



GREEN ZONE

Great gardens and backyards are never an afterthought, insists landscape designer Kate Seddon. Plan ahead, and you will add joy – and value – to your home.

BY Stephen Crafti

GARDEN DESIGN is a collegiate affair for Kate Seddon. This she makes clear from the moment we sit down in the kitchen of her Victorian home in Melbourne's south-east – everything she does is a team enterprise, her business name, Kate Seddon Landscape Design (KSLD), aside. “We work across all projects together, from the start to the finish,” she tells me, over a pot of tea and a plate of delicious home-made biscuits. “I don’t want this to sound like it’s just about me.”

Over the past two decades, the 50-something designer has made a name for herself creating dazzling private gardens for the well-heeled in Brighton, Caulfield North, Northcote, Hawthorn, Richmond, Fitzroy North, South Yarra and Toorak. There are also projects on the Mornington Peninsula and in Bendigo, Ballarat and Castlemaine. “I don’t want to spread myself too thinly, with a two hours’ drive the max,” says the mother-of-two matter-

of-factly. “A sense of place and understanding the local terrain is extremely important.” She recently completed a garden for a new two-storey house at Barwon Heads on the Bellarine Peninsula, which falls within the designer’s self-imposed geographical boundaries. Although the former cottage was demolished, the owners of the property were mindful that the locals loved the cottage-style garden. Rather than clear the site and start from scratch, Seddon and her team retained a number of the original trees, such as coast banksia and willow myrtle. She also brought in a few 30-year-old olive trees, replanted from another property.

“These established trees come with gnarled trunks and the structure is beautiful,” says Seddon, who likes to use a combination of native and exotic species, selecting the most appropriate plants for the site as much as for the climate. She often clips certain species to add

Above: in this KSLD project in South Melbourne, shutters from the house were refashioned into curved bench seats.

form, allowing a looser arrangement to spill over them. For the Barwon Heads house, she used Elio cobblestones for pathways and a local sandy gravel for the driveway to complement the colours of the house bricks.

IT TOOK Seddon some time to find her creative pathway, despite her pedigree. After finishing high school, she studied arts at the University of Melbourne, majoring in psychology. This was despite her late father, Chris Seddon, being a prominent architect, having done work for Sir Norman Foster’s studio, including the iconic HSBC building in Hong Kong. “I think architecture just seemed too close,” recalls Seddon, who pursued a career in advertising instead, working with companies such as Schofield Sherbon Baker (Leo Schofield, the cultural buff, was one of its directors). “Advertising is a young person’s field,” she notes. “It’s exciting, but it demands night and weekend work and is not



particularly amenable for starting a family.” She bit the bullet and made a career change in 2002. “I was always attracted to gardens and the broader world of design, given my father’s career, and seeing numerous buildings on family holidays.”

Seddon enrolled in a graduate diploma in horticulture and design offered by the University of Melbourne, located in Burnley on the banks of the Yarra River. “From the first moment I arrived, I knew that I had made the right choice,” she says. “The setting was magical. It’s like a small botanic garden, full of birdlife, with a fabulous mid-20th century building. My lecturers were truly passionate and deep thinkers.” Landscape architect Andrew Laidlaw, who was one of many who taught Seddon and now works at the Royal Botanic Gardens, explains why she was dux of her year. “Kate would always ‘gobble up’ as much information as she could, continually asking questions and always eager to learn more. I could tell even then that she would be successful. In this profession, you need to be a great listener. But you also need to have an innate ability to design. Most of the great landscape designers I know have little ego, and Kate is certainly not about her, but the work.”

Like most new graduates, Seddon began with a small project, which was in the bayside suburb of Brighton – only a driveway and a side path to redesign. She brought in a copse of trees on one side and installed a meandering timber path leading to the front door at the side of the house. The meandering path was later implemented on a much larger scale for the Besen family’s TarraWarra Museum, an hour’s drive from Melbourne.

Among her many other projects: the landscaping for a mid-20th-century home in Caulfield North. The owner already had succulents and cacti dotted around the house. The pool’s pebbled “crusty and awkward lip” was removed and the pool retiled. One of the inspired choices was a curvaceous steel fence that enclosed the new crazy-paving, a style popular in the 1950s that matched the age of the home. The garden beds were also replanted and reshaped with kangaroo paw and coastal rosemary, along with native grasses. Closer to the city, she reworked the garden of a Victorian house in South Melbourne (see facing page and above), which lacked a midpoint in the vista, with a swimming pool positioned at the very end of the backyard. Hence, her redesign included a new paved area in limestone and an affresco dining area, with a pergola to screen a neighbouring church. Shutters that were no longer required in the house were fashioned into curved garden bench seats.

Above: the South Melbourne project’s affresco dining area acts as a visual mid-point. Right: Seddon only takes on work within a two-hour drive – “understanding the local terrain is important.” Below: the front garden of a South Yarra project.



For Seddon, it’s not only understanding what her clients are looking for but also, as importantly, their dislikes. And rather than confuse the client with too many different schemes, she presents just one. “If you develop too many concepts, a design loses its strength and becomes a ‘Frankenstein,’” says Seddon, who sees the importance of creating a “dialogue” between the house and its garden rather than having different “voices”. “I think the best gardens happen when the clients also get involved, whether or not they put their fingers in the dirt.”

Architect Anne Hindley, director of Hindley & Co, is currently working with Seddon on a property in Brighton. As well as refurbishing the house, the brief included screening the back garden from a palazzo directly behind. “Kate’s suggestion was to demolish the old

pool house on the edge of the site, provide some dense planting and build a new pool house that would also accommodate the family’s needs,” says Hindley.

All gardens mature, of course, evolving with the seasons and as a family moves through their life cycle, but over time they can take on a different nature as properties change hands or owners imprint their own character. One that Seddon revisited three years after designing it introduced a series of garden gnomes across the front flower beds. Each plaster figure carried a ball or a cricket bat, lined up into teams. At another house, a Japanese-style bridge had appeared. But given the owners’ children’s affection for using it as a backdrop for fairy stories, the bridge was retained and enhanced with new plants around it.

Our interview over, Seddon shows me around her own back garden on this overcast afternoon. At the end, there’s a separate nook where she stores plants. Some of these are waiting to be planted or perhaps used for a client’s garden – she calls this spot her “laboratory”. There are mounded plants such as Persian shield plants, *Pittosporum*, Miss Muffet and unusual sculptural and succulent plants sprinkled throughout.

If there’s one piece of advice Seddon can give, it’s to plan ahead, as gardens can add considerable value to a home. Unlike building or renovating a house, gardens and landscaping more often than not are left as an afterthought. A fairly simple garden, including structures, can start at \$80,000 and go anywhere up to a million dollars, and this needs to be factored in when building a house. What may seem a tidy sum initially can pay big dividends over the longer term. ■



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB BLACKBURN; SIMON GRIFFITHS