



TROPICAL FEEL

Lush layers of glossy-leaved plants were the key to creating a little slice of South-East Asia in suburban Melbourne.

STORY *Elizabeth Wilson* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Martina Gemmola & Isaac Todd*

Clipped bougainvillea, olive trees and a feijoa tree form undulations that flow over the front fence. The verge is planted out with *Austrostipa stipoides*, a tough native grass. **OPPOSITE** Standing at the front door is the frangipani that initially attracted the owners to the house. Gardenias (*Gardenia 'Florida'*) grow under the window while *Philodendron 'Xanadu'* is mass-planted under a row of *Strelitzia reginae*. The path is bluestone random paving.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT The front garden has been transformed into a private oasis; the beloved frangipani at the door is a welcoming sight for visitors. The jungle-like side garden features *Philodendron* 'Xanadu' and large-leafed *Strelitzia reginae* and a mix of gingers including *Elettaria cardamomum* and *Alpinia* spp. Purple-flowering *Liriope muscari* 'Royal Purple' and dwarf mondo grass. *Camellia sasanqua*. **OPPOSITE** The front garden features a small area of buffalo lawn for Clara to run around on, bordered by layered foliage including *Liriope* 'El Marco', orange jessamine (*Murraya paniculata*), *Philodendron* 'Xanadu', *Strelitzia reginae*, *Strelitzia nicolai*, gingers and canna lilies.

A frangipani tree in the front garden was the first thing to catch the eye of landscape designer Hendrik van Leeuwen. It was April 2018 and Hendrik and his wife Susie were trawling real estate websites in search of a new home in the Melbourne beachside suburb of Elwood. After living in an apartment for five years, they were seeking some more space for themselves and their daughter Clara, now five.

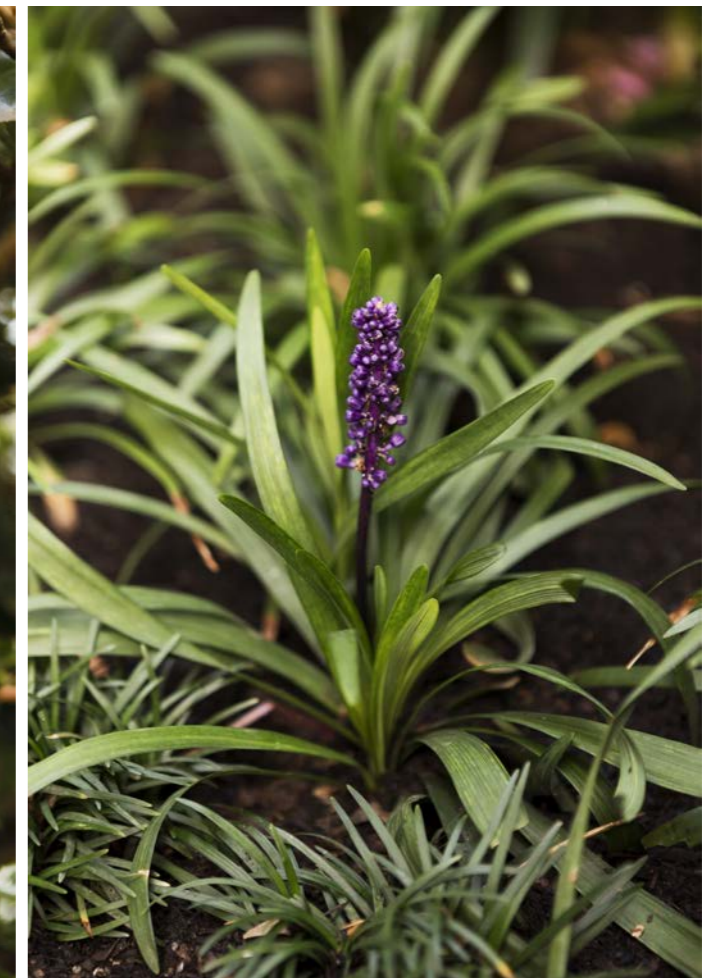
"I noticed this Federation-era home on a corner block. It had a lovely facade but it was the tree that really caught my eye, because I love frangipanis," says Hendrik. Thankfully, an inspection of the house didn't disappoint. "The house itself was in pretty good condition: it needed repainting inside and out, new floorboards in parts and we wanted to open up some rooms and create an attic space. But we could see the potential." It was the first and only house they looked at. They bought the property and had a six-month settlement period, giving them plenty of time to plan their renovations inside and out.

