

# meet the gardener

## PETE SACHS



A Sydney gardener makes room for his passion for bonsai, balancing it with a beautiful but practical space that works for the whole family, writes KIRSTEN COLVIN

**P**arents of small children know that those quiet, still moments before everyone wakes up are magic. Tip-toeing down the hallway, quietly making a cup of tea and taking it outside to view the lie of the land is a meditative way to start the day, especially if you're a keen gardener.

That's where you'll find real-estate agent Pete Sachs most days. While his wife, Sammy, is out at the flower markets, Pete pulls thongs over his socks – his 'Japanese riding boots' he calls them – and heads out, with bonsai scissors in hand, to check on the latest experiments in his 'nursery', and to prune, deadhead, handwater and observe everything.

"With gardening, you have to be attentive and be in the moment," he says. "Observing is an important part of it for me."

That precious time in the morning is not only meditative for Pete, but it's also a practical way to keep on top of all the garden maintenance. With four children – Madeline, 10, Oscar, 8, Lily, 5, and Freddy, 2 – life's already busy, but Pete also owns and runs a successful real-estate company and Sammy runs a florist design business from the converted garage at the rear of the property. ►

PHOTOS BRENT WILSON, KIRSTEN COLVIN

OVER THE FENCE



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE**  
From an overgrown block, the Sachs have created a manicured front garden, featuring the distinctive 'muffin tree' camellias; a picket fence makes a good boot rack; Pete's very first bonsai; *Acer palmatum* 'Emerald Sunset' marks the front entrance; Pete waters a 50-year-old conifer he inherited from Sammy's grandma.





## OVER THE FENCE

### Pete's billabong

Pete has a clever trick to keep his pot collection well hydrated. A big round fountain pot, which he calls 'The Billabong', sits on the back deck. It's the ideal spot for water-stressed pots on a hot day!

The 800m<sup>2</sup> gently sloping corner block is in Roseville, an established suburb on Sydney's Upper North Shore. When the Sachs moved in eight years ago, the garden was overgrown. Since then it has slowly evolved to meet the needs of their growing family and businesses, and they've made the most of every square metre.

### FIRST THINGS FIRST

The back garden was the first to get some attention. Next to the garage, they built a raised garden surrounded by a low sandstone wall, which has had a number of lives. Right now, the bed holds a mix of established and new plantings: herbs, a lush passionfruit vine, dahlias, olive trees that provide foliage for Sammy's arrangements now and fruit that they may bottle in the future, and *Hakea* 'Pin Ball', which spills over the wall and produces shocking pink flowers in winter and spring.

"I just chuck things in different spots in there and see how they go," Pete says. "Everything grows well in the bed, due to the good drainage and its north to north-east aspect."

Opposite the raised gardens are Pete's favourite trees – three established maples. "I love the colour of their foliage in autumn, the amazing leaf structure and the delicate flowers that become seed pods, and even in winter there's beauty in their bareness," he explains. "The established acers can also stand to lose a limb, or have some leaves knocked off, and still grow back," he says, referring to damage from the kids playing ball sports in the backyard.

Pete says hydrangeas are also virtually indestructible in a family garden. Starting with two, he propagated more by taking hardwood cuttings in winter. Now Sammy has enough to use the foliage all the time.

### PETE'S PLAYGROUND

Linking the backyard to the front garden is a sunny but sheltered area down the side of the house that Pete calls 'the nursery'. Here he not only tends new plants, but also experiments and tries new things.

It has a perfectly trimmed conifer hedge (*Cupressocyparis x leylandii* 'Leightons Green'), planted for privacy, which is 3m high at its highest point and steps down the slope, with an immaculately groomed lillipilly hedge beyond. The area is also a perfect spot for their lemon, lime and orange trees, and will soon be home to a dedicated dahlia bed for Sammy.

