

## IN BRIEF

**What** Private garden overlooking the coast on the edge of the Point Nepean National Park on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula.  
**Where** Near Melbourne, Australia.  
**Size** Around two acres.  
**Soil** Sand, very low in nutrients.  
**Climate** Cold, wet winters with strong winds. Summer temperatures usually in the mid-high 30°Cs, often over 40°C.  
**Hardiness zone** USDA 10b.

The garden Sam has created around this wood-clad, cantilevered building by architect Sean Godsell blends seamlessly into the National Park beyond. Sam often uses boulders in his work. This one, hugged by a cushion of seaberry saltbush (*Rhagodia candolleana*), marks the steep drop at the edge of the driveway.

# LED BY THE LAND

Australian designer Sam Cox has worked with the surrounding landscape to create this extraordinary garden

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**T**he southern point of the Mornington Peninsula outside Melbourne, Australia, is a landscape of two halves. The inner shore, on Port Phillip Bay, is calm and sheltered, a place of holiday makers and sun seekers. The outer coast is a different beast entirely. The site of former Australian prime minister Harold Holt's drowning in 1967, and bordering the infamous, shipwreck-strewn Bass Strait, this is a much harsher environment where storm-force, salt-laden winds can blow for days and where summer temperatures regularly top 40°C. It is, as landscape designer Sam Cox says, "a tough place to be a plant", meaning that plant selection for this garden, which sits high in the dunes there, was more vital than for most.

As in all his projects, Sam took his cues from the surrounding landscape – here the heathland of the Point Nepean National Park. "It was actually a really simple process," he says modestly. "So often there's the tendency to overcomplicate things or to try to be clever but my aim is always to strip things back and to connect with the spirit of a place, using nature as my guide. As soon as I stood at the edge of the building [designed by architect Sean Godsell] and looked out across the National Park to the coast – it was clear what we had to do. We just needed to emulate what was already here."

That said, the first phase was one of removal. Over the past few years, a South African weed, *Polygala myrtifolia*, has run amok in the dunes, out-competing native species and, with its lime-green tinge, completely altering the area's aesthetic. Sam persuaded the clients that it had to go and a team of three spent three weeks on their hands and knees, cutting the plants at their base and burning them. "It was a significant investment before we'd even started on site but the ▷

**Above** Silver cushions of the aptly named cushion bush (*Leucophyta brownii*) punctuate the dense evergreen planting closest to the house. Their roots help stabilise the dunes beneath but as they grow their lower branches have a tendency to go brown, so careful pruning is required.

**Right** The arching trees in front of the house are coastal tea trees (*Leptospermum laevigatum*) with their textural, shedding bark and white flowers in spring. One trunk has been propped to maintain its sculptural shape. A dense covering of bark chippings acts as both a mulch and a winding, free-form pathway through the planting.



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Working without a plan is complete freedom as it allows the design to evolve in response to what the site needs



▷ clients really grasped the idea and ran with it,” says Sam. Happily, it had the desired effect. “As soon as it was gone, the tones in the landscape immediately shifted back to the soft greys the coast is known for.”

Winning the confidence of clients is important for all designers but absolutely crucial for Sam, who works with only the loosest of conceptual plans. His approach stems from his time apprenticed to Gordon Ford (1918-1999), considered, along with Edna Walling (1896-1973) and Ellis ‘Rocky’ Stones (1895-1975), as one of the pioneers of the Australian natural-style garden. “Working without a plan is complete freedom as it allows the design to evolve in response to what the site needs,” says Sam. Of course, for this to work, Sam needs to be on site and to that end, he and his team do all the landscaping and planting themselves – just as Ford once did. “Even at the age of 77, as one of the leading designers in the country, Gordon still had a shovel in his hand,” says Sam. “Working like this means we see where the sun comes up and where it falls, how the wind comes through – we just gain so much more understanding of the place.”

As well as these practical lessons, Sam has also absorbed Ford’s philosophy about natural materials, native plants, soft landscaping (hard lines are very rare in Sam’s work) and boulder placement, all of which are in evidence here. The builders had to make some dramatic, deep cuts to sit the house in the landscape so Sam’s first job, after the polygala had been cleared, was to reshape the dune around the building, connecting the house to its environment, and to work out the location of the grassed area (which also follows the form of the dune), trampoline and camping area, requested by the clients for their children. Around 2,500 plants, all endemic to the coastline, were then planted, the vast majority of which were from just a handful of species: the coastal tea tree (*Leptospermum laevigatum*); moonah ▷

**Above** The pool, also designed by Godsell, is situated at the top of the site to provide views out to the coast. To the right is a silver banksia or honeysuckle tree (*Banksia marginata*), which bears large, golden, bottlebrush-like flowers in summer, much loved by bees and honeyeater birds.

**Left above** The dark-tipped sandhill sword sedge (*Lepidosperma gladiatum*) was existing on the site, though looking rather sad. After mulching and a little irrigation it has revived to form a spectacular backdrop to the silvery swathe of *Olearia lanuginosa*, covered in white, daisy-like flowers in spring.

**Left below** The building is clad in an Australian hardwood known as blackbutt, whose greyish tones blend well with the surrounding bush. The plant at the base of the concrete support is *Atriplex cinerea*, grey saltbush, which produces globular clusters of flowers and, as its name suggests, is highly salt-tolerant.

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▷ trees (*Melaleuca lanceolata*) with their cream, bottlebrush-like flowers, *Banksia integrifolia* and some local wattles (*Acacia*) among them. All were heavily mulched with a 7-10cm layer of recycled timber chippings (the same material that forms the paths) to suppress weeds and maintain moisture.

“The soil is really low in nutrients and humus here, and I think my biggest concern was whether the plants would grow and whether I would get a good result for the clients,” says Sam. The severe droughts that have now become commonplace – 17 years of Sam’s 20-year career since Ford died have seen drought – were also a worry. “Luckily, we struck two really good seasons after planting and everything has just taken off,” he says.

The result is a calm, serene and broadly constant landscape where the interest comes from the details – the sinuous, twisting bark in the coastal tea trees, for example, the flush of white when they flower in spring, the yellow blossom of the wattles, or the effect of the light filtering through the grasses. “We don’t have dramatic changes of colour through autumn, or the dropping of foliage you get with deciduous trees,” says Sam. “It’s about noticing the subtle changes and slowing down enough to do that.”

Subtlety could indeed be the byword for Sam’s work. Now that the building work is complete, from many angles it’s almost impossible to tell where the natural vegetation ends and the garden begins, which is just how Sam likes it. “If we can recreate that experience of nature in people’s own environments, then I feel like we’re hitting the mark,” he says. □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Sam’s work at [samcoxlandscape.com](http://samcoxlandscape.com)



**Above** Sam has planted a moonah tree (*Melaleuca lanceolata*) at the corner of the house, chosen for its sculptural form. Depending on the angle of the sun, it casts beautiful shadows through the house’s shutters. In summer, it is covered in white bottlebrush flowers.

**Right above** The house looks directly on to this grove of ancient tea trees. To enhance the sense of drama, Sam has planted a line of *Poa labillardierei* at their base, backgrounding it with a glade of brighter green bower spinach, *Tetragonia implexicoma*, an excellent groundcover.

**Right below** Sam included the grassed area at the request of his clients, who wanted somewhere for their children to play. The grass is Santa Ana couch grass, which is drought tolerant once established. The tree at the centre is a coastal tea tree, whose trunks has been partially submerged by the sandy soil with no ill effects.

