

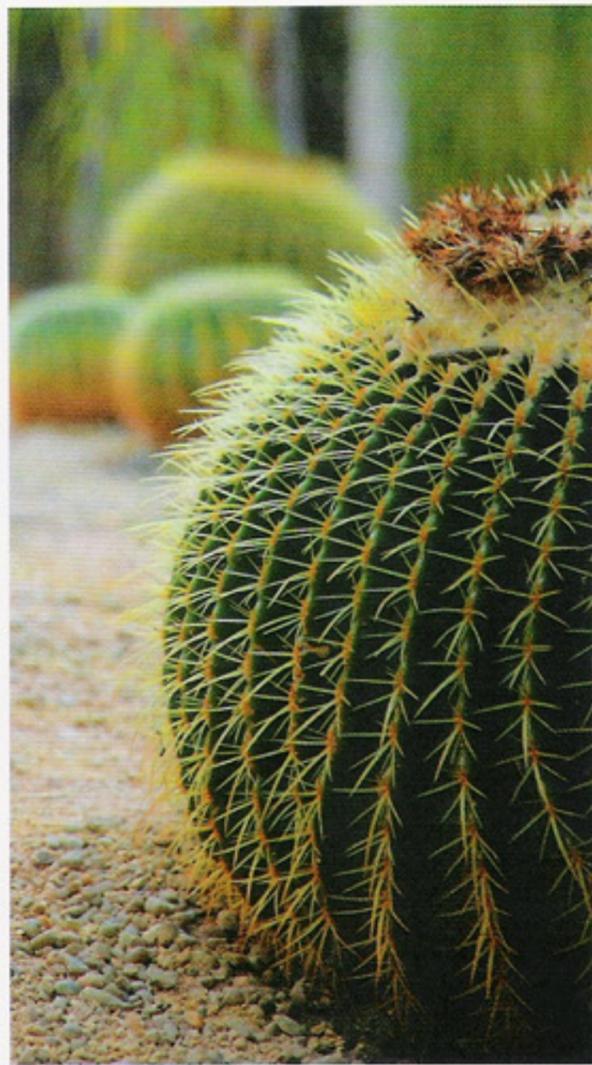
Multi-headed pony tail palms.

A CUT ABOVE

Words by Kelvin Carlson
Photography by Peter Brennan

Making a point was very much on the mind of the designer of this modern cactus garden on Sydney's northern beaches





“ If it doesn't rain at all for six months, maybe give it a drink”. That's the advice given to me from the specialist grower of the industrial-grade, nuclear holocaust-resistant, seemingly indestructible Golden Barrel (*Echinocactus grusonii*) cacti that are thriving in this Sydney garden.

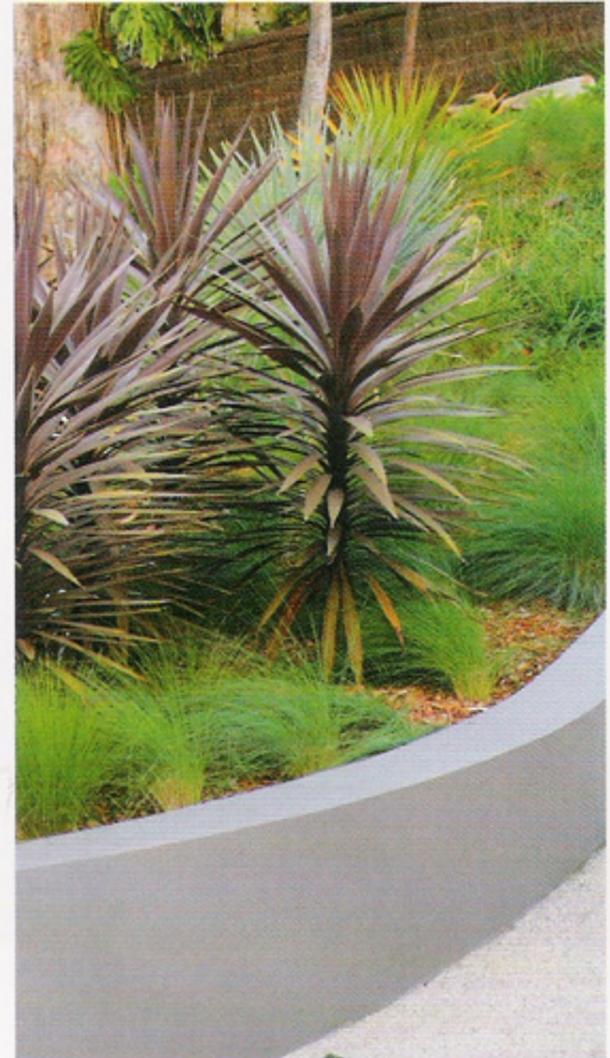
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In its natural habitat, *Echinocactus* can be found eking out a meagre existence in central Mexico; it is now critically endangered. This is possibly due, in part, to an illegal trade in these handsome plants. Cattle rustling was once a part of the colourful past of Mexico, but now it has been replaced with cacti rustling, complete with bad guys, money and guns, such is the value of these extremely slow-growing cacti.

