

# WONDER LAND

Designed as a fun-filled playspace for the owners' children, this Sydney backyard has become a favourite with their many friends too.

STORY *Chris Pearson* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Brigid Arnott*

Massed plantings of heliconias, underplanted with *Philodendron* 'Xanadu', as well as giant taro (*Alocasia macrorrhizos*), provide the lushness the owners sought in their garden. Fast-growing weeping lilly pilli (*Waterhousea floribunda*) offers screening from the neighbours. Basketball net from Mega Slam Hoops.





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A park-like paradise right at the back door: that’s what the owners of this Sydney garden wanted for their four children, all aged under 10. And Fiona Ericsson and Julia Levitt of Sticks & Stones Landscape Design have delivered on that brief in spades. “The kids are out there all the time, regardless of the weather,” says the owner.

In 2018, before the duo was hired by the owners, the children would have been less enthusiastic. Then, the garden was lacklustre, with patchy grass and sparse plantings, and dominated by a paved parking area higher than the lawn that sliced the backyard in two.

“Our brief focused on ways to encourage action, activity and movement for the kids,” says the owner. “We wanted to use every square metre to motivate them to be outdoors.” Living in a busy beachside suburb, the couple also envisioned the garden as a sanctuary from the hubbub beyond.

The backyard was, naturally, to be the heart of the children’s activity space. “The owners asked us to create outdoor zones with better flow and function that were interactive and interesting – a playground and sanctuary all in one – so that everyone in the family could each find their own space,” says Fiona. Established trees, including white cedar (*Melia azedarach*), jacaranda and a bangalow palm, all of which the owners wanted to retain, lent instant park quality to the garden, along with a generous amount of shade. But all that shade also limited Fiona and Julia’s options when it came to plant selection.

“We needed plants we could layer, which would provide privacy and tolerate the shade, a mixture of evergreen and deciduous trees,” says Fiona. And the grass had to be resilient, hence the choice of Sapphire Buffalo. But, for the hardworking areas near the basketball hoop, artificial turf was the ideal solution.

Massed plantings of robust, low-maintenance, large-leafed tropical plants *Heliconia bihai* x *Caribaea* ‘Hot Rio Nights’ and giant taro (*Alocasia macrorrhizos*) make bold statements. Tall and fast-growing, they quickly provided the jungle-like lushness the owners were after, aided by massed underplantings of *Philodendron* ‘Xanadu’, dwarf cardamom (*Alpinia nutans*), *Blechnum* ‘Silver Lady’ and tractor seat plant (*Ligularia reniformis*), all at home in the shade of the white cedar.

While the yard is enjoyed by the children, the upper deck is the adults’ stomping ground. “It is like being in a treehouse looking back down to the garden with all the greenery,” says the owner. “The kids are mostly old enough to be down there by themselves, so we can just look over from the deck to monitor.”

Despite so much choice, Fiona and the owner agree on their favourite feature. “The curved stone seat,” says the designer. “You can sit there and watch the children play on the equipment – including a basketball hoop, a swing set, climbing frame and, the crowning glory, a custom cubbyhouse – under the canopy of the stunning trees.”

“I love that feature,” echoes the owner, “because it uses natural materials to introduce a solid seat that also looks great.” Another favourite element in this playground paradise may bring out the children in the adults. “The spider swing seat is used every day by kids of all ages,” he says.

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The blackbutt deck is an extension of the living areas. Growing in the textured pot at left is *Euphorbia* ‘Firesticks’. Malmo sofas and coffee table, Coco Republic. **OPPOSITE TOP** The swing set is from Play Equipment. **OPPOSITE MIDDLE** From left The custom cubby. A curved sandstone bench is a perfect place for parents to perch near the play equipment; the lawn consists of Summer Prestige 30 artificial turf from Field Turf and Sapphire Buffalo grass, separated by crisp steel edging. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** From left Shade-tolerant plants such as *Blechnum* ‘Silver Lady’ and *Ligularia dentata* occupy the lower canopy, while more robust plants, such as giant taro (*Alocasia macrorrhizos*) and a kentia palm, add density to the middle layers. A potted *Pandorea jasminoides* is underplanted with *Zoysia tenuifolia*.