

## SCULPTED LANDSCAPE

ONCE BEREFT OF TREES, THIS GRACEFUL GARDEN IN THE NSW  
HUNTER VALLEY IS NOW TESTAMENT TO THEIR BEAUTY.

WORDS KAREN MCCARTNEY PHOTOGRAPHY PRUE RUSCOE

*Brachychiton rupestris* make a statement  
in John Hartigan's garden. The trees are  
commonly called Queensland bottle trees.





CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT Weber agave (centre) and *Trachycarpus fortunei*, commonly known as Chinese windmill palm, are just two of the plant varieties that grow around the pergola; crepe myrtles, just starting to reveal their pink flowers, stand by the two lakes William designed for the garden. The lakes are connected by a rock formation — larger slabs and smaller hand-laid stones make the lake look like it's always been there; tall cabbage tree palms grow alongside the house and a wraparound verandah makes the most of the valley views; John Hartigan (left) with designer, William Dangar.

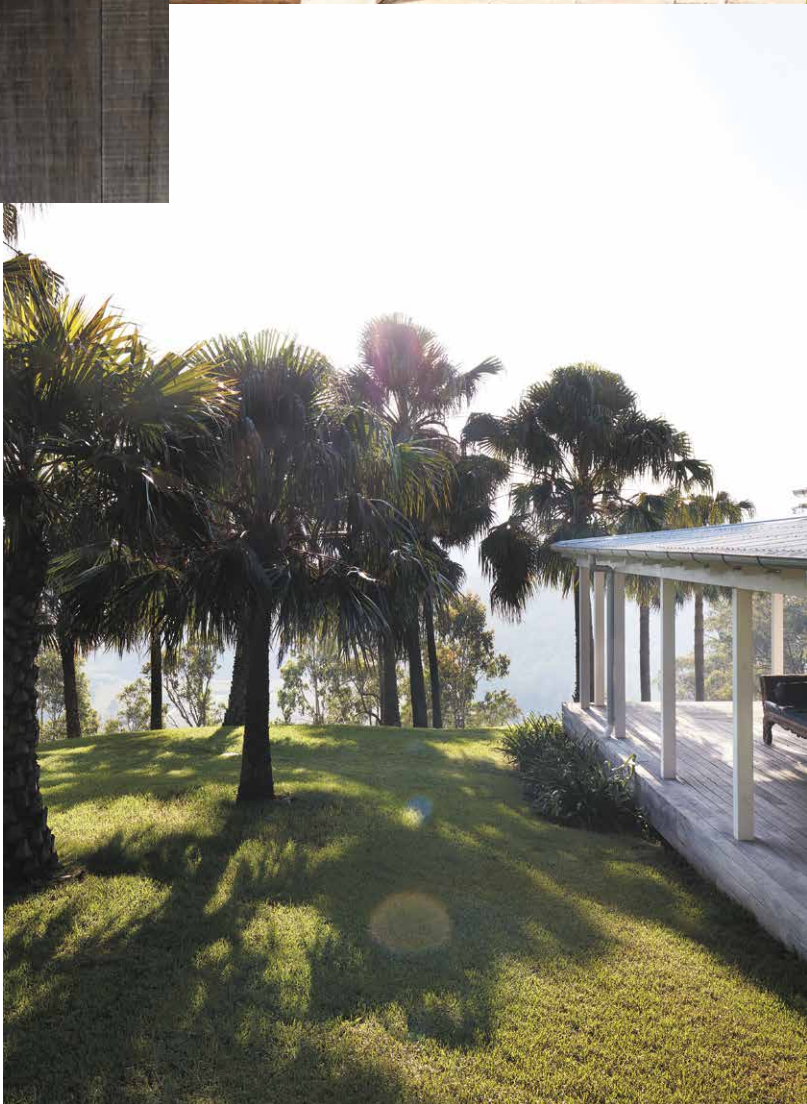
“ONE OF LIFE’S LITTLE mysteries is that invariably you don’t understand the true majesty of the humble tree until you’re too old to replicate its beauty,” says John Hartigan, former News Limited CEO and owner of this garden in the NSW Hunter Valley. “Or at least see the effort of your work reach its mature, glorious grandeur.”

One way of making sure you can enjoy trees at their best is introducing full grown specimens — as renowned landscape designer William Dangar did for this project.

Back in 2008, Will was impressed by the crepe myrtles in the garden of the Getty Centre in Los Angeles. When he got back to Australia he worked with a grower to cultivate 20 crepe myrtles, knowing that in time the right opportunity to plant them would come about. It took six years for him to use them with the scale and significance he envisaged.

“This project in the Hunter Valley was park-like in its scope,” says Will. Along with the need for mature trees, “much of the emphasis was in sculpting the land itself to create a majestic setting with great views”.

When Will and his team arrived on site, the new house was in the process of being built, and one of Will’s earliest decisions was to bