

Edible Eden

Sophisticated planting design creates a sustainable – and largely edible – landscape

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Many people would like their garden to be a gorgeous oasis but fear that water restrictions will make that impossible. And when they imagine their backyard sanctuary could also be well designed, highly ornamental and have abundant seasonal vegies and fruits, they assign their dreams to the too-hard basket. But tucked away in Hughesdale, in Melbourne's southeastern suburbs, is a garden where the dream has become reality — and winner of two first prizes in the 2009 Victorian Landscape Awards, one for best Sustainable Landscape,

the other for Plants in the Landscape. Designed and built by its owner Hendrik Van Leeuwen and his landscape company, VanLeeuwenGreen, the garden reflects Hendrik's passion for plants, good design and easy-to-implement sustainability principles. Hendrik bought the Hughesdale house only four years ago with his partner, Nicole. Both were keen to give the weatherboard Californian bungalow a complete renovation with garden redesign and refurbishment given equal importance to renovating the house. "Working in the landscape industry, I really

wanted to demonstrate that a bare suburban backyard and nondescript front yard could be transformed into something contemporary, beautiful and sustainable. The gardens had to relate strongly to the house but with a lush, oasis feel and with as many food plants as possible," explains Hendrik. To achieve this, Hendrik had several key principles in mind for planting and construction. These were for maximum aesthetic effect and for minimum environmental impact. "I love plants that have interesting foliage or →



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relatively long lived. Plants include two types of bird of paradise, clivias and native frangipani.

As the southern boundary continues into the back garden, grasses or grass-like plants such as poa, pennisetum and lomandra are used where shade gives way to full sun. Also planted along the southern fence are various citrus and stonefruit trees and some uncommon edible plants such as the Natal plum from South Africa (*Carissa grandiflora*).

In the back garden, beauty, produce and lifestyle are cleverly integrated. Several key accent plants have been used as long-term features, including the lemon-scented gum right at the back and the giant Abyssinian banana (*Ensete ventricosum*) in the mid distance. These are combined with lighting, hedges, pathways, a small lawn and a circular fire pit to provide an overall structure.

From the house, bifold doors open onto the large area of sustainably grown and

harvested sugar gum decking. The hardwood was sourced from the Smart Timbers co-op in Western Victoria. Sprawling vines of grape and kiwifruit shade the decking as they climb over a solid pergola. Shade is important for a west-facing garden and the deciduous vines provide an appreciable cooling effect on the house in summer. This helps reduce the need for energy-hungry air-conditioning but lets in light during winter.

From the decking, the garden becomes an extension of the house, an extra living space that is green, sheltered and inviting. The turf area in front of the decking uses heat and drought-tolerant kikuyu, kept green with greywater fed through a buried coil of agricultural pipe. A clipped lilly pilly hedge partially screens the work shed. Nearby is the fire-pit for social gatherings where Hendrik used Castlemaine slate, quarried in Victoria, reducing the environmental cost of transporting →

overall form, so texture, form and colour were major aspects of planting design, along with seasonal flowering events, too. I emphasised species selection for low water and long-lived plants that nevertheless provide a lush appearance, underpinned by plant zoning, drip irrigation, rainwater harvest and use of recycled greywater.

"I also wanted food-producing plants that looked great as well as plenty of standard vegetables, fruits and herbs. And I was very keen to get all hard materials such as decking timber or pavers sourced from sustainable supplies," says Hendrik.

The front garden is relatively formal with bold masses of plants such as helleborus, phormium, Chinese plumbago and the stunning purple succulent *Aeonium arboreum* 'Schwarzkopf'. Crabapples provide a canopy and a springtime display of blossom.

The shaded, protected south side of the house is planted as a cool, green subtropical walkway. Despite looking like a "rainforest", most of the plants are low water users and



garden profile



slate from overseas. The redgum sleepers used around the garden beds are all recycled from rail lines.

The northern boundary of the back garden is filled with fruit trees, mixed vegetables, herbs, shrubs and herbaceous perennials. One of Hendrik's favourite plants is the globe artichoke, with its stunning architectural grey foliage and large, edible flower buds. Throughout the garden you can see the

benefits of heavy mulching with pea straw, and manure from the chook pen on the fruit trees, vegetables and herbs. The fruit trees are a mix of deciduous stonefruit such as peach and apple, as well as citrus trees and subtropical plants such as cool-climate bananas.

The vegetable garden near the chook yard is laid out more formally than the rest of the garden. This is where Hendrik plants seasonal vegetables such as corn in streamlined rows.

"There is nothing better than homegrown food and, with eggs from the chooks as well, trips to the supermarket are reduced at the height of the growing season," says Hendrik.

Hendrik put in a 9000-litre water tank behind the work shed that flushes two toilets and supplies water for a drip irrigation system designed to match plant water requirements, through plant type zoning. Apart from careful species selection and rainwater harvesting, water use is simply reduced through good horticultural practice such as the application of mulch and soil-wetting agents and building up the levels of sponge-like organic matter in soils.

"Weeds use as much water as desirable plants, so I keep these at bay with pea-straw mulch and through the use of long-lived plants rather than with herbicides," explains Hendrik.

In October 2009, Hendrik's garden was featured in the Australian Open Garden Scheme, attracting more than 1000 visitors over two days, making it the most popular suburban garden in the program for the year. Hendrik thinks this is a sign of the times:

"People really want to understand how to design beautiful low-water gardens and feel that their lifestyle choices aren't damaging the planet, and they're interested in edible landscapes and smart plant selection. I'm excited to be in the industry at the moment and to have my garden as a demonstration of how you can go about it." ■

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