

A formal garden featuring a central rectangular lawn bordered by low, manicured hedges. In the background, a larger rectangular basin contains a fountain with a central statue. Two large, ornate stone planters with pink flowers are positioned on either side of the lawn. The garden is surrounded by tall, dense trees and a large, mature tree on the left side.

Clipped hedges of English box (*Buxus sempervirens*) line the rose garden and give a crisp definition to the view along the central axis. Rose varieties planted here include densely petalled 'Fair Bianca', long-flowering 'Amber Queen' and lemon-scented 'Devoniensis'.

# THE SECRET GARDEN

Inspired by a fertile blend of global influences, a landscape designer creates a layout of universal appeal – with a strong element of surprise – in the Southern Highlands of NSW.



It's exactly the kind of garden you could imagine flourishing on an English country estate: all lush lawns, established trees, towering hedges and twists of beautifully weathered stone walls. In fact, this garden is very Australian, located in the Southern Highlands of NSW, and also relatively new, planted just 10 years ago.

Landscape designer Nicholas Bray designed and planted most of this garden from scratch, on a site that was originally a grass paddock adjoining a 100-year-old stone home. The owners of the property asked him to create a garden that would complement the historic building's features.

"They told me, 'We've got this vacant block of land and we want to create a secret garden,'" Nicholas recalls.

His design concept for the 700-square-metre layout specified three separate garden 'rooms', consisting of a rose garden, a spring perennial garden and a winter-flowering bulb garden. "I wanted the different spaces so there would be great variety throughout the seasons," Nicholas explains.

Linking the themed spaces is a delightful central water feature, as well as a curving sandstone wall that encloses the entire space. The owners were keen on a wall to give this large garden a



This mature *Eucalyptus macarthurii* provides year-round shade in the bulb garden.  
**OPPOSITE top** On the central lawn, a crabapple tree in flower offers a glorious sight.  
**OPPOSITE bottom** A closer look at the delicate blossoms of the crabapple.





- 1 Woodland
- 2 Pavilion
- 3 Tennis court
- 4 Dam
- 5 Sandstone wall
- 6 Central lawn
- 7 House
- 8 Spring perennials
- 9 Pond
- 10 Flowering bulbs
- 11 *Eucalyptus macarthurii*
- 12 Roses

◁↔ sense of privacy, but they also wanted it to look “as if it had been there for ever”. To give the new wall the impression of venerable age and long establishment, Nicholas edged it with a cypress hedge and lined it in part with espaliered vines.

“At first it looked too harsh,” he says, “but now that it’s settled in, the stone has weathered and the plants have grown, it’s all ageing beautifully.”

The garden is built on a sloping site, so extensive retaining walls were needed throughout. But these, Nicholas insists, only add to the visual interest of the space.

“The sandstone wall steps down because of the slope, so you see lots of curved bits and pieces of sandstone,” he says.

Another challenge for the landscape designer was to link this new layout with older elements of the property, including an existing hedge running between the house and garden. “I wanted to keep it because it’s tall and rambling and gives the sense that this is an old space,” Nicholas says. His simple but satisfying solution was to cut a hole through the hedge, creating an entry point into the new garden from the home’s kitchen door.

