



Residential Garden Design

Desert Dreams – a stylish and sustainable dryland garden

Client: Private clients
Location: Caulfield, Victoria
Date: 1999
Budget: \$40k
Company: AQL Landscape Architecture
Role: Design & construction management
Awards: Commended Landscape (\$35,000–\$100,000) Landscape Industries Association Awards Of Excellence



This garden brings together sustainable landscaping and funky design.

Low-maintenance is often a key requirement of clients, and this can be achieved using the same techniques that rank high for sustainability.. and help to control costs.

Existing Cordyline trees were protected and retained for their architectural foliage, low water use and to provide an immediate sense that the garden is well-established.

Plant species and materials were chosen for their ability to look good year-round without significant care, as well as their ornamental qualities.

Strong geometric shapes of grass, gravel and pebbles were used to complement the horizontal architecture of the home.

Natural rainfall is collected and detained onsite in a gravel-lined swale - a dry creek bed - allowing it to recharge natural underground water storage within the soil, and functioning as the main feature element of the garden.

Design by Perry Mills/AQL, constructed by Australian Quality Landscaping.



Photography by Andrew Lecky



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Desert Dreams – a stylish and sustainable dryland garden

More Information

Desert Dreams - relying solely on rainfall, this desert-inspired garden is both stylish and sustainable

by Andrew Leckie

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The natural, down-to-earth feel of the garden, an effect enhanced by the exposed pebble pathways, is the first thing passers-by notice. For the owners, however, one of its chief attractions is its ability to flourish on rainfall alone.

As this is a front garden, it needed to have plenty of street appeal. Planted with hardy, drought-tolerant plants, including succulents, the overall emphasis of the garden is on natural forms, from the granite field boulders to the dry watercourse of river pebbles. This “back to nature” look is strengthened by the stepping stones leading to the office that sits to one side of the front door and the liberal use of free-flowing shapes to create an easy transition between garden zones.

The owners, a busy working couple, wanted the garden to have a Californian desert-inspired look that would complement the contemporary architecture of the house. It also needed to be low-maintenance and drought-tolerant.

Before the transformation began, the front yard was an unremarkable expanse of lawn dotted with a few shrubs. First on the “to do” list was eradicating the existing areas of grass. Because the owners were keen on having some patches of turf, however, the new garden has sculptural strips of slow-growing Santa Ana couch grass flanking the main path.

Staying true to the best sustainable landscaping practices, soil from on-site earthworks was re-used to create garden mounds and planting beds.

The planting is a mix of drought-resistant Australian natives and exotics chosen to suit the existing soil conditions. The planting palette was selected to create a contemporary feel closer to the dwelling, which meant using architectural-style plants. As the planting flows back to the outer spaces of the garden, it becomes more informal.

Plants were also chosen to provide seasonal interest in the form of flower colour and flowering groundcover under the trees - as well as attracting bird life. To help the moisture retention of the soil and to reinforce the desert styling, washed granite sand was used for mulch.

A dry creek bed meanders through the garden, performing two very important functions. From a design perspective, it adds interest and draws the eye to different parts of the garden. From a practical perspective, it diverts run-off during periods of heavy rain. Water subtly flows from the creek into the holding pond then drains away after several days.

There are no irrigation systems and the garden has not been watered since construction was completed. In fact, it has flourished despite the extremely dry conditions of the past few years. The only special drainage installed was the soakage pit in the middle of the lower pond to disperse any excess water.

By learning about the soil in your garden and developing a sound understanding of local weather conditions, you can choose plants that will be inexpensive to establish and easy to maintain.



Landscape design matches architecture



Informal curvilinear layout



Rainwater harvesting swale

