

# Making a splash

The rainforest home of young Australian designer Phillip Johnson is a shady retreat surrounded by natural looking pools and lush green planting

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Phillip Johnson's career as a garden designer is bubbling along nicely. Water is one of the key elements in all his designs, and while commissions in garden design can ebb and flow, his career at present could be described as in full spate. Since winning the Best in Show award for his stunning exhibit at last year's prestigious Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show, the first time he had entered, Phillip and his work have become widely recognised.

The show garden was a breathtakingly large bush scene featuring Australian plants, pools with water recycled within the site, and rocks used to spectacular effect. Phil, as he prefers to be known, says his mantra is "working with nature – not against it", with sustainable design practices using three key elements: water, rocks and plants.

A visit to his own garden reveals a wonderful showcase of his ideas. It's high in the hills of the Dandenong Ranges, where in chilly early light, mist wraps the majestically tall Australian mountain ash trees (*Eucalyptus regnans*). Phil calls these five acres of bush, which he bought in 2000, his "living research laboratory". The outside temperature is 5°C, but inside Phil's corrugated-iron clad home is a cosy 22°C with the wood-burning stove well stoked up.

## Imitating nature

Phil says he began by dealing with the twin technical problems of a steep site and difficulty of access. "The gradient is 23 degrees and just one of the challenges was to prevent erosion and exposing the tree roots, as water hurtled down the hill. We got over this by using a non-slip geo-fabric on the driveway – it's 'mossing up' well and we have redirected the storm water across the site, gently dispersing it via a series of filtering pipes."

It took 360 truck-loads of material – sand, mulch and rocks – to create the marvellous, natural-looking garden, which now merges seamlessly into the surrounding bush. Small, level areas were also created to make functional spaces. "Of course, in retrospect, it would have been easier to build the garden before the house," he says. ▷



At the heart of the garden, an ironbark boardwalk snakes over a natural swimming pool shaded by tall Australian mountain ash trees (*Eucalyptus regnans*).

## In brief

WHAT Private garden of designer Phillip Johnson  
WHERE The Dandenong Ranges, Victoria, Australia  
SIZE Five acres  
SOIL Rich in humus, water-retentive, acidic  
CONDITIONS Wet, cool, temperate rainforest  
SPECIAL FEATURES Natural-looking pools fed by water storage and recycling system; native plants; naturalistic use of rocks in hard landscaping

“ I love waking up in this environment. I find the sunrise and moonrise through the trees totally energising. At night there’s a symphony of frogs ”

▷ Massive rocks, manoeuvred down the steep driveway and craned into place, are one of the key features. They provide the hard landscaping around the pools, Phil Johnson’s trademark design feature – a billabong – which he describes as “the soul of the landscape” (see right). In his garden, the lower billabong is home to silver perch. The upper billabong is a natural swimming pool, where aquatic plants help the filtration system. Tucked among these two larger pools are an outdoor shower, a hot spa and another Johnson signature – waterfalls, which appear from under the house (pictured right). Phil’s inspiration here was Fallingwater, architect Frank Lloyd Wright’s iconic house built in 1934 in Pennsylvania, USA.

Water is central; the design is animated by the movement of water over and around the hard landscaping. There’s no mains water supply, so water harvesting, water recycling and managing storm water run-off are priorities. Rainfall in these hills averages 90cm a year and every drop that falls is captured on site in three storage tanks holding 150,000 litres of water. On-site sewage and grey water treatment are part of the picture; most water is recycled and moved through a series of pools and tanks all around the garden.

All that water helps protect against the one serious downside of Phil’s retreat. This is one of the most fire-prone areas of Australia, so he has installed an elaborate computer-driven fire prevention system, which includes drenching the entire house by spraying the roof.

### Green planting

The plant palette is not extensive. The bright fronds of tree ferns, *Dicksonia antarctica*, thrive in the cool glades under those mountain ash trees. Colour comes in seasonal splashes from wattles in spring, particularly *Acacia dealbata*, and small low-growing plants such as correas with their petite green bells tucked in among the rocks.