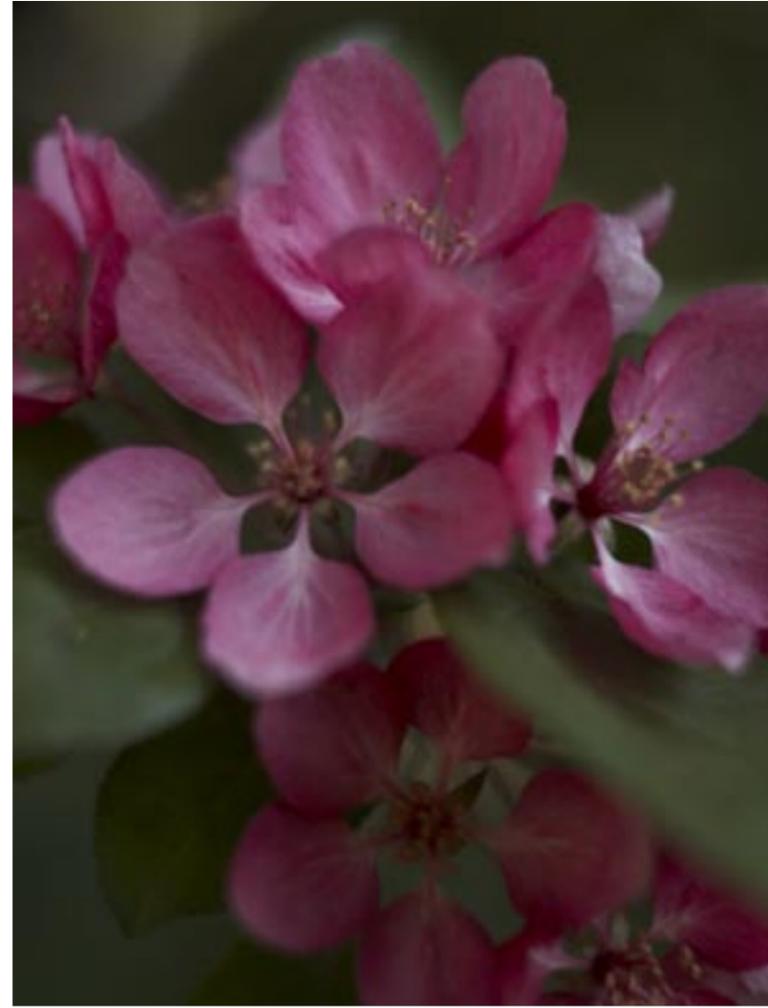
The inspiration for the overall design came from a range of international gardens Nicholas had recently visited. “I’d just

come back from a trip that incorporated the gravel gardens of Japan and some in the UK, and Granada in Spain,” he says. “Inspiration from all those places rubbed off here. It’s really an English garden but it’s quite Celtic, too.”

The resulting creation is designed in such a way that it can be experienced in a number of different contexts. “It’s a place that you walk through and sit in,” Nicholas explains. “There’s a seat in the perennial garden and on either side of the pond, so it also offers a space for contemplation.” →-----▷↔

**OPPOSITE clockwise from top left** The deeply shaded springtime blossom of a flowering cherry. Adjacent to the tennis court, the pavilion seems to have been there for decades. *Ajuga reptans* (blue bugle) provides a shot of colour in the spring garden. *Buxus japonica* (Japanese box) hems the central lawn in this view from the property’s northern portico.

Illustration by Allison Langton





↔ A garden of this size and complexity can't be appreciated in a single glance, of course, so Nicholas has incorporated a sequence of elements to be discovered and enjoyed as one walks through the curved, looping pathways.

"I wanted the garden to evolve as you make your way through it," he says. "Now that the hedge is so dense, it helps to give that sense of surprise."

A vibrant and varied array of plantings brings forth maximum colour and texture throughout the seasons. Flowering bulbs – such as tulips, crocus and iris – add bright bursts of colour in winter. Layers of grasses, climbers and spring flowers work together in the perennial garden, their supple shapes contrasting beautifully with the handful of established trees, including one majestic, 100-year-old eucalypt.

In the course of a single decade, this garden has achieved the established, weathered beauty of a property many years older. It also offers timeless pleasures that strike the eye afresh on each viewing: spots for relaxing, visual feasts of colour and structure, and a surprise at every corner.

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Nicholas Bray Landscapes, Moss Vale, NSW; 0417 278 267 or [www.nicholasbray.net.au](http://www.nicholasbray.net.au).



Flowering cherries and crabapples dot the lawn facing the century-old home. The drive is hedged with Japanese box.

**OPPOSITE top** A picket gate in a low drystone wall leads to a peaceful dam overhung with willows, against a backdrop of stately cypress trees.

**OPPOSITE bottom** Plantings in the bulb garden include the yellow *Kniphofia* 'Maid of Orleans' and pink *Helloborus* (hellebore). *Hydrangea petiolaris* climbs the sandstone wall.

