



On the level

This clever small-garden makeover created a coastal retreat that's perfect for play and entertaining WORDS DONYALE HARRISON

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PROBLEM This compact outdoor area on Sydney's Northern Beaches had an old deck with a precipitous drop to a tired lawn below. With two small children, the owners needed something safer and more fun.

SOLUTION Adam Robinson, of Green Rooms Gardens & Landscapes, a Sydney-based firm, was called in. He found the site dictated many of his choices: "I wanted to capture the sense of easy coastal living, which the house and area are all about". He started by smoothing out the level changes throughout the area, taking out the old structure and building two new decks - raising the whole lower area. Then he pumped up the light with a series of pale surfaces and features, before adding a tapestry of low-water-use plants.



1 A graduated change in levels, rather than the previous steep drop, makes the most of this sloping site - a great solution for young families, because you can keep an eye on children in the garden. In summer, the dining table can move from inside to out.

2 Adam used plantation-grown Australian hardwood for the deck. "It's renewable and strong and really lasts," he says. The upper level is paved with Himalayan honed sandstone, which plays up all the available light, while the built-in bench is mostly constructed from hardwood. "We dressed it with a stone wall cladding from Eco Outdoors," says Adam. "Each piece is fixed separately, but it looks authentic for a fraction of the weight and resources."

3 Views of the neighbours' mature palms and Norfolk Island pines provide an upper storey to the plantscape. Design elements are borrowed from past architectural styles. The retro panel of white blocks backing the shallow pond (top left) echoes old fences that are found in the area, and the slatted wall feature behind the *Aloe barberae* (bottom left) harks back to weatherboard beach homes.

4 "We wanted a real garden, not just hard landscaping," Adam says. "Even though it's a small space, there's a lot of plant texture and variety." Plants include child-friendly grasses, succulents, bamboos and foliage highlights, which include an array of colours and textures: silver-leaf olives, chunky aloes and the crisp, bright green of *Helichrysum petiolare* 'Limelight'.

5 Plants were chosen for low-water needs. But to cover extended dry periods, a drip-irrigation system with a timer and a rainwater meter was added, so water costs will stay low. The pond bubblers and half-eyelid lights on the steps, which gently fold one level into another, use very little power but add ambience and safety. For more information, contact Green Rooms Gardens & Landscapes, Kingsford NSW. Call (02) 9662 8188 or visit www.greenrooms.com.au.