



Silvery grey cushion bush (*Leucophyta brownii*) contributes dramatic form and softens the hard edges, creating a natural landscape feel. The fire pit is used all year for cooking and sitting around.



Viewed from the living room the forest effect is created by an eclectic mix of natives, including Illawarra flame trees (*Brachychiton acerifolius*) and a dwarf form of *Eucalyptus pauciflora* (the Edna Walling snowgum).

Village People

In Melbourne's St Kilda, a living example of gestalt design brings materials, plants and people together.





top The brilliant colour of the Kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos* sp.) stands out amongst all the greys. **bottom** The small pond, situated at the lowest point of the garden, collects all excess water. Only in cases of high rainfall does water leave the property. **opposite** Looking back towards the house and a native frangipani (*Hymenosporum flavum*) on the left. Mass planting of native grasses with tufts of native bluebells provides seasonal interest.

When owner, Peter Bridges arrived at the comfortable but traditional Californian Bungalow, he encountered a pretty but predictable lawn and garden layout. The garden was always thirsty in summer and required frequent maintenance throughout the year. The busy and appropriately named Bridges wanted to make a place that requited his love of drawing creative people together. For those times when all the guests are gone, he yearned for a domain of relaxation and unruffled peace. And his Staffordshire terrier, Roxy, was also keen for some room to ramble.

With this enticing brief in mind, Bridges turned to the noted Melbourne-based architect, Richard Swansson, who realised the first half of his vision in early 2005. A northern wing was added to the house and the existing internal layout was reconfigured to create a new kitchen, guest room and living areas, all cleverly designed to joyfully embrace the imminent action outside.

Matthew Dux, landscape designer and director of I Love My Garden, who had been previously engaged to create a space that delivered more time for outdoor enjoyment with less work, was an obvious choice to realise the second half of the vision.

Stage One had transformed the existing lawn into a series of smaller garden beds planted out with manageable trees, shrubs and groundcovers. Stage Two introduced a more complex topography, with a series of terraced platforms stepping down from the new living area to a wide, slightly bowl-shaped gathering space. The intimate amphitheatre is fringed on three sides by a raised array of breathtaking native flowers, wandering groundcovers and a mix of slender native trees. Water loss is kept to a minimum with a thick layer of shredded bark mulch covering the perfectly balanced outer circle.

The sense of joyful embrace between the house and the garden, the host and his guests, has been achieved by subtly linking the internal floor levels of Swansson's addition with the terraced layers constructed by Dux. Instead of a conventional timber deck, the uppermost level of the terrace is topped with slate in the design of a large native fish. A permeable sub-surface consisting of recycled clean-fill allows room for the vegetation that it supports to thrive.

As many trees as possible were retained from Stage →





top Dense and layered planting on the fence lines provide a sense of enclosure and privacy for Roxy and her owner.
bottom The owner's love of grey foliage extends indoors.
opposite Kitchen windows open fully to the garden with two pieces by ceramicist Andreas Tesch doubling up as bar stools. The once-diseased hibiscus now thrives in the free-draining platform with its original root level carefully protected.

One, including the only feature from the original front yard – a magnificent hibiscus nestled in the uppermost corner of the plateau, within arm's reach of the kitchen bench. The hibiscus provides a dramatic backdrop for those keen to strut their stuff on the natural outdoor stage, with grand entrances made from the living room. Scatterings of groundcovers planted between the natural stone on vertical and horizontal planes help to soften the scene.

For those more inclined to observe than perform, the sandy gathering space is easily accessed at the lower level via a generous hall that links the kitchen and the guest wing. A large glass sliding door invites visitors to step out into the space, rewarding them with impressive displays of plants and performers alike. And for those who've seen it all before, the mesmerising edges of a small natural pond ebb against the sand at the base of the terrace, fed by a trickle of water whose source emerges somewhere from the stones above.

The flow of water across and through the site has been skilfully managed by Dux, who designed and installed a drainage system to underpin the permeable surfaces and cope with the changing levels. This allows the space to be about what's on the surface because the foundations that lie beneath are so strong.

As dusk falls in the garden, the flickering flames of the sunken fire invite guests to sit on the boulders scattered around, with granitic sand underfoot. Here visitors ready themselves for the next show, or anticipate the next quiet conversation. Is this really St Kilda? It feels like a million miles away.

And the final ingredient for bringing great people together is of course, the catering. Tucked away behind the kitchen and overlooked by the master bedroom is a small but productive private kitchen garden, designed by Dux and maintained by Bridges and his dedicated core of friends. The fruit, vegetables and herbs it produces are grown organically to bring guests together and share each other's company.

When viewed from the street, it's difficult to believe that such a unified world exists behind the tall timber fence and traditional gable. If it takes a village to bring people together, it takes skilful design to create a village. 🌿

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top A water gum (*Tristanopsis laurina*) nestled in the corner will contribute to the future canopy of the garden. **bottom** The much-used kitchen has easy access to the veggie garden. **opposite** The kitchen garden is small but practical.