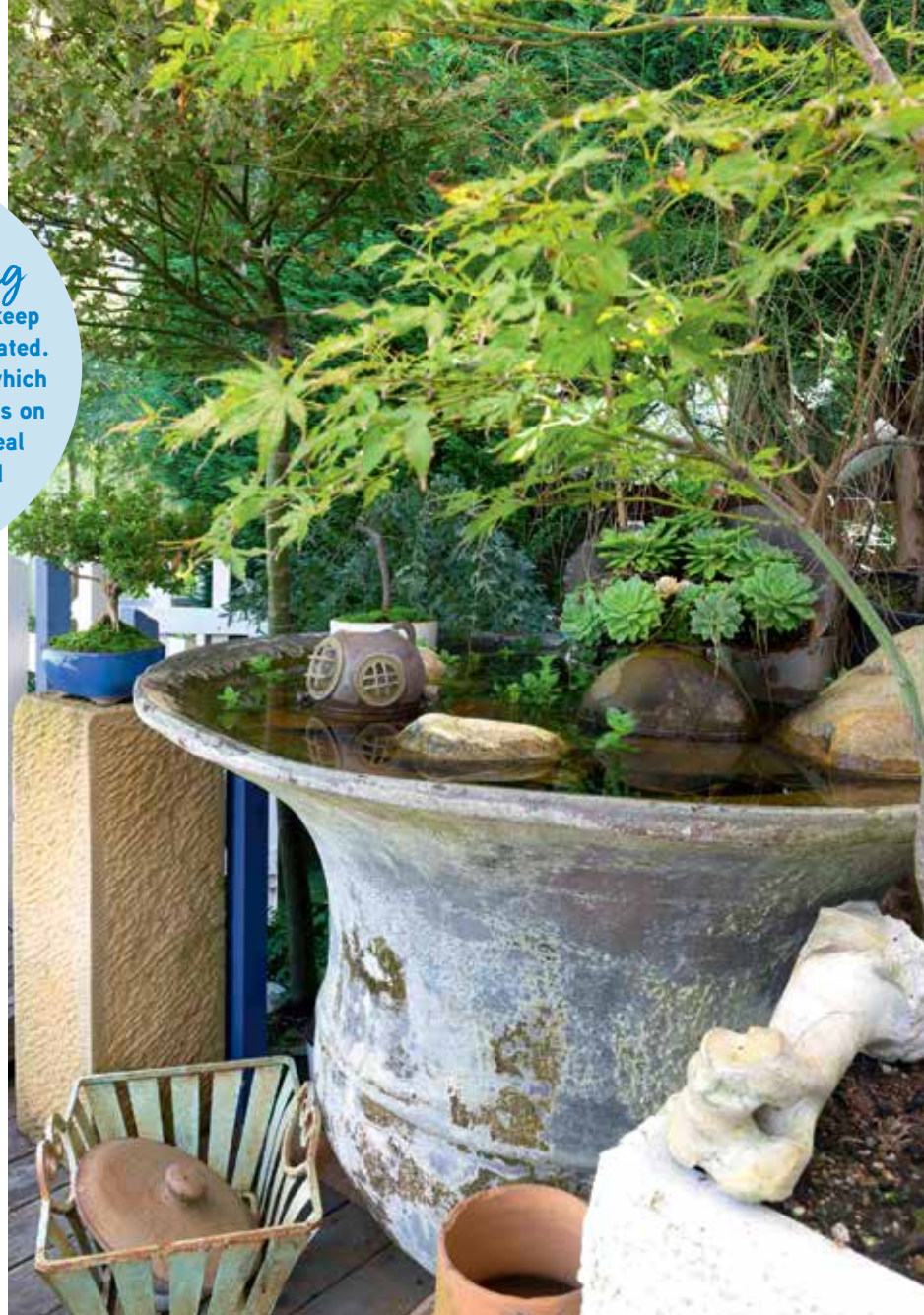
In front of the bedroom window is a collection of bonsai at various stages. In the future, Pete is planning a Zen garden in this spot, featuring his best bonsai. He has been clipping and snipping bonsai plants for more than 15 years, and his oldest one, perhaps 50 years old, was inherited from Sammy's grandma.

Pete loves trialling new plants and challenging himself to grow those that are not necessarily suited to his climate. He loves boronias, which prefer cooler conditions, so on hot days he places ice cubes on the surface of the pots. "I'm not formally trained but I have a problem-solving attitude, and it's all trial and error," he says.

### STREET APPEAL

While the back garden is family friendly and a great entertaining space, the front garden, which has been four years in the making, showcases Pete's ability to create order out of chaos. This is where you'll find the Sachs' distinctive 'muffin trees', as they call them – two pink sasanqua camellias clipped into topiaries.

"They had a good trunk but were really overgrown," says Pete. "I gave them a ►



### CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

Florist designer Sammy uses many of the garden's plants in her arrangements, including this bouquet of kangaroo paw, flannel flower and olive foliage; ball games, including cricket, are played regularly in the backyard and only the toughest plants have survived; the lawn receives a lot of foot traffic from the family's four children; Sammy's studio in the converted garage overlooks the backyard; favourite maples and bonsai, part of Pete's rotating collection, live on the wooden deck at the back of the house; Pete tends to a prickly paperbark (*Melaleuca styphelioides*); the 'billabong' holds an assortment of bonsai when they need a soaking.



