

H&G

gardens

OPEN ALL HOURS

This month, we take a tour around a coastal cactus garden that delights in full sunlight. Then, as darkness descends, we create an ideal evening garden that will seduce your senses and calm your soul.

Photograph by Jason Busch

Potted golden barrel cactus
(*Echinocactus grusonii*).



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Textured plants such as (from left) *Cordyline* 'Red Sensation', bismarck palms (*Bismarckia nobilis*) and foxtail grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*) are a striking fit with this home's modernist architecture. Loose Nepean river pebbles are an unusual roof covering.

HIGH AND DRY

A modernist house on Sydney's Northern Beaches is the perfect backdrop for the sculptural forms of desert-dwelling cacti.

STORY SARA SILM | STYLING MEGAN MORTON & SARA SILM | PHOTOGRAPHY JASON BUSCH



A man wearing a cowboy hat, a black t-shirt, and dark pants stands with his hands in his pockets against a wall of stacked sandstone blocks. To his right is a large, spiky green plant in a large, rusted metal barrel. In the foreground, there are several golden barrel cacti. The ground is covered in light-colored gravel. To the left, there is a concrete wall and a window with dark shutters.

Kelvin, also known as Mr Harmony, stands among an army of golden barrel cacti and a potted dragon tree (*Dracaena draco*). **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** *Agave attenuata* are planted around a sandstone outcrop. Coastal rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*) is clipped into large topiary balls. *Agave attenuata*.

Finding the right landscape designer for your needs is rarely easy, but Coco the Jack Russell terrier quite literally took it in her stride. Unbeknownst to her owners, Greg and Karen Walker, she slipped out for a sneaky morning walk and found the perfect man for the job in horticulturalist Kelvin Carlson, who was working on a garden two doors down the street.

"I've never been recruited by a dog before, but there's a first time for everything," says Kelvin. "When I took Coco home and met Greg, I looked up the driveway and said, 'Great house, mate - pity the garden's a bit average!' He responded: 'Well, what would you do?'"

Two-and-a-half years later, the results speak for themselves. Nestled into a sloping bush block in Sydney's Bayview Heights, the sculptural dry garden sits perfectly, yet somewhat surprisingly, within its surroundings.

"I was conscious of designing a garden that was in the same architectural context as the house, but also in keeping with the eucalypts that provide a canopy to the garden," says Kelvin.

Inspired by photographs of the Getty Centre's rooftop cactus garden in Los Angeles, Kelvin responded to the challenges of the sloping block and an increasingly drought-dominated Australian climate by creating a low-maintenance cactus garden, which is the central feature of the outside space. He also used mass drifts of hardy, drought-tolerant grasses and succulents. "Cactus gardens aren't just low maintenance, they're no maintenance," says Kelvin. "As long as they have good drainage, they survive on what falls from the sky."

The plantings are a celebration of sculptural form and textural interest, >



'I was conscious of designing a garden that was in the same architectural context as the house... The Mexican-style desert garden works well against the minimalist Hollywood-style house.'

KELVIN CARLSON,
LANDSCAPE DESIGNER

< but there's no doubt the stars are the golden barrel cacti (*Echinocactus grusonii*). Due to their extremely slow growth rate, these easygoing plants come at a hefty price in their mature form, which has become particularly problematic for the species.

"There is a huge illegal trade in barrel cacti and they're now endangered in their native Mexico," says Kelvin. "Cattle rustling, a big part of Mexico's past, has been superseded by cactus rustling, complete with bad guys, big money and guns. As a result, it's critical to source stock from reputable nurseries."

Kelvin secured his stock through cacti expert Noel Butler of Advanced Arid Exotics. All the barrel cacti were grown from seed by Noel and some are up to 30 years old. Their size presents unique challenges when planting.

"My aim was to plant them without becoming a human pin cushion," says Kelvin, laughing. "I made two long handles out of polystyrene and managed to avoid any injuries." The garden also includes giant yucca (*Yucca elephantipes*), foxtail grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*), palms, bird of paradise, mother-in-law's tongue, cordyline and *Agave attenuata*.

Although Kelvin has 20 years' experience as a horticulturist and landscaper, he prefers to think of himself as "just a gardener". "I make gardens for my clients, not landscapes," he says. "People don't pour a glass of wine and sit in their 'landscape'. They go into their gardens to relax and get away from the business of modern life."

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**Kelvin Carlson, Harmony in Landscape,
North Narrabeen, NSW; 0416 160 996
or www.mrharmony.com.au.**

ABOVE Golden barrel cactus (*Echinocactus grusonii*) surround a ponytail palm (*Beaucarnea recurvata*) in the courtyard.

OPPOSITE Foxtail grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*) and yellow kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos flavidus*) create texture and colour beneath the existing eucalypts.



Barrels of beauty

Ten reasons why you should plant *Echinocactus grusonii* in your garden:

- 1 Golden barrel cacti can go up to six months without water during non-growth periods. During the growth period (September to April), water once a month or when ribs appear wrinkled.
- 2 They don't need pruning, and they suit both urban and rural settings.
- 3 You can go on holidays without fear of them not surviving because they can pretty much exist purely on rainwater.
- 4 It is not so much heat as light that makes cacti thrive, making them ideal for exposed areas such as apartment balconies. Just make sure they get sunlight for at least two-thirds of the day.
- 5 Thanks to their prickles, they make great added security under windows.
- 6 Their long flowering period sees buds open in daylight throughout summer.
- 7 Their non-invasive root system won't damage surrounding structures.
- 8 They are resistant to weed killers, such as Round-up.
- 9 They can be grown in large pots, containers or planted straight in the ground (if your backyard has rich, sandy soil). Buy mature plants, as seedlings can take 50-60 years to reach maturity.
- 10 Like bonsai, golden barrel cacti are heirloom plants that appreciate with age. They easily live 80-100 years old.

– Noel Butler, Advanced Arid Exotics,
East Kurrajong, NSW; (02) 4576 3133
or www.barrelcactus.com.au.