On a ROLL

Landscape designer Matt Leacy bought a hilltop home on Sydney's northern beaches and used all his skills to make the steep garden fit for his children.

STORY & STYLING *Natalie Walton*
PHOTOGRAPHY *Chris Warnes*

This is the life

Matt and his wife Marie, a schoolteacher, are firm believers in children having free-range, outdoorsy childhoods and there's always plenty for them to do here. "In summer, it's beach in the mornings and afternoons by the pool in the back garden," says Matt. "In winter, we congregate in the front, making the most of the western sun. We usually end the day gathered around the fire pit, watching the sunset together."

TV ROOM The chest is one of Matt's most treasured possessions. "It belonged to my mum and grandmother, who brought all their belongings in it when they escaped from Latvia during World War II," he says. Matt's daughters Sienna (left) and Amalija relax on a sofa from MRD Home. For similar blind, try Spotlight. The rug was a gift from Matt's aunt. Floor painted Porter's Perfect Floor Paint in White (throughout). **Smart buy:** Hektar floor lamp, $79, Ikea. **FRONT GARDEN** It took more than 80 tonnes of soil, but Matt was able to create a level-ish expanse of lawn for his children, including son Thomas, to play on. Completed in 2013, the front garden was the first big project Matt and Marie tackled at the property. ▶

Landscape designer Matt Leacy wanted a family home with a firm connection to the garden. "I feel strongly about providing an environment where our kids - Sienna, 11, Amalija, nine, and Thomas, seven - can be kids, and where we all feel connected to the outdoors, even when we're inside," he says. It was a sentiment shared by his wife, Marie, when they bought their four-bedroom home on Sydney's northern beaches in 2012.

Built in the 1980s, a time when orange brick veneer was popular and gardens were often an afterthought, the house had a small, tiled front patio with brown tiles and columns, no driveway and no decent lawn due to its steep slope. Matt, whose landscape design business is based on the lower north shore, had spotted the home while viewing other properties in the area. "It looked bad, with no real street appeal, but there was something about the place," he says. "At the time, I told Marie I would move this far out for it." Three weeks later, they bought it.

Much of the home's potential was in its aspect. There are also unique benefits to being on a steep site. "We can have all the doors open most of the year because we're completely protected from coastal winds, and there's always plenty of sunlight, even in winter," says Matt. "Being up high, our home feels more isolated than it really is - we love that, and the fantastic views, of course."

One of the first changes he and Marie made was to tone down the orange brickwork with a coat of Resene Bokara Grey. Next, Matt got stuck into the garden. He put in a new driveway, built retaining walls and brought in about 80 tonnes of soil to create a gently rolling lawn for the children to play on. While it took a lot of work to make the garden user-friendly, Matt says it was well worth doing so early on.

Turning their attention indoors, the couple then knocked through some internal walls to create a generous open-plan kitchen/dining ▸

Paint colours are reproduced as accurately as printing processes allow.

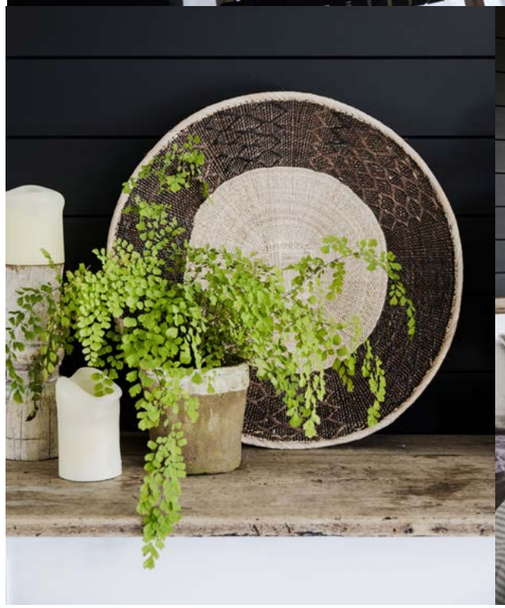
THE PALETTE

Dulux Tamed Texan kitchen cabinetry

Murobond Paint Pirate Black internal lining boards

Resene Black White interior, main walls

LIVING To create a coastal-cabin feel, lining boards painted Murobond Pirate Black were used to clad select walls. Matt created the tree art from branches that fell off one of his neighbour's palms. For similar sofa, try Freedom. The cowhide and floor cushion were bought in Indonesia. Eggcup stool, Mark Tuckey. 'Roxy' chair, Interiors Online. Existing chandelier. **Smart buy:** 'Samson' floor lamp, $728, MRD Home.
KITCHEN Matt (pictured) and Marie renovated the kitchen in 2014, replacing an internal wall and pantry with easy-to-access underbench cupboards. Carrara marble benchtop (rear) and splashbacks. The island benchtop is sealed limewashed timber. An iron planter from The Pot Warehouse overflows with *Rhipsalis*, a succulent that thrives in warm kitchen environments. The footed bowl (on bench) is a memento from a trip to Morocco. Custom-made wall shelf. Stools, Ikea. Oven, Westinghouse.