PHOTOS BRENT WILSON, PETE SACHS, JENNY BALDWIN



OVER THE FENCE

massive cut, but it's only in the past two years that they've thickened up, and now they have a really good shape. They come in handy as landmarks when I'm giving instructions for people to find the place."

And that happens often. "We love to entertain," he adds. "Last weekend we had a dinner party, followed by brunch for 50 in the backyard the next morning. We've also held a few movie nights using an inflatable screen in the front garden, and invited the neighbourhood."

Until recently, the large front lawn of 'Santa Ana' couch with a bit of 'Legend' in the shaded areas was picture perfect (see Pete's tips for a perfect lawn, below). However, recent dry weather combined with foot traffic from four children and mysterious dead patches after movie nights – spilled drinks, perhaps, Pete wonders – has taken its toll and he has relaxed his lawn regime. Round the back, he's even introduced a strip of artificial grass, which serves as a cricket pitch and slope for Freddy to coast down on his trike.

The family love their chickens and they get lots of attention from the kids. Lily, in particular, loves to give them cuddles and they've found egg production has increased dramatically, from three eggs a week, to three a day! They've also increased the size of their run, giving them plenty of space to free range on the lawn and scratch in the shady corners under shrubs.

The garden's accent colours are apparent from the entry, with pink-flowering feature

trees – a crepe myrtle on one side and camellia topiary on the other – flanking a bright blue gate. Softening the grey paved path is fluffy, no-mow zoysia grass (*Zoysia tenuifolia*), which looks like a welcome mat.

The path leads to the 1920s bungalow. A creeping fig (*Ficus pumila*) at the base of the house, planted two years ago, is slowly climbing upwards, giving the house what Pete calls a green 'footing'. It's the perfect backdrop for the second 'muffin tree' and a compact *Acer palmatum* 'Shishigashira'.

Pete's attention to detail is apparent in many thoughtful arrangements. Plants and pots are often grouped in four, representing his children, such as the four little potted succulents at the base of a blue pot near the front door. The tiled area, which he laid himself, has blue tiles in groupings of four and two, also to represent his family.

Near the front door are more of Pete's bonsai displayed on ledges, the stairs, the ground and an outdoor table setting. All up, Pete has about 150 bonsai, with about 30 or 40 that he considers show quality. He takes the best ones into the office, where he has about 10 on display at any one time, bringing them back home to his nursery when they need rejuvenating.

Many of Pete's plantings will take time to develop, but he's in it for the long haul. "With the maples and my bonsai, I'm really looking forward to seeing what happens in 10, 15 or even 22 years' time," he says. "If I put in the effort now, it's like a gift to myself in the future." **GA**

**PETE'S TIPS FOR A PERFECT LAWN**

Pete's drive to create the perfect lawn was inspired by his grandfather. "He had an amazing lawn and mowed it once, if not twice, a day," Pete says. His lawnmower collection includes a classic Scott Bonnar cylinder mower inherited from his grandfather. Here are Pete's tips for a perfect lawn.

- De-thatch and core to aerate in spring
- Keep water up and fertilise regularly
- Use a wetting agent to help keep soil moist
- Routinely handweed
- In summer, mow three times a week, and cross-mow (in one direction, then the other). The more you mow it, the thicker it will grow.

PHOTOS BRENT WILSON, JENNY BALDWIN, KIRSTEN COLVIN



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
Behind the scenes, an extended collection of bonsai contenders are trained for their 'day in the sun'; down the side of the house, the path to Pete's 'nursery' passes a sunny garden bed of citrus trees that's well sheltered by the large hedge; from movies to birthday parties, the Sachs' garden is built for entertaining; looking to the front gate flanked by the pink feature trees, a camellia and crepe myrtle; to keep his boronias cool and moist on a hot day, Pete drops a few ice cubes on the surface of the pot before he leaves for work; the chickens are thriving and have a great run; Pete takes pride in his 'Santa Ana' couch front lawn.







## Pete's pots

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

A perfectly formed bonsai olive tree takes pride of place at the front entrance; groupings of four, symbolising each of the four children, are dotted around the garden, including these potted succulents at the base of a pot painted bright blue; Pete loves boronias for their profusion of flowers and fragrance, so he placed this hot-pink variety at the front door so visitors can enjoy it, too; on the steps are (*bottom to top*) a bonsai conifer, red box and an acer underplanted with native violets.