Hendrik was especially excited about the garden, which he renovated simultaneously with the house. From the moment he stepped onto the site he could envisage the transformation.

"The garden had good bones and the existing plants included frangipani, giant strelitzia, bougainvillea, feijoa, olives, hibiscus and pandorea," he says. "It seemed natural to me to create a lush tropical garden. It's a style I love, inspired by my travels in South-East Asia, and I've always enjoyed creating that look."

A tropical garden in temperate Melbourne? It's not as unlikely as it seems, says Hendrik. His approach is all about conjuring a feeling, using plants with plentiful glossy leaves rather than plants that are specifically tropical. "There's a palette of tropical-look plants that are surprisingly tough and tolerant of the cold – things like liriope, gingers, viburnum, japonica, clivia and bamboo. They're cool-climate but lush and when mass-planted create the feeling of a tropical garden."

Firstly, Hendrik had to think about how to zone and structure the corner block. "It's an interesting shape – like a slice of pizza," he says. This meant most of the planting would occur in two corner locations and along the side of the house. He was keen to keep and restore all the existing plants: some of them – the frangipani, a woody orange tree and a couple of *Waterhousea floribunda* trees – received "regenerative prunings". Others, including clivias, were





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Flowering native Wonga Wonga vine (*Pandorea pandorana*). An old concrete tub has been repurposed as an outdoor basin, surrounded by giant timber bamboo (*Bambusa oldhamii*). Hendrik, Susie and Clara in their lush sanctuary. The barbecue caters for alfresco dining. **OPPOSITE** The 40m² rear deck and bench, made from cumaru timber, are immersed in greenery: weeping lilly pilly (*Waterhousea floribunda*) grows along the fence. A nearby linden tree (*Tilia cordata* 'Shamrock') will grow to form a shading canopy. Hendrik painted the house and outdoor furniture in a mix of Dulux Midnight and Woodland Grey. "All the foliage looks great with the backdrop of the black and grey," he says.

transplanted. "I pruned the frangipani and the citrus by about 50 per cent, but now the canopies have grown back and look dense and amazing."

New trees and large shrubs came next, crucial to creating structure. In the front garden, these included giant bird of paradise (*Strelitzia nicolai*), tamarillo, fruiting banana trees and native frangipani (*Hymenocallis flavum*). Then he began adding layers. For screening he used slender weavers bamboo (*Bambusa textilis* var. *Gracilis*) and for hedging, *Murraya paniculata*.

To create dark, green foliage in the borders Hendrik planted gardenias (*Gardenia augusta* 'Florida'), *Philodendron* 'Xanadu', *Camellia sasanqua* and *Liriope giganteum*. For texture, there's a mix of tufting and strappy plants, including canna lilies and ginger species such as true cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*), ornamental gingers (*Hedychium greenii* and *H. gardnerianum*) and *Alpinia* spp. Groundcovers include tall and dwarf mondo grass, Asiatic jasmine, assorted herbs and carpet thyme. The greenscaping continues up the fences with climbers including Wonga Wonga vine (*Pandorea pandorana*) and passionfruit vine.

"You need to build up your plant palette, dividing the plants into those suitable for sun and shade," says Hendrik. "Then create a layered scheme of foliage textures – the idea is to put plants together that complement each other or have contrasting foliage. Mass-planting makes watering easier and it looks better too."

The amazing thing is that Hendrik's tropical paradise emerged within 10 weeks. It's very achievable to put in a new garden and make it look established, he says. "The trick is to combine existing plantings with new, advanced plants, quick-growing species and mass-planting," Hendrik says. "It just takes some strategising. Don't be afraid to regenerate plants. A massive prune can produce big rewards. And if you're strategic about it, investing in a few advanced plants can be worth the money."

Hendrik and his family spend a lot of time hanging out in the private front garden where there is a small section of buffalo lawn for Clara, and a vegetable garden heaving with seasonal produce. "We sit out there, surrounded by beautiful foliage, and feel we're in another world," he says. "Just like we're on holidays." **H&G Van Leeuwen Green; 0412 499 987 or vanleeuwengreen.com.**