DINING *top and bottom left* A bank of bifolds, which are often found wide open, deliver the all-important link to the garden. The dining table is a piece Matt and Marie have owned for many years; it's teamed with chairs reclaimed from a church. Console table, a roadside find. Woven Tongan basket (on console), Imprint House. The pot plants are a maidenhair fern (left) and peace lily. **MAIN BEDROOM** By the bed, a cutting of Persian shield (*Strobilanthes gossypinus*) is as beautiful as a bouquet. Linen throw, Imprint House. Cushion, Tribe & Co Living. **STEPS** The original front balcony was extended and converted into a deck with tiered bench seating, avoiding the need for a balustrade that would obstruct the view. The west-facing deck is now a favourite spot for the family to sit and enjoy afternoon sun. In keeping with Matt's desire for plant life in every space, a mature agave stands proud at the top. ▶

'I want my home to feel comfortable, lived in and welcoming – with plant life playing a big part.' *Matt Leacy*

FEATURE TREES & PLANTS

BARBECUE AREA

Juniperus 'Keteleeri'

Japanese maple

FRONT GARDEN

Sweet viburnum

Salvia 'Santa Barbara'

Pyrus nivalis

Licorice plant (*Helichrysum petiolare*)

Miscanthus

and living area. The kitchen was updated and the old cypress floorboards freshened with white paint. A bank of bifolds now connects the living zone to the extended front deck, garden and leafy outlook beyond.

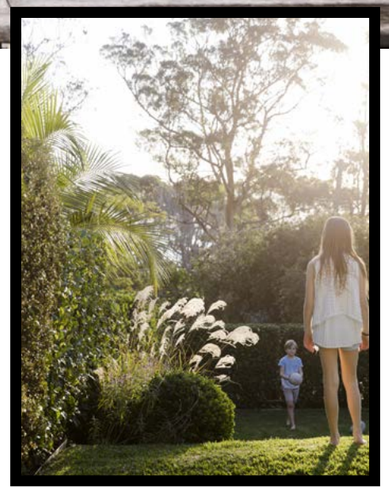
In 2015, the couple decided to undertake a more extensive makeover of the backyard. With the help of Matt's Landart Landscapes team, he installed a terraced entertaining area and retiled around the existing pool, built a deck and barbecue facilities, and improved the drainage. Today, the poolside entertaining zone is used throughout the summer; in winter, the family mostly hangs out at the front.

Given the schedule-driven nature of his work, Matt says he really enjoyed the freedom of renovating his own home slowly. "It's nice to have the luxury of making things up as I go along," he explains.

Plans to tackle the bathrooms are being made, but the couple are taking a break from renovating for the moment. "I think it's good for children to see the work that goes into building something," says Matt. "That said, there's a point when you need to pull back and enjoy what you've created.

"This home is everything to us," he adds. "Marie and I sit out and watch the sunset by the fire while the kids play footy and dance on the grass. It's become our sanctuary." **H&G**

***Landart Landscapes**, Willoughby, NSW; (02) 9958 0462 or landart.com.au.*



How the garden grew

Aside from creating a play space for his children, Matt's initial to-do list included improving his home's street appeal and enhancing the outlook. He planted fast-growing elms for shade, with a mix of viburnum and bottlebrush on the boundary for privacy. "They're great shrubs that are easy to maintain at a desired height and, because we're on a slope, they are never going to block my view, only the things I don't want to see," he says.

BARBECUE/ALFRESCO DINING A mountain of bedrock didn't deter Matt from having an outdoor entertaining area: he built a deck over the top. The lining boards are finished in Porter's Paints Salt Wattle. Black subway tiles look smart on the bench facing. Feature plants on both sides – a cloud-pruned *Juniperus* 'Keteleeri' underplanted with *Dichondra* 'Silver Falls' (left) and a flame-hued Japanese maple – frame the concrete bench all year round. The integrated barbecue is by Electrolux. **FRONT GARDEN** *above right and opposite* A steep driveway and fence screened by ornamental snow pear trees (*Pyrus nivalis*) gives the large landscaped front garden all the privacy of a backyard. Matt bought the fire pit from Bunnings. *For Where to Buy, see page 221.*