

MY GARDEN RETREAT

You don't have to have a big garden to have a beautiful garden. A garden is not only about the plants – it's also about the different things you add to your garden to make it interesting, beautiful and different. I may have a small garden but my house backs onto one of the Durack lakes so I have lovely lake view. I call this my "outer garden" that someone else comes to mow and maintain, thanks Palmerston Council.

My garden started in 2011 as a blank canvas for me to create my special space. The yard was boring, uninteresting and messy but I had a vision and could see the potential when I bought the house. Along the side of the house was a small walkway and the rest of the area was unusable and a muddy mess in the wet season. In the rock garden were several different types of palms and half-dead plants that looked as if they had once been pot plants and just planted out at random for a last chance of survival. The only thing in the back yard was a garden shed and weedy, patchy grass surrounding the pool with random rocks and weeds. Planted along the back fence were scruffy overgrown plants that obstructed the lovely view of the lake.

Perhaps it was not such a blank canvas. Before I started I had to chop down, remove and do lots of shovelling and excavating.

The Vision

My vision was a tranquil Bali theme garden/large courtyard. I had a big vision with a small budget, but with the commitment to put in the hard work. I started by collecting pictures from magazines and the Internet on what plants and features I would like in my garden, but I had to be realistic about what I could physically manage and within my skills to do it myself with minimum expense.

Work in Progress

I started with the framework of the garden, the big jobs and then worked on the smaller details:

1. Exposed aggregate down the side of the house and around the pool. Unfortunately, I could not get a match to the existing aggregate
2. Shade sail on the side of house
3. Concrete sleepers around the shed to create a small garden bed
4. The area next to shed was scrappy grass and weeds, so I killed it off and added some topsoil and levelled the ground to lay new [Zoysia](#) turf and feature stepping pavers
5. I put in stepping pavers on the other side of the house so I could walk down more easily than just on rocks, which was hazardous. The rocks were already there but were sunken into the ground. I didn't need more rocks – I just needed to fluff up what I already had. I called it rock fluffing. At the time this was a relatively unused area but now I store my 'project stuff' there and have my potting bench on that side of the house so I am always up and down that area. Looking back I should have put that exposed aggregate down that side of the house as well.

As the big jobs were finished, I added plants and detail which included making things to add function and interest to the garden.

My garden is always changing as things grow or die and luckily they generally don't die. There's no room left on the ground now for more plants so I am moving up with hanging baskets and starting to grow epiphytic plants such as bromeliads and orchids. I don't have irrigation and never will. All my plants are hand watered according to their location and individual needs. For me watering is relaxation therapy and a chance to take time to admire my plants. I water in the late afternoon/evening so after a hot day the water helps cool down a hot house.

A garden is never finished and even now it is still a work in progress and there is always room for one more plant.

Pots on the Move

I have lots of pots which came with me when I moved or have since acquired but I can't manage to move big heavy pots myself. Most pot trolleys don't last long and are not suitable for very heavy pots so I decided

to make my own using hardwood decking timber offcuts and sturdy wheels. This is how my woodworking adventure started.

Advantages of pots on wheels:

- No pot stains on the concrete and they can be easily moved to clean underneath
- Aeration/drainage under pots
- As the seasons change so does the direction of the sun so some pots have to be moved. In the wet season I have to move some pots because they get too much water running off from the shade sail
- When there is a cyclone alert, it is easy to move pots and huddle them together in a sheltered position

Privacy

Living in the suburbs on a small block means limited privacy. I am lucky to have lovely neighbours but we still like our privacy, especially since my outdoor area is my living area and I sit and eat out on my back patio all the time, like most Territorians do, and swim in the pool.

After the exposed aggregate was put down I had a gap between the concrete and fence so this was ideal to add plants for privacy screening. In the cool of the evening I would go out and dig the rocks and clay out of the trench and fill up buckets. A friend was back filling an area so needed fill. I would take the buckets of dirt and rocks on a trolley and leave them out the front for my friend to pick up the next afternoon and he would leave empty buckets to fill. This went on for a few weeks – digging, digging, digging. My neighbour next door, who I did not know at the time, thought I was chopping up dead bodies and burying them at night! Trenching and filling done, it was time to plant.

Screening Plants

At the side of the house where it is semi-shaded I planted [Rhaphis palm](#), commonly known as Lady palms. I had a large clump growing in a pot which I split up and planted. I kept some of the plants and planted them back into the pot to grow on and multiply so I could later use them along the fence line under the carport. I had the large pot of Rhapsis for many years but when it was growing in a pot it did not get very tall but once planted in the ground it grew much taller, providing a lovely tropical look screen. The Rhapsis was a bit slow to get going but is now well established and spreading. It is fairly low maintenance and just needs to have the dead leaves cut off.

