

# DESERT DREAMING

A thoughtful interpretation of the Spanish-style gardens of Arizona led to this Australian oasis, set in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales.

STORY ALEXANDRA NEUMAN PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL WEE



When landscape architect Nicholas Bray bought a 1930s ironbark house set on a picturesque property in the NSW Southern Highlands, one of the first things he thought about was how to transform its English-style cottage garden.

Part of the problem was that the garden came with a large couch grass lawn. Nicholas could see his valuable weekend time being taken up with mowing.

After renovating the house with wife Mel, he set about redesigning the garden, starting with the subdivision of the vast 2350-square-metre plot into a more manageable 830 square metres. Inspired by a book about desert gardens in the south-western US, particularly Arizona, Nicholas decided on a Spanish-American feel for the area, but planted with flora appropriate to our climate.

"I wanted the garden to have a distinctly Australian feel, unlike the more European gardens typical of the area. It needed to blend in with the rustic look of the house," he says. "It's more about

using earth-based colours and materials like river stones and recycled timber than about hedges and tulips." Using a patchwork of sandstone pavers, beds of pebbles and layers of plants with textured foliage, he has successfully created a garden that blends a Spanish aesthetic with a typically Australian ambience.

"The gravel garden at the front has a Spanish courtyard feel, with a fountain set in the middle of a large expanse of river stones," says Nicholas. The stones are peach-toned to complement the mustard-coloured weatherboards – a scheme reminiscent of many designs in Arizona. The fountain at the centre of the pebble garden is made from a 350kg block of sandstone that was sourced from the local quarry and set in place with a crane. "It's a slow-water fountain," says Nicholas. "The water simply bubbles up and trickles over the edges. I see it as a celebration of water and a recognition of its scarcity."

The entire garden is enclosed by a two-metre-high double-brick wall that acts as a noise barrier and privacy screen from the busy road that runs near the house. "Although I ▷→



Natives and exotics sit side by side, with pink camellia and rhododendrons spilling over the rendered wall next to *Banksia spinulosa* 'Giant Candles' and *Phormium cookianum*. Large tussock grass (*Poa labillardieri*) sits behind the raised seating. OPPOSITE from left Steel hacienda-style gates inset with stone. Nick Bray enjoys a rest on the verandah, which overlooks a bed of flowering *Eriostemon myoporoides* and clipped mounds of English box (*Buxus sempervirens*). The oyster plant (*Acanthus mollis*) loves this shady spot.

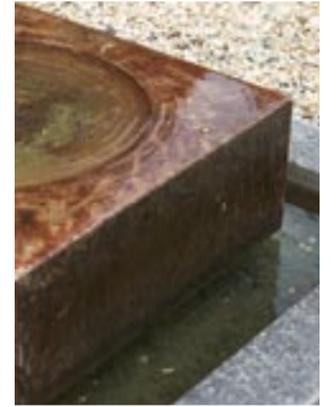
Nick at the fire pit with the swinging hotplate. Behind him are strappy-leaved *Dianella tasmanica* and *Rosmarinus* 'Blue Lagoon'. OPPOSITE clockwise from top left Abundant banksia flowers. The sandstone water feature. *Ajuga reptans* 'Jungle Giant'. Rhododendron and camellias with banksia in the foreground and a scented *Prostanthera lasianthos* 'Badjas Peak' on the right (local to Moss Vale). Wall art.



## DESERT DWELLING

Create your own south-western US desert-style garden using:

- A 'river' of pebbles, to emulate a dry river bed.
- Spiky desert plants, especially one or two larger sculptural ones that create an eye-catching feature.
- Contrasting leaf textures.
- A spot of vibrant colour, like the blue echium planted against the yellow wall in Nicholas' garden.
- A large expanse of gravel instead of lawn.
- Irregular pavers set in gravel, for an informal feel.
- Little or no lawn, but lots of groundcover plants.
- Plantings that merge with, or overhang, pathways.
- Curves or stepped designs. Note the wall top and non-symmetrical bed used in Nicholas' garden.



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◀→ designed the wall for practical reasons, it turned out to be a great vertical canvas that adds interest to the space," says Nicholas. He commissioned local artist David Ball to create the sculptural element that runs across the wall and along the top of the gates, as well as the hacienda-style gates themselves.

"In the evening, when the uplights wash across the walls and candles sit in the little nooks, the whole place looks and feels very calm," says Nicholas.

Bearing in mind the drought, and his desire to avoid mowing, Nicholas used a variety of ground covers and native grasses to replace the lawn, plus a mix of Mediterranean and native plants that have similar, simple needs.

Layering plants with contrasting foliage and flowers such as *Banksia spinulosa* 'Giant Candles', rhododendron and camellias adds texture and bursts of colour to the earth-toned materials. A pair of snow gums (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*) acts as living sculptures, their twisted white trunks likely to become an eye-catching feature when they reach maturity.

Sandstone pavers are used for pathways and edging around the garden as well as in the rustic entertaining space at the rear of the house. Here, a capped sandstone edging doubles as seating that overlooks a distinctive fire pit. "I saw this idea in a book and translated it to create this fire pit with a removable hotplate," Nicholas says. "Once you've cooked your steak, you simply swing the hotplate back and everyone can sit around the open fire and chat, ranch-style."

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