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*A wildly pretty rural garden*



# How to REVIVE A CLASSIC

An old cottage has been given new life with a contemporary garden of lush, layered plants.

STORY *Elizabeth Wilson* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Simon Whitbread*

## *Movement and flow*

Lyndall planted strappy walking iris (*Neomarica gracilis*) and bendy elephant's ear (*Colocasia esculenta*) to give the garden a sense of movement, in contrast to the non-moving bromeliad and *Senecio* plants. "Moving plants are very important because they bring life and change to a garden," says Lyndall.

## *Lush and lovely*

This richly textured bed combines the burgundy-toned groundcover *Tradescantia zebrina* with walking iris (*Neomarica gracilis*), multi-lobe-leaved *Philodendron* 'Xanadu', giant arrow-shaped leaves of elephant's ear (*Colocasia esculenta*), silver-grey blue chalksticks (*Senecio serpens*) and the feature plant, Imperial bromeliad (*Alcantarea imperialis* 'Rubra').

## *Silver lining*

With its silver-blue tones and 'fingers' of foliage, blue chalksticks (*Senecio serpens*) is a succulent offering wonderful contrasting colour. "I also love the way it cascades gently over hard edges in the garden," says Lyndall. It's drought-tolerant and produces a small white flower in mid summer.



LYNDALL KEATING

*Director, Garden Society*

*The brief*

The front garden of this 1880s timber worker's cottage in Sydney's inner west had seen better days when the owners approached Lyndall Keating to refresh it.

Old camellia, hibiscus and murraya shrubs were either overgrown or stumpy and the whole space needed enlivening. The owners wanted a garden that would sit in harmony with the home, without being traditional or cottagery. Lyndall was asked to select the plants, with one special request to incorporate a bougainvillea, part of the owners' general desire to introduce colour.

*The solution*

"There was nothing we could work with," says Lyndall of the former garden. The owners agreed – and the old shrubs were removed. Working with the existing retaining walls, Lyndall created a vibrant and modern garden of layered, lush, largely foliage-based plants in deep greens, burgundies and splashes of silver. Huge bromeliads – *Alcantarea imperialis* 'Rubra' – are the hero specimens, planted in clusters of three for visual impact. The two garden beds are filled with the same plants, in reverse order, providing a sense of symmetry without being too exact or formal.

*Designer statement*

"The rich mix of foliage gives this garden texture, vibrancy and colour, with a modern twist." ▶

*Bold features*

The bold and beautiful Imperial bromeliad (*Alcantarea imperialis* 'Rubra') has spectacular foliage form and colour. "I love how the top side of the leaf is silvery-grey, and the underside is deep burgundy," says Lyndall. To help hide the bromeliad's stem, she has planted round-leafed *Carissa* 'Desert Star' at the base.





## SEA OF GREEN

A bird's eye view of the garden bed, left, shows the striking, regal form of the Imperial bromeliad (*Alcantarea imperialis* 'Rubra') plants, amid a sea of green foliage. "The bromeliad is the feature plant and the others work in harmony around it," says Lyndall. Surrounding plants include *Cordyline glauca*, *Philodendron* 'Xanadu', *Carissa* 'Desert Star' and walking iris. "To delineate them all, every plant has a different leaf shape," says Lyndall.

### Welcome sight

Lyndall positioned two large concrete pots at the front door to play up the symmetry of the cottage's facade. In them, she placed giant bird of paradise (*Strelitzia nicolai*) underplanted with *Senecio serpens*.

### Tropical touch

The multi-lobed leaf of the philodendron lends a tropical feel to the garden. Lyndall loves this plant for its versatility, colour and interesting leaf form. "It's like the glue in the garden, holding everything together."



### High points

These concrete pots from Papaya were chosen for their scale and shape. "I like their bulbous forms," says Lyndall. "Combined with the height of the strelitzia, they help create a grand entrance."

### Star performer

"I love the way the *Alcantarea* sits upright," says Lyndall. "With its burgundy and deep green tones it's a great accent plant. It can be clustered or stand alone. I've clustered them in threes to make a focal point."

### All ears

The generous arrow-shaped leaf of the elephant's ear (*Colocasia esculenta*) lends height and movement to the garden as well as screening the side walkway. "Its colour and soft leaf form work well."

*When mixing foliage plants, the aim is to achieve a harmony of tones and leaf shapes. Here, Lyndall's tips on achieving the right mix:*

- ✦ Aim for colour variations, but keep the palette simple. In this garden we used four different tones: light green, deep green, burgundy and silver.
- ✦ Select a variety of textures and leaf shapes, but don't overdo it. In this garden we used 10 different key plants, repeat planted.
- ✦ Plant each species in groups. This allows for a larger visual impact and prevents the garden looking too busy or bitsy.
- ✦ Use large plants to create features and focal points.
- ✦ For visual interest, aim to mix plants that range in scale and height. Larger plants, such as elephant's ear and *Rhapis* palms, are helpful screening plants.



### **Colour mixing**

The beauty of this garden lies in its deftly mixed blocks of colour. Combining deep greens, burgundies and silvers is a sure-fire way to add drama and interest. Here, Lyndall shares her top-five plant recommendations for each of those three colour groups:

**DEEP GREEN TONES** *Carissa* 'Desert Star', *Crassula gollum*, *Rhapis excelsa*, *Cephalotaxus harringtonia*, *Ficus lyrata*, *Zoysia tenuifolia*.

**BURGUNDY TONES** *Cordyline glauca*, *Tradescantia zebrina*, *Alcantarea imperialis* 'Rubra', *Ficus elastica*, *Philodendron* 'Rojo Congo'.

**SILVER TONES** *Senecio serpens*, *Kalanchoe* 'Silver Spoons', *Crassula* 'Bluebird', *Dichondra* 'Silver Falls', *Agave* 'Blue Glow'. For more silver-foliage recommendations, see Helen Young's column on page 120.

A Lyndall's clients love the hot pink flowers of *Bougainvillea* 'Scarlet O'Hara' and requested its inclusion in the garden design. Lyndall planted it out the front at the side, installing tensioned stainless-steel wires for it to grow up. B The substantial leaves of an elephant's ear (*Colocasia esculenta*). C The pots containing giant bird of paradise (*Strelitzia nicolai*) underplanted with blue chalksticks (*Senecio serpens*). D Lush green *Philodendron* 'Xanadu' and walking iris (*Neomarica gracilis*) pop against a bed of burgundy-hued *Tradescantia zebrina*. **H&G**

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