

working the angles

With its unique layout, captivating planting and sculptural screens, this retreat offers peace and privacy amid the buzz of urban life

WORDS Karen Booth PHOTOGRAPHY Peter Brennan DESIGN Outhouse Design



The reconfigured deck bridges the level change with ease and the steps provide casual seating.

design file

OBJECTIVE

The owners, a young couple who entertain frequently, wanted to make better use of the small rear garden by including a gathering space for friends and a spa. They wanted it to feel like a private garden getaway with layers of green, and it needed to be dog-friendly.

SOLUTION

The deck elegantly resolves the major level change. The spa has been cleverly integrated into the deck with a built-in daybed close by. The overall layout is on an angle to visually stretch the space with the sculptural custom screening adding a sense of movement.

OUTCOME

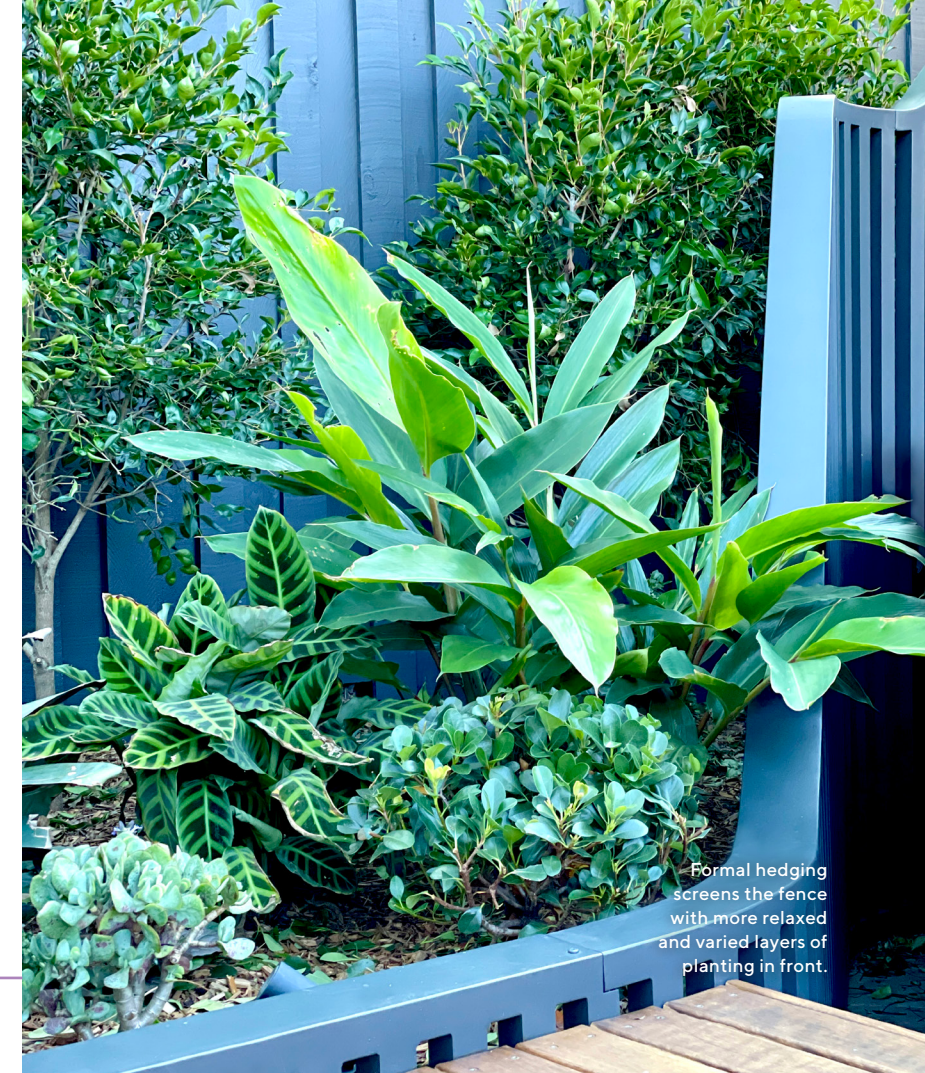
Given the compact space, this garden works all the angles to create an urban sanctuary that is ideal for keeping friends, and the beloved family dog, entertained. Vertical and ground-level planters overflow with the vivid foliage of a curated selection of dog-resistant plants.

