



# the good life

This family chose a series of decks and platforms in lieu of a lawn

Text by **Carol Bucknell**. Photography by **Helen Bankers**.

**W**hen you have a beautiful park right next door, why bother with a lawn? Jacqui Vaughan and Craig Kells came to this conclusion when planning a redesign of their inner-city Auckland garden bordering Grey Lynn Park. "The kids play in the park every day so we wanted to create a subtropical sanctuary in our own garden, and connect the house to the pool area," says Jacqui.

The couple had owned their house for a year before they tackled the garden with its "pretty basic and disjointed backyard". "We fell in love with the location right

beside the park and saw that the property had good potential. The previous owner had built two small decks, one off the house and one at the pool but there was no connect at all. The middle was just lawn with some sporadic planting."

As Jacqui and Craig knew they wanted something special for their garden it was a no brainer to enlist the aid of landscape designer Donna Stanish of Seed Landscapes to help them achieve that goal. Donna's plan focused on establishing a better link from the pool to the house. "The idea was to create an easy transition

*Above left* Designed by Donna Stanish, kwila timber platforms descend gradually through the subtropical garden connecting the house and pool. The timber decks are laid at different angles to create energy and movement. *Above right* The second family room on the bottom floor of the house opens out directly to the lower decks.





## in a nutshell

**Who lives here?** **Craig Kells** (property developer), **Jacqui Vaughan** (New Zealand sales manager for Swarovski), **Tyler**, 20, **Mia**, 12, and **Tristan**, 21, now flatting but a regular visitor for Sunday dinner; border terrier **Cash** and rescue puppy **Elsa**.

**Jacqui, what do you like about living in Grey Lynn?** It's an amazing community. I have lived in Auckland for almost 20 years and only ever lived in this suburb. It's so close to the city, Ponsonby Road is a walk away, the cafes are getting better and better. The park is such a central point for us, walking the dogs each day.

**What's your favourite season in the garden?** Definitely summer, but you can see the garden from every window in the back of the house and it looks amazing all year round.

between spaces, leading the eye out and across the property, to create an engaging journey," she says.

Donna was pleased that Craig and Jacqui didn't want a lawn as this allowed her to design what she calls "travelling decks" – a series of kwila timber platforms that link the family room on the lower level of the house to the swimming pool. "The height between the existing pool and the house was very similar so we only needed three steps between them," she says. "This allows the decks to float above the garden at a height where you are surrounded by lush planting, around, below and above. You are truly deep within the garden. The distance effectively disappears as the decks bridge the garden and the pool draws you across."

A central feature of the design is the row of three giant bromeliads (*Alcantarea imperialis* 'Rubra') planted in circular pots that form a dramatic colonnade on the journey from house to pool. The pots are cleverly set on posts and pavers so they

are the same height as the deck, adding structure to the garden and further directing the view to the pool. The bromeliads with their soaring red flower spikes are among Jacqui's favourite plants in the garden.

"They are amazing. In the giant pots they are such a statement. Actually there is nothing in the garden that I don't like – the tractor seats (*Ligularia renformis*) and the taro that frame the pool and decking look stunning."

Craig is even more enthusiastic about the garden, developing very green fingers since its installation and spending up to two hours a week on average out there. His skills as a qualified builder have also come in handy, with the decks, seating areas and double-sided timber batten screens all his handiwork. "He was very busy," laughs Jacqui.

Donna's subtropical plant palette for the garden was inspired by the "borrowed landscape" of the next door park with its nikau and pohutukawa along with an existing stand of banana on the property.

**Clockwise from top left** Cash the border terrier walks across the upper deck which sits in the canopy of palms and neighbouring trees and overlooks the pool; the family spend hours in the poolside sun trap; the striking blooms of one of Jacqui's favourite plants, the giant bromeliad *Alcantarea imperialis* 'Rubra'.





"Cool roots and a sheltered suntrap have created a microclimate that has seen the plants grow at an astonishing rate," she says. "Craig followed my advice by putting in good quality soils and mulches. Start right and you will be rewarded with outstanding growth and plant health, protecting and enhancing your garden. It sounds boring but there is no better way."

Donna also recommended her clients use lighting consultant Jenny Pullar who suggested coloured lenses for the outdoor lighting, green for the plants and amber around the decking. "This also bathes the skin in a warm 'candlelit glow' effect around the seating areas," says Donna. "Otherwise we can look grey and washed out in white light at night, not a look we want."

The pool area is now the focal point of all summer family entertaining in the Vaughan-Kells household. "Kids' daily swims after school, weekend gatherings, Christmas Day family events – we have had well over 30 people here for barbecues and there is

always space to sit back, relax and enjoy the sunshine while keeping an eye on the children in the pool," says Jacqui.

So sheltered is the garden that even during the winter months the family can be found outside on weekends, relaxing and reading on the wicker sofas out on the top deck. Whatever the season, having such a variety of outdoor areas has been key to the success of this garden, Jacqui believes.

"As there are numerous spaces available to entertain, the garden never gets old. We can either use the concrete table on the top deck, the wooden seating corner where we usually have the beanbags or down by the pool on the loungers, soaking up the Auckland sunshine. Sometimes we just sit with our feet in the water chatting to the kids on a hot summer's day or floating on pool toys. It is serene down there – I always say it's our little slice of Titirangi right in the heart of the city. We have a kingfisher that comes every year, tui and fantails aplenty. It is our subtropical oasis." •

## tips for choosing a landscape designer

✦ **Using a landscape designer** is a good option if you want that extra 'wow' factor in the garden. As Jacqui says: "If you want something to look amazing then using a professional is the only way to go. Stepping the decks and those amazing floating pots makes our garden look really special."

✦ **Make sure you** and the designer are on the same page, and can communicate well. Jacqui found Donna easy to talk to and liked the fact that she understood what they wanted from the space. "From day one – she nailed it."

✦ **Ask a designer** for options. Most can provide advice to suit your budget from a quick consultation to a full plan with construction drawings and planting schedule.

Clockwise from top left Mia chills out on the upper deck which is sheltered by timber screens built by her dad Craig; three giant bromeliads sit in pots raised up on plinths so they are level with the deck; Mia and Tristan love to sit and chat with their feet in the pool.