In the pool area, which gets more sun, I planted [Malay dwarf variegated bamboo](#). It is a good screening plant. My bamboo requires a bit of maintenance because I keep it trimmed for the small growing space and so it doesn't cover the decorative bamboo screen that I was using a feature. It does drop leaves and is a bit messy. The other problem is that it gets scale which I am constantly battling – that is why it is currently not looking good.

The screening plants would take some time to grow so I put up shade cloth and timber bamboo screens as a temporary fill until the plants were able to grow and provide screening. The timber bamboo screens only have a limited life and are now rotting and will soon be removed and I will allow bamboo to spread.

Location Location Location

There are so many lovely plants that I would have liked to use but gardening is just like real estate – location, location, location. Sometimes you can't use the plant you want because the location is not suitable so I had to select something different that will grow in that location.

My garden is more about different leaf shapes, variegated plants and contrasting leaf colour to add interest and contrast, rather than flowering plants. I don't have edible plants, except for mint, because I don't like cooking and prefer to spend my time in the garden and not the kitchen.

I have a couple of areas where I had problems with getting things to grow so it was a bit of trial and error with certain plants. Lesson – don't persist with plants that struggle in a certain spot. A friend bought me a plaque "*Live by the law of nature and you will live in harmony*" so I adopt this philosophy in gardening.

Problem areas:

Garden around shed

I had a vision of hiding the garden shed with plants. I tried several different sun-loving plants but none were successful due to heat radiating from the shed. I need to think about a different plan. Some time ago I was splitting up ornamental pineapple and Aloe vera and just plonked them in pots in the garden bed and to my surprise they handled the heat and grew well. Not what I wanted to grow there but they were growing well and the red ornamental pineapple and bright green [Aloe vera](#) added contrasting colour.

Lawn under front window

This area is quite shaded so the grass was not growing well, despite my best efforts to get it growing. It was muddy when wet and weeds were the only thing to grow well. Once again I realised I was fighting with nature and I was not going to win so I had to come up with another option. I added a border of concrete sleepers between the lawn and shaded area and added stepping stones so I did not have to walk in the wet and sometimes muddy area. After several attempts to grow a few things without success I decided to put in shade loving, easy care ground covers. I planted [Dichondra repens Polly Green seeds](#). This ground cover does well in the shade – not so happy in the wet season but bounces back in the dry. Because I am impatient and do not like bare patches, I transplanted some [Zoysia tenuifolia](#), also known as 'no mow grass'. They are both currently growing together in harmony but I think the Zoysia will outgrow the Dichondra long term.

Every Garden Needs a Hero

My vision was a Bali theme garden so I wanted a Buddha water feature – my hero garden piece. Unfortunately, this idea was way beyond my budget at the time. As I kept on with the garden construction I was always on the lookout for something more affordable. My patience and persistence paid off, I found something affordable but unfortunately it fell over in a storm and was damaged and got a crack down the middle, so I got it at a cheap price. "No worries, I will have a go at fixing it up." What was I thinking! Getting it home was a logistical nightmare and then fixing it was another challenge. I did not know anything about fibre glassing so I watched every YouTube tutorial on the subject. It was so much work with lots of blood, sweat and tears in the process but I got there in the end.

Recycling, Upcycling, Reusing

Some time during my garden journey I started making garden things, first the timber pot trolleys from timber offcuts then progressing to other things using bits I had picked up at the tip shop, bits that I had found or been given and was always on the lookout for markdowns. It just takes a bit of creative imagination. I sit on the patio in the evening with a glass of wine and have what I call "a drink and a think" to come up with ideas. Sometimes I have an idea and look for bits to make it and other times I just come across things and think "that has potential, don't know what I will make but I will think of something" so I collect it and put it into my project stash. It is all well and good to have an idea but how will I execute this idea? I am not a tradie so Mr Google, YouTube and Pinterest are my friends. Along the way I have learnt about making, fixing and recycling. I am not the best or fastest nanna tradie but I do manage to get things done in the end.

Composting is another way I recycle and my neighbour helps me feed the compost tumbler. I use the compost, when available, to make my own potting mix but I use potting mix faster than I can compost.

Potting Up

I am always potting something so after all this time of bending down potting on the lawn I recently decided that I needed a potting bench and a single place to store my potting things and bits and pieces. There was no room so after some creative thinking, I used the small space at the side of the house. I made the potting bench from scrap recycled timber and put up shelves to store my potting and gardening bits and pieces. I call this my "gardening pantry"

I Can See Clearly Now

The latest addition to my garden is a glass pool fence. The previous metal pool fence made the patio area feel small and enclosed and obstructed my view. It was getting rusty so I decided to replace it with a [glass pool fence](#), something that I have always wanted. I am so happy with the fence and Northern Frameless did a great installation job. The one thing to think about is placement of plants close to the glass as the heat/light will magnify through the glass and possibly be too hot and burn the plants .