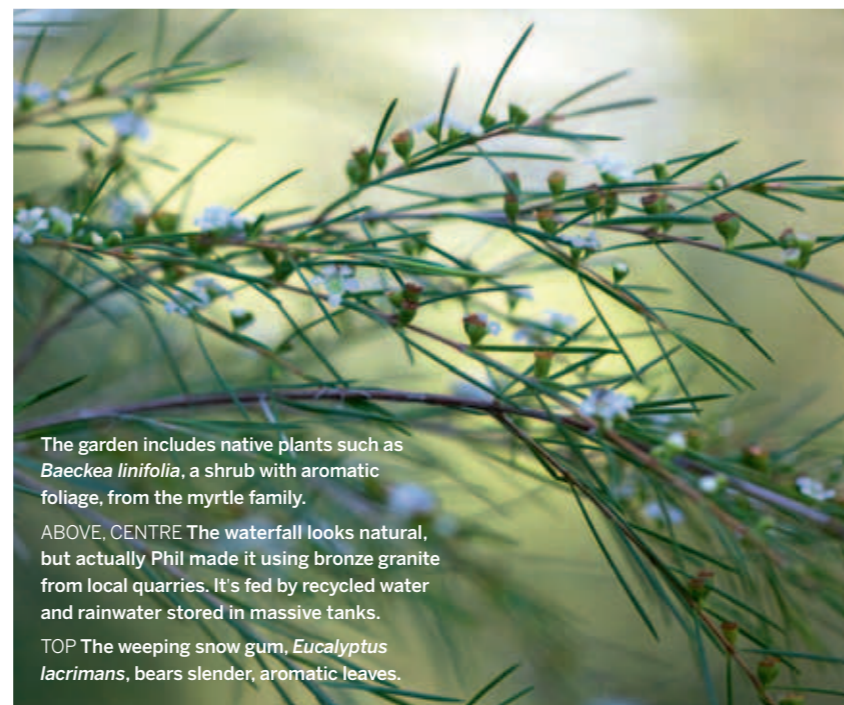
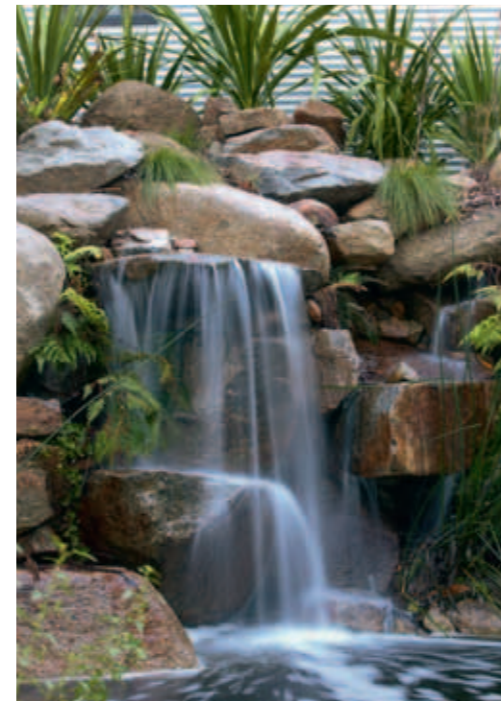
Garden and bush blend seamlessly together. “I love waking up in this environment. I have lyrebirds, wallabies and echidnas at my doorstep; I find the sunrise and moonrise through the trees totally energising. At night there’s just the symphony of frogs. Nature entralls me.

“My clients tell me stories about their children and grandchildren excitedly exploring our landscapes, about jumping along the granite stepping stones across the billabongs. I’m working to inspire change and a renewed appreciation and respect for the joy nature brings. Nature never goes out of fashion.” □

• Find out more about Phil’s designs at [www.phillipjohnson.com.au](http://www.phillipjohnson.com.au) or call +61 3 9886 9793

### What is a billabong?

Australia’s unofficial national anthem, *Waltzing Matilda*, celebrates ‘a jolly swagman who camped by a billabong’. This Australian geographic feature can be described as an arm of a river, made by water flowing from the main stream, usually in time of flood or the rainy season. When the water level then falls, it leaves a pool or lagoon, sometimes of considerable extent.



The garden includes native plants such as *Baeckea linifolia*, a shrub with aromatic foliage, from the myrtle family.

ABOVE, CENTRE The waterfall looks natural, but actually Phil made it using bronze granite from local quarries. It’s fed by recycled water and rainwater stored in massive tanks.

TOP The weeping snow gum, *Eucalyptus lacrimans*, bears slender, aromatic leaves.

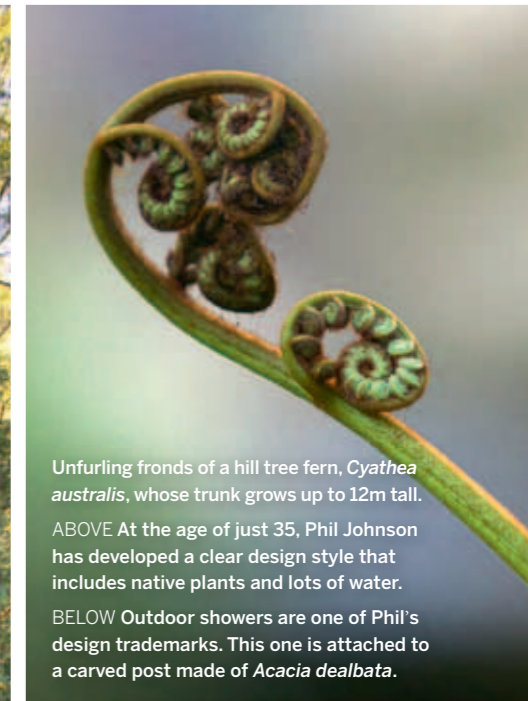


Rocks and blue-green tussocks of the grass *Lomandra confertifolia* subsp. *rubiginosa* line a sandy pathway near the lower pool.

ABOVE The balcony above the ‘billabong’ swimming pool is a great place to relax and enjoy views of the garden.



australian garden



Unfurling fronds of a hill tree fern, *Cyathea australis*, whose trunk grows up to 12m tall.

ABOVE At the age of just 35, Phil Johnson has developed a clear design style that includes native plants and lots of water.

BELOW Outdoor showers are one of Phil’s design trademarks. This one is attached to a carved post made of *Acacia dealbata*.