These plants are so drought-hardy the grower has a golden barrel lying under his hothouse bench that's been there for three-and-a-half years without even a drop of water. You'd be excused for thinking it's dead. But it's not. It's just sitting there, patiently waiting for a drink.

The original concept for this garden was not derived from a water-saving perspective — that is a bonus. It was conceived to blend in with the built environment. The dwelling, which could best be described as a Hollywood-style mansion architecturally tipping its hat to Frank Lloyd Wright, is all rectangles, flat roof and very minimal — and it just screamed out for a minimalist, natural, Mexican desert-style garden to complement it.

Left Spiky stuff! Below Red Cordylines create drama and impact.



The multi-stemmed pony tail palms (*Beaucarnea recurvata*) were difficult to find at the right age — 30 years old — but once sourced and planted look fantastic. Also drought-resistant, these plants store water in their bulb-like base.

Pony tail palms have been used to create height and scale, and have been placed carefully to look like they just germinated in the garden naturally, but also with a mind to achieve a pleasing aesthetic from all three viewing points of the garden. The tall, blue *Cereus* has been used as a feature, the blue complementing the yellow of the painful spikes on the Golden Barrels.

Euphorbia virosa is actually a hybrid, cultivated from a plant that had a problem with photosynthesis. It has attractive cream and grey colours and was used to create a ragged border that defines the garden perimeter and provides a somewhat stark contrast against the white wall behind.

Golden Barrels have been placed randomly, again creating a natural, uncontrived effect. Some have “pups” (baby plants) placed carefully at the base to give the impression the Golden Barrels →



Deco Granite mulch blends well with Travertine walking. Below A rust-coloured urn is a feature that complements the desert style.

have been there a long time and are multiplying.

