



pastoral care

With its postcard-pretty country backdrop, this fragrant garden is a wonderful outdoor sanctuary that suits its owners' relaxed way of life

WORDS MEREDITH KIRTON PHOTOGRAPHY SUE STUBBS

This early 20th-century cottage was originally constructed out of red mahogany and rosewood boards, all of which were milled on the property. It was extended in consultation with architect Caroline Pidcock. In summer, fragrance fills the air with an intoxicating blend of frangipani and orange jessamine. There are also swathes of day lilies which, with their apricot bells, nod and dance in the breeze.



When Charlotte, her husband David and their baby daughter, Isabelle, made the move to the NSW mid-north coast, their new home consisted of a paddock and a small early 20th century cottage, with cows grazing right up to – and even on – the verandah. Nowadays, the scene has changed. The modest cottage has been extended with the help of architect Caroline Pidcock, and a wonderful garden has been established around a plan by landscape architect Richard Stutchbury of Red Dust Designs. Growth is not confined to the property, however, and there are also two additions to the family in the shape of Oliver, now 15, and Alice, 13 (pictured above with Charlotte).

The scenery around the 32-hectare property unfolds like a postcard: rolling green hills, gently winding river, cow-studded paddocks, rustic yards and remnant bush. At the heart of all this stands a U-shaped homestead, with verandahs that wrap around one side, creating a sheltered courtyard that is perfect for magnolias. Richard Stutchbury designed the basic structure of the garden, the pool and tennis court location, aiming for a garden that is easy to look after. "I don't want to be a slave to it," says Charlotte. "It's a family garden and I want us all to enjoy it."

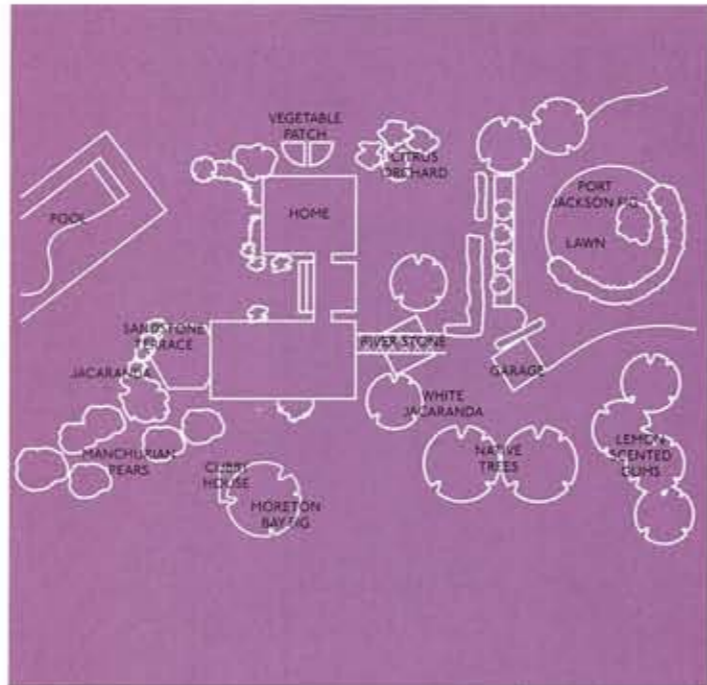
The result is a low-maintenance yet beautifully formed space. There are broad sweeps of lawn, with curving hedges that are relaxed enough to meld successfully with the native tree belt beyond, and pergolas over which climbers ramble. "The garden beds are set out with curves and bends to bring the river theme into the garden, and get away from the formality that hedges might otherwise bring," explains Charlotte.

This is essentially a year-round garden. The hedges and statement cycads, gums and curvaceous garden beds have a structural permanence about them not reliant on flowering displays. Mass plantings of dwarf agapanthus, gardenias, crepe myrtles, camellia sasanquas, jacarandas – including the rare, white-flowered species – day lilies, duranta and *Evolvulus* 'Blue Eyes' add luscious blooms. Artworks and water features also add year-round interest. "I love whimsy and the feeling of finding something around the corner," says Charlotte.

Inevitably, not everything went smoothly. "Some of the plants didn't work out, such as the Himalayan strawberry tree that lasted about a week, and some of the initial hedges were wiped out after a few heavy frosts," recalls Charlotte. These setbacks haven't stopped Charlotte as each year, she extends the garden. "I'm working at getting more natives into the periphery," she says. "Every year I say I'm not doing any more, but each year I can't resist making a few additions!"

The large, two-hectare garden is a successful backdrop to family life and dovetails with the relaxed lifestyle the couple were chasing when they moved from Sydney. "We love it up here," says Charlotte. "We think we have a piece of paradise!" >

POOL "The pool has been perfect with its swim-out section," says Charlotte of the free-form pool, whose undulations reflect the bends of the nearby river. Designed by Richard Stutchbury and built by Pollard Pools in Port Macquarie, it features bluestone surrounds and is internally lined with pebbles from the local area.



SANDSTONE TERRACE (above left & opposite) Landscape architect Richard Stutchbury designed the sandstone work in the outdoor entertaining area and the broad entrance way, where its smooth lines provide a contrast with the unformed borders of river rock. "We have used river rock as mulch on some beds as well as up either side of the drive to incorporate the river theme, too," says Charlotte.

RURAL SPLENDOUR (bottom left & right) "We love the view over the river flats to the mountains and escarpment beyond. The colours change constantly and the sunsets are unbelievable," says Charlotte of the garden's sprawling surrounds. >





KEY MATERIALS

Pool: The pool was designed by Richard Stutchbury of Red Dust Designs and built by Pollard Pools, (02) 6583 3934, pollardpools.com.au. It features Wistow Bluestone paving, \$55/sqm, (08) 8398 2960, wistowstone.com.au.

Cubby house: Charlotte purchased the cubby house from Playcraft years ago. For a similar setting, try the Cottage Cubby House with double swings, raised deck, door, windows and slides, \$2520, (02) 9634 7249, playcraft.com.au.

CONTACTS

Architect Caroline Pidcock, (02) 9357 1366, pidcock.com.au.
Landscape architect David Stutchbury, Red Dust Designs, 0404 807 705, reddustdesigns.com.au.

CUBBYHOUSE (above) The children's cubbyhouse and outdoor play area, purchased in kit-form from Playcraft and delivered to the property, nestles beneath a huge Morton Bay Fig (*Ficus macrophylla*), which was already on the property when Charlotte and her family purchased it. Charlotte has since added Port Jackson figs to complement this tree.

DRIVEWAY (left) The circular driveway is made of Nambucca Gold pebbles (the same stone used for the pool) and still features some of the original gum trees as well as newer plantings. "I can't wait for the avenue of Manchurian pears, planted between the house and the tennis court, to join together and provide a luscious dense shade on hot sunny days – I regret not planting them earlier," says Charlotte. ■