

before & after



# On the UP

Words: Karen Booth  
Photos: Peter Brennan

When you're dealing with a small or awkward space, it really is often a case of less is more

**"D**amp and dated" is how garden designer Steve Warner of Outhouse Design describes the garden that greeted him during his first site inspection. "Crisp and sophisticated" is how he sums it up post-makeover.

Home to a couple of young executives with demanding jobs requiring late hours and lots of travel, it was hardly surprising that along with their request for a relaxed and stylish outdoor entertaining space and a better sense of connection between upper and lower garden levels, the emphasis was to be on creating something low-maintenance.

Steve describes their design brief in more detail. "First, they wanted to be able to use the whole garden, so connecting the upper and lower spaces was paramount. The upper garden was separated by an overpowering and ugly treated pine retaining wall. The connecting steps were severe and when wet created safety concerns for visitors.





“One of the key requirements was to open up the space, create a connection from the rear living area of the home to the alfresco entertaining space and provide an easier connection to the upper garden so it would be open and family-friendly.”

As the garden measured an awkward 13m x 5m, had a steep slope and a high (1.8m) existing wall, some creative thinking was called for. “Placing the access steps to the right rather than in the centre allowed us to create a more intimate dining area while the continuity between the stairs and the path leads the eye and embraces the full curve of the wall, which opens up the garden. In this way, we were able to turn the eyesore of the wall into a feature,” explains Steve.

“The sensual curve of the new retaining wall definitely helps to open the space up,” he adds. “It also creates a sense of softness, which is reinforced by the use of natural stone paving and simple planting lines.”

To deliver on the owners’ desire for a contemporary look and the need to make the space feel as open as possible, Steve chose



Before



hardscaping materials that combine clean lines with warm, natural, earthy tones.

“Large-format pavers were chosen for the entertaining area to create a solid impression, a soft, earthy floor and textured finish underfoot. This paving was also used in the upper garden and creates a smooth visual transition. To ease the transition from hard surface (paving) to soft surface (grass), a paved area with mondo grass borders helps the eye link the two areas comfortably,” says Steve.

Keeping the main plant palette simple — chiefly liriopse, mondo, hebe and native violet — was important so the garden didn’t feel too busy or crowded. Keeping the colours consistent was necessary to ensure a sense of harmony.

To draw the eye upwards and help make the space feel a little more open, there are strong vertical plantings of ornamental pear and the main fence boundary wall will eventually be covered in jasmine, creating a soft, scented feature wall that will complement the natural stone paving.

As with any new garden design these days, effective water management and use was a priority. “The upper garden has extensive soft surfaces and mondo borders that allow for natural water penetration, and the new paving was graded so as much surface water as possible would be directed into the newly installed garden beds. Also, the lower paving was graded to direct any excess water into the existing sub-surface drainage system,” says Steve.

“However, the real key to a water-wise garden is the planting selection and all planting was selected to support the microclimate within this garden,” he adds.

The result? An easy-care, low-water-use garden that is big on style and a pleasure to use day or night. ■