

Personalise *Your Space*

House and land packages offer a simple solution to first homeowners but the garden often needs a personal touch.

Dean Boone shows how to make a new garden your own

Making a house your home isn't just about what's on the inside. You'll often need to transform the outside, too. If you've just bought a brand new house and land package, chances are the garden is very new, very simple and very much in need of your individual style. Yet it also presents the rare opportunity to skip the messy stages of landscaping and start with a well-planned basic garden, from which your own personal additions can grow.

Most new 'package' gardens are a planned entity, designed by professionals who know how to make the most of the land around the house. It will have 'good bones'; the basic elements of screen planting on the boundaries, a few trees for shade and privacy, and essential bits like retaining walls, a path in the front and to the washing line, and an entertaining area out the back.

You may have already had some say in your garden, as developers usually offer a few basic designs to choose from. But beyond that, new gardens are predominantly lawn and it's your job to bring greater depth, variety, contrast and colour.

The basic assessment

Before you start adding, check out the conditions you have to work with. There are some things you need to consider and they apply whether you opt for the landscaping package or not:

Is the drainage good?

Does the soil need improving?

Is the soil compacted?

To remedy these problems you may need to make drainage, improve the soil or add a liberal sprinkling of gypsum to break up clay soils. Seek professional advice if you are unsure of your knowledge in this area.

Once you have addressed these issues you can move forward to the design layout. Look to see if you need extra trees for shade and privacy – most likely you will. Think about keeping a sunny space for vegies and herbs, and perhaps a patch of lawn for kids to play on. Pets are also a consideration, so assess how much room you require and if you need space for a kennel, aviary or cattery.

Check before buying

Before you rush out to the nursery you should also consider the look of the garden. Some would say this is the most important thing of all. Your new planned garden may already be composed of massed plantings, neat lines of informal hedges and hardy small trees. If you cram lots of bits and pieces and uncoordinated plants into this space, you could ruin the designed look and possibly devalue your house in the process.

Discuss with the developer or garden designer what plants have already been used. They can suggest new plants to add without impacting on the overall effect. There are many hardy, drought resistant and reliable plant selections that will also help minimise maintenance, so make the most of the advice they can offer.

When you are sure

Incorporating more foliage contrast and colour is the best approach for this type of garden. The 'bones' have taken care of the background plantings but the middle and foreground area may be lacking. Planting suggestions could include natives, such as the Bush Gem series of kangaroo paw, and much-loved exotics like agapanthus or *Limonium* 'Perezii Blue'.

All of these are great free-flowering plants that don't need lots of attention. Plant them in long arching drifts to create flow. You could also add fragrance to the garden and gardenia is a great choice. Maybe try the 'Iceberg' roses for spring and summer scent, and winter bulbs like the classic jonquil.

Less is more

It's easy to be tempted to fill the garden with lots of wonderful things you find when you visit a nursery but small gardens look bigger when the layout and plant selection are kept simple. Less is more is the golden rule and the addition of just a few select plants, repeated throughout the garden, will work infinitely better.

A well-defined lawn, like a perfect circle or rectangle, will also make the garden look bigger, while a well-placed pot filled with your favourite annuals is enough to lift and change the colour of the garden with the seasons. Down the side of the house, a small trough pot with a scented climber, like Chinese star jasmine, will bring colour and depth to a very small space.

The last place to consider is where you want to sit, and a nice piece of outdoor furniture will make all the difference. Dressing the furniture with colourful cushions – and a table setting to match – can transform your bare outdoor space into another room, bringing the indoors out. After all, this is probably where you'll end up spending most of your time.

How to make a project garden your very own

Learn where sun enters your garden throughout different seasons, as it will impact on your enjoyment of the garden. Work out the passage of the sun over your house in winter and where you'll get maximum sun. In summer, shade from trees should work as passive airconditioning for the house and for greater enjoyment of outdoor living spaces.

Take a long look at all the potential views of your garden. Stand inside and look out through the various windows. Note where the direct line of sight ends. Is this a place for a focal point such as a sculpture, bench or feature plant? Check, too, how the seasons impact on your viewing patterns. Plan for seasonal changes.

Choose plants for screening that won't become a problem. In narrow spaces, plant fastigiated trees for shade, climbers for fence covers and narrow plants like clumping bamboo, conifers or shrubs that do not impede passage along a path.



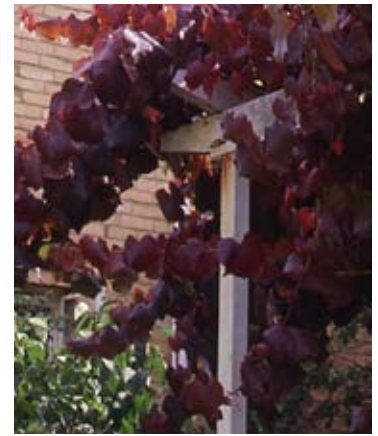
Make a great first impression at the front entrance. Seasonal potted colour is welcoming, and a decorative element, such as a wall plaque, can add further interest. Entrance plantings are often more formal than in other areas, creating a sense of order.

Vertical plantings such as a climber trained on wires or lattice, adds height and privacy to the side of the house. Consider a wall fountain outside the kitchen window with up-lights at night to create atmosphere.

Utilise open spaces for relaxation and outdoor dining. Grow a deciduous vine, such as a grapevine or Boston ivy, to provide dense summer shade but let winter sun penetrate. Make the most of views out into the garden with focal points, and allocate shady corners for relaxing retreats. Your garden is a sanctuary and an antidote to daily stress.

Plan drawings help you visualise vistas, focal points and how sunshine affects your garden

Top tips to personalise your off-the-plan garden



Above: Choose a deciduous vine, such as grape or this crimson glory vine (*Vitis coignetiae*), to cover a pergola, creating summer shade and winter sun.



Above: A miniature garden of small, tough succulents can make a great table setting or add interest to a bare corner or pathway.



Right: Place a Japanese ornamental water bowl among plants in the garden. It can double as a bird bath or a pet's water dish during the day when you are at work. It also helps humidify the area around plants which need moisture on hot days.



Right: A freestanding plug-and-play water feature softens any hard paving around a bare deck. Its calming, melodic sound creates a lovely soothing effect and it's an appealing visual attraction in its own right.

DETAILS PHOTOGRAPHY CHRIS L. JONES, GARY CHOWANETZ



Above: Group pots in complementary or matching colours around a patio to relieve the boredom of plain paving.



Above: A slatted or bamboo screen can soften a harsh fence, particularly if it's a highly heat-reflective metal one.



Left: Visit nurseries, galleries and markets for stylish garden art and statuary that blends with the tonings of paving, walls and surrounds.



Bring life to your landscape

Right: Grow groundcovers like thyme, dwarf or black mondo grass between pavers and around gravel to soften large heat-absorbing expanses.



Gardens photographed at Macarthur Gardens Display village, Campbelltown