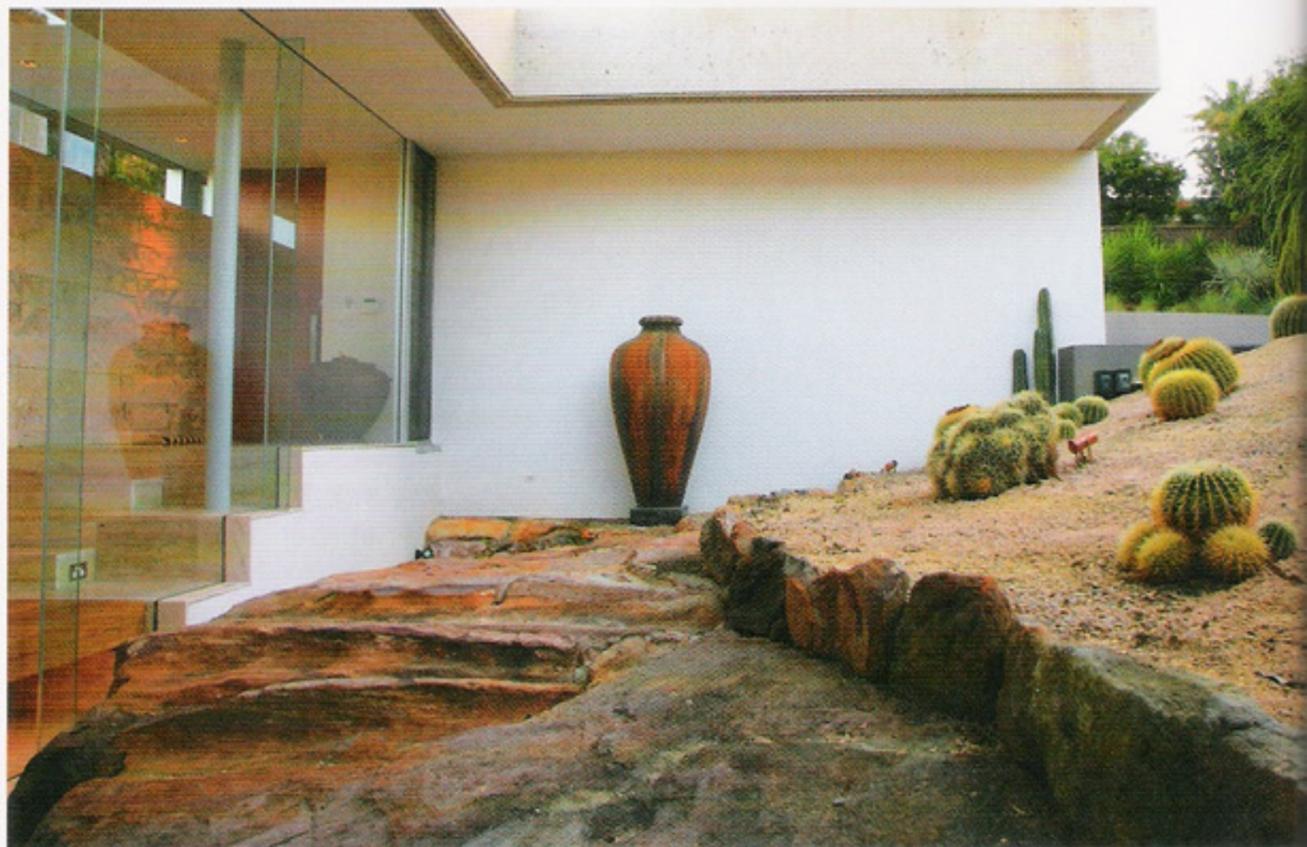
Golden Barrels (amusingly known as the very politically incorrect 'Mother-in-Law's Cushion'), are surprisingly easy to plant. Foam blocks were used to handle the plants into position, so that the spikes stick into the foam and not soft skin. I learned the hard way not to squat down backwards while making this garden. In fact, I now ask myself: "What was I thinking? Just about everything in the garden involves really sharp spikes!"

The blue cactus (*Cereus azureus*) proved challenging, but only when it came time to prise it from its home, which was really close to lots of big, spiky plants in a cactus garden in the Blue Mountains. This stunning plant is rare. Most *Cereus* are green, not the steel-blue of this feature plant.

The Euphorbias were a challenge to install. The plants we used are actually large cuttings and, having incredibly fragile branches, had to be very carefully wrapped in bubble wrap for transportation. They are also covered in lots of spines, just in case planting them wasn't challenging enough to begin with.

The pony tail palms were relatively easy to plant. First, they were hand-dug from field-grown stock, the roots trimmed, then loaded by tractor onto a ute where they were placed in old tyres for transportation. There aren't any spikes but the leaves have a sharp edge and cut the skin easily.

Often, these sorts of gardens have fine, white pebbles as mulch, as the white helps with light reflection onto the plants. However, we decided to go with mulch consisting of 50 per



cent Deco Gold (decomposed granite) and 50 per cent 10mm Nepean River Pebble. The sandy colour of the Deco Gold looked great, so we added the pebble to create aeration that enables water and air to enter the soil profile. As the mulch is laid at a depth of 75mm, weeds should be suppressed.

I deliberately chose rust-coloured pots and a shapely, rust-coloured urn as a feature. This colour fits with the earthy desert look and contrasts well with the sandy-coloured decomposed granite.

Of course, no man is an island, so for

technical information and assistance in planting out the garden, I turned to Noel Butler from Advanced Arid Exotics whose encyclopaedic knowledge of desert plants is astounding.

For those wishing to create a water-wise cactus garden, my advice is to do it — just make sure you're not around when it's time to plant the spiky stuff. **SL**

Kelvin Carlson is a horticulturist and principal of Sydney-based landscape design and maintenance company, Harmony in Landscape.