actually see out through the garden to the view, so we needed to reshape the space. And that's when we called on Matt."

They loved the work of landscape designer Matt Leacy of Landart Landscapes, who had designed their previous garden, so they enlisted him again. As soon as Matt saw the site he identified areas where the garden wasn't flowing – where sections of the garden didn't connect with each other or with the setting. He also thought some of the existing plantings were at odds with the natural bushland.

"Some of the established garden was quite exotic and tropical in appearance," says Matt of the plants, which included lavender, buxus, duranta, cordylines, hebes, agapanthus, cabbage tree palms, an evergreen alder and splashes of vermilion bougainvillea. "It was colourful, but it didn't sit comfortably in the environment. We wanted to enhance the garden's sense of connection with the landscape."

The key was to blur the lines between the established garden and new sections of native-focused plantings. Starting in one pocket of the garden, Matt created a richly textured mix of tropical and native plants – introducing mass plantings of the silvery-grey succulent *Crassula* 'Blue Bird', strappy *Phormium*, Asian jasmine (*Trachelospermum asiaticum*), mother-in-law's tongue (*Sansevieria*), various aloes, flowering gums, grevillea, and *Carex*. This section of garden wends down to the pool area, where Matt planted a native/Mediterranean mix including mass

Photography by Jason Busch & Phillip Castleton (water dragon, *Crassula*, people).



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT Grasses such as feathery *Miscanthus sinensis* and wheat-coloured *Poa* 'Eskdale' create a symphony of soft colours. The front of the house overlooks the expansive lawn. Decks and viewing platforms are positioned for front row views of the garden. Detail of *Crassula* 'Blue Bird'. Here, alfresco lunches are a regular occurence. A water dragon goes for a swim. **OPPOSITE TOP** Mounds of coastal rosemary contrast with the spiky grasses. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** Designer Matt Leacy (left) walks through the garden with Laurie and Christine Sellers.

'THE POOL FILLS ME WITH A SENSE OF CALM AND RELAXATION. IT'S OUR OWN PERSONAL WATER VIEW.' CHRISTINE

plantings of *Miscanthus, Poa, Dianella, Lomandra, Juncus* and *Isolepsis* grasses combined with agaves, sculptural Mexican lily and closely clustered mounds of *Westringia fruticosa* (coastal rosemary). "Most of this garden is low maintenance, which is exactly what you need in a property of this size," says Matt.

An important aspect of the refurbishment was creating a stronger link between the pre-existing cabana and the bush. "We cleared some of the exotic trees so you could see down to the natural bushland from the cabana," he says. He also designed a timber walkway leading from the cabana around the pool, to encourage engagement with the water and, via walkways, the bush.

The centrepiece of the design is a cantilevered 9m-long pontoon that hovers over the water. "The great thing about the pontoon is that it's a place where you can engage with the pool without swimming," says Matt. It's also a diving board for the Sellers' grandchildren when they visit in summer.

The main problem during the garden's construction phase were the visits from marauding wallabies. To help identity which plants they were attracted to, Matt placed 'tasting plates' out in the evenings to eliminate certain species from their plant selection. "But they ate every single plant we left out," he says. "We had to put up barriers around the plants to allow them to grow."

This garden buzzes with life. Water dragons appear everywhere. "I love them," says Christine. "In the mornings, they're everywhere you look, in every size."

Other visitors include lace monitors, possums and many birds, who all gravitate to the pool, just as the people do. "The pool fills me with a sense of calm and relaxation," says Christine. "It's our own personal water view." And as for the refurbished garden? "It's like having lots of different gardens in one," says Christine. "I now have a more intimate relationship with it. I know every corner of it." H&G

Landart Landscapes, Willoughby, Sydney; (02) 9958 0462 or www.landart.com.au.

This drystone wall is built from sandstone, the majority of it taken from the property and the remainder matched from a recycled-stone supplier. The bench and decking is built from sustainable spotted gum. The sandy coloured grass fringing the wall is *Poa* 'Eskdale'. Cushions from The Design Hunter. Table from Tait. Plant pot from Garden Life. **OPPOSITE** A smaller pool sits above the main pool with commanding views of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. **For Where to Buy, see page 196.**

Photography by Jason Busch.