The inner-city location was vibrant, the newly-purchased home a dream come true ... but the outdoor space? Well, that was problematic. “The rear yard was run-down and out of keeping with the design-savvy homeowners’ modern tastes. The dimensions weren’t particularly generous and there were several practical issues to resolve, too,” recounts Steve Warner, OUTHOUSE design’s principal designer.

“A small space measuring 50sqm, it had a major, one-metre level change from the house to the ground, which presented challenges such as lack of privacy from the neighbours. It also had a large deck that occupied much of the space and had fallen into disrepair. Additionally, the lower part of the garden was marred by the lid of the underground service pit, so that needed to be disguised. As for the existing vegetation, it was minimal – mainly a pair of Bangalow palms tucked into a corner.

“The owners, a sociable young couple who entertain often, were keen to incorporate both a spa and gathering space to create a relaxing year-round retreat for themselves and their many friends. And they wanted the space to feel like a secluded garden getaway with layers of luxuriant green, which was quite the challenge given the dense, bustling urban environment.

“Low maintenance was important, to fit in with their busy lives, as was catering to



Formal hedging screens the fence with more relaxed and varied layers of planting in front.

“They wanted the space to feel like a secluded garden getaway with layers of luxuriant green





the needs of the much-loved four-legged member of the family, Brixton. The garden needed to stand up to the rough and tumble of a sizeable dog, be a safe space and keep him engaged while they were at work.”

Steve decided to lay the new garden on an angle to create interest, introduce “pockets” so they could fit in as much as possible and enhance flow.

“The new design reduces the overall bulk of the deck and breaks the height transition into platforms with pockets for the spa and a generous built-in seat and daybed unit that offers sofa-like seating for group gatherings,” he explains. “The daybed can be moved, allowing access to the relocated service pit lid, with the warm tones and natural texture of the timber softening the vertical metal screens and unifying the space.

“Privacy was achieved with sculptural custom-made screening. On one side, it incorporates vertical planting that can be enjoyed from the lounge room, especially when the owners fully open up the glass bifold doors at the rear of the house. This screening is like a visual ribbon connecting upper and lower spaces. To create cohesion and an aura of calm in the limited space, the new timber fencing was painted in the same colour as the powdercoated metal screens and the house.”

The spa, which had to be craned in over the house due to access restrictions, was nestled into the deck and positioned away from the boundary; not just to satisfy planning guidelines, but to also create the perception of increased depth and visually “stretch” the compact space.

The new deck was constructed so that if the spa is ever removed, the deck section can be reinstalled, ensuring easy access from upper to lower garden levels. Also, there is under-deck storage, accessed via a hatch, to keep essential garden items neat, tidy and close at hand.

The garden has a formal native hedge for privacy and to create a strong green boundary. In contrast, the internal planting is fun, easy to manage and dog-friendly. A forest pansy (*Cercis canadensis*) feature tree offers additional screening as well as seasonal change while the ground-level planting, including bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans* ‘Catlins Giant’) and silver kidney weed (*Dichondra argentea* ‘Silver Falls’), offers textural variety, softens the look of the lower-garden’s random-length paving, and, most importantly, is dog-resistant.



“A garden needs to fully connect with the people who’ll be using it, both on a visual as well as sensory level



The mid-storey planting is a blend of giant bromeliads (*Alcantarea imperialis*), blue bird jade (*Crassula arborescens* ‘Blue Bird’), lilly pilly (*Acmena smithii* ‘Sublime’), dwarf pittosporum (*Pittosporum tenuifolium* ‘Hole in One’) and Indian hawthorn (*Raphiolepis indica* ‘Oriental Pearl’). In the custom screen planters, the mix includes snake plant (*Sansevieria trifasciata* ‘Moonshine’) and wavy jade (*Crassula arborescens* ‘Max Cook’).

In 2023, this innovative retreat won a Landscape Design Institute award for small-garden design. Says Steve: “The well-designed garden has balance, interest and intrigue. Not only that, a garden needs to fully connect with the people who’ll be using it, both on a visual as well as sensory level. When creating an outdoor space, whatever its size, it should offer an experience.” This garden does exactly that.

■ outhousedesign.com.au

THIS PAGE The sculptural outline of the screening and daybed introduces a welcome sense of movement.

OPPOSITE PAGE Chosen for colour, form and texture, the plants add visual interest while being dog-friendly.