



HELEN YOUNG

First impressions

THE FRONT GARDEN'S THE STAR

Many front gardens don't get used," landscape architect Melissa Wilson says. "I thought the biggest opportunity for this project was to create something special around the magnolia tree at the front of the house – it's such a beauty."

The property in Sydney's Rodd Point, a waterside suburb in the inner west, covers 600sqm and includes a variety of interlinked indoor and outdoor spaces. As part of a major renovation of their California bungalow, Wilson's clients were keen to have a garden their young children could explore, that offered flowers at different times of the year, and that suited both the old and new parts of the house.

Wilson supervised the arborist who cleared the surrounding plants obscuring the magnolia and lifted the canopy to reveal the tree's structure. The sitting wall of local sandstone she created beneath it is ideal for watching the children play. "Neighbours pass by all the time and comment on the garden, so using it has really connected the family to the community," she says. The tiled entry path is original but Wilson added the oversized sandstone steppers; *Dichondra repens* fills the gaps between.

The front garden planting is an eclectic mix of natives and exotics, including dwarf pink kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos* 'Bush Pearl'), *Echium*, euphorbias, cushion bush (*Leucophyta brownii*) and walking iris (*Neomarica*). "It has looser planting moments and more formal hedging to create a strong structure and a sense of sanctuary," Wilson explains. She chose *Elaeagnus x ebbingei* for the hedge, with a row of silver lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*) at its feet. The colour theme of silvery grey, lemon and mauve also carries through the other garden areas.

One of the key features of the



Photography Tom Ferguson



revamp by architect Mark Szczerbicki is a central courtyard that brings northern sun into the new living area and acts as a pivot point between the original and new parts of the house. Taking centre stage here is a coral bark maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku'). "It provides a beautiful profile against the crisp architecture – in winter the red, bare branches against the white walls is pretty special," says Wilson. Around the tree, informal plantings echo those of the front garden, while an adjacent fence is covered in maidenhair creeper (*Muehlenbeckia complexa*).

A large lawn and the shady canopy of a mature *Murraya* tree

were the main drivers of the back garden's simple design. A standout feature is the green wall opposite the end of the swimming pool, with concrete cube pots filled with plants including succulents, herbs, dwarf aloes and the climber *Pandorea* 'Lemon Bells', which is also used alongside the driveway.

Both the house and the garden, completed in late 2016, were shortlisted for the 2018 Houses Awards. "It was one of those completely joyful projects," says Wilson. "When you have such good relationships between clients and all members of the design team, you get a beautiful result."



Tree change: the courtyard maple and front garden magnolia are heroes



Armed with a torch, I've finally caught a green beetle making salad of my lillypilly hedge under cover of darkness. What's the best defence?

Jen Robinson, by email

The adults and larvae of *Paropsides calypso* beetles notch the leaf edges of *Syzygium australe* varieties. Damage can be severe.

This native pest has spread from northeast NSW in the past 10 years, as monocultures of lillypilly hedging proliferate. It feeds at night and pupates in leaf litter. There are no products registered for its control but if you are using Eco-Neem mixed with Eco-Oil to treat other pests such as scale, you'll see results.

What is the best way to grow grapes and passionfruit neatly along the house without rotting the walls?

Jaynell Gudsell, Fennell Bay, NSW

Use stainless steel wire rope, fixed with long eye bolts to hold the cables well away from the wall. Grapes are easy to train neatly because of their winter pruning regime; passionfruit tends to be more unruly.

Does clay breaker change the soil's pH? I'm treating my heavy clay with it, aged cow and poultry manure, and sugar cane mulch.

Peter Taylor, Campbelltown, NSW

You are doing all the right things. Gypsum (calcium sulphate) or clay breaker helps soils high in sodium but not others. To test, place a few small, dry clods in a glass of deionized water or rainwater. Leave undisturbed. If the water turns cloudy, gypsum will help; if the soil crumbles but the water stays clear, it won't. Water in the gypsum well to flush the sodium deep down. Gypsum won't affect the pH, unlike other calcium sources such as lime and dolomite.



Send your questions to: helenyoungtwig@gmail.com or Helen Young, PO Box 3098, Willoughby North, NSW 2068. Website: helenyoung.com.au. The best question for December/January wins the Nylex Digital Rain Gauge, spray gun and weeper hose worth \$135. 📧