

WEST WEEKEND

JUNE 7-8 2014

ROS
THOMAS

'WE CALLED IT
THE MAN TRAP.'

CHICKEN
RUN

ROBERT DREWE
IS WALKING ON
EGGSHELLS

plus »

COOL DESIGNS,
HOT BARS & AN
AMERICAN BEAUTY

Green
ROOM

Garden designer Ascher
Smith loves turning
barren backyards into
patches of paradise.

The Weekend West

The tailor-made garden

« They decided they wanted to create more of a traditional garden, which would complement the older house. “We didn’t really have a theme. I supposed it’s in keeping with the house — there’s no point having a hard-edged garden with all the spiky plants here. If you’ve got a modern home then it suits that kind of thing. But this isn’t that at all, it’s more of an old-fashioned garden.”

She says they began with lots of flowers, “and then we slowly got more into the vegetables and fruit trees. And then we built the studio and then we did the aquaponics and then we got the chickens — it’s one thing after another.”

The ornamental pond was transformed into a “working pond” after Sarah-May and Steve discovered aquaponics at Garden Week. In a very clever, neat and symbiotic life cycle, the nutrient-rich water from the fish pond feeds the leafy greens, the plants take the nutrients and deliver clean water back to the pond, via a few feisty marron.

While there are plenty of roses, pansies, petunias, orchids and a couple of topiaries, the Baxters have also incorporated lots of natives and plenty of food crops into a waterwise garden. Statues, decorative pathways and quirky ceramic pieces crafted by Sarah-May in her backyard studio add plenty of interest. She recommends creating lots of focal points in a garden by installing a big pot with a feature plant.

Thankfully, her creative streak is complemented by her husband’s practical focus. “He puts in all the paths and he’s always digging. He put lots of retic in; it’s on a bore, which is good, that’s what you need.”

Sarah-May advises budding gardeners to seek inspiration: visit an open garden, read magazines. “There might be just one thing that you think ‘Jeez, that is a really good idea and that will work in my spot’.” And don’t be stingy: mass planting is always a good look. “Even if you’ve only got a small space, everything en masse always looks better than a mishmash.”

The Baxters are keen participants in the Open Gardens scheme and enjoy showing off their hard work — visitors have been known to settle in for hours. And because of the amount of healthy greenery, on a hot day the backyard is a balmy micro-climate. “In summer, because of all the trees, it’s about five, sometimes eight degrees cooler out there.” **WW**

sarahmay.com.au; opengarden.org.au.

When Ascher Smith and her fiancé Dylan Lindsay began revamping their Scarborough house three years ago, the parched courtyard’s most impressive feature was a wall of blonde bricks. These days the walls are, quite literally, alive. At the top of this deceptively big botanic wonderland is what she likes to call her “rusty daisy greenwall”: an ingenious vertical garden made from construction board and Weedmat and filled with a colourful array of diverse but compatible plants.

“We’ve got succulents, herbs, ferns, annuals, natives, exotics,” Ascher explains. “Everything lives in harmony in that wall.” The plants peep out of daisy motifs carved from the construction board, which was painted with Porter’s Liquid Iron and Instant Rust paint, giving the very convincing impression of a sheet of weathered metal. The blonde bricks have been covered with limestone cladding and a good-sized garden bed along the boundary line has been filled with endless shades of green thanks to the magnolia, frangipani, ornamental pear and avocado trees underplanted with shiny-leaved shrubs.

There’s a calming water feature, pots and urns and a magical mirror that gives the illusion of a gateway to another garden. A domed pizza oven dominates one end of the courtyard while a mosaic-topped wrought iron table takes pride of place. A purple grapevine wends its way through the pergola overhead.

It’s hard to believe the transformation from barren patch to a vibrant, verdant haven. The success of the space is something Ascher, a largely self-taught garden designer, puts down to thinking outside the square. It’s an approach she takes when designing gardens for others, too.

“You can do it with anything; it just takes that bit of creativity. It’s also doing something that’s a bit different — something that makes it personal. You really need to bring out a part of them in the garden. That’s what I strive for.”

Ascher grew up in a Palmyra house with an “amazing”

garden inspired by her creative parents’ travels. “They’ve been there 32 years and it’s unlike any other garden I’ve seen in Perth. Seeing that growing up, it just becomes a part of you. You see what can be done and you need the vision, you need to see the beauty in any garden.”

After high school she studied viticulture in Margaret River, where she learnt about the intricacies of soil, and then, in 2004, horticulture in Broome, where she worked in a nursery and fell in love with tropical plants. A local landscaping company took her on before she headed back down to Perth. After enduring painful operations to correct carpal tunnel syndrome — the result, she suspects, of years of work in viticulture — Ascher was given an ultimatum. “They said either get off the tools or find a different line of work. That’s kind of how I fell into designing and worked for a company for a couple of years in Perth and branched out on my own about five years ago.”

After the hard slog of landscaping and digging out someone else’s design, Ascher loves seeing the creative process full circle. Her favourite jobs are those that have seen a “bomb site” turned into an oasis. “The clients’ faces, when they see the transformation in the space of a month — they’re speechless.”

She says it can sometimes be tough to convince people that they need the help of a garden designer. “We can save them huge amounts of money, we can save them years of heartache and stress. We have the knowledge and the experience, and we have the vision. It’s like building a house: you start with the plans, with a design, and essentially you can’t build a house without these plans. Having someone’s knowledge of how to go about it and what materials and plants to use is invaluable. What might be a small consult fee could save you thousands of dollars.”

Apart from considering getting professional help to design your garden, Ascher recommends having the courage to try something different in your yard. And don’t be afraid of planting trees. **WW**

aslandscapedesigns.com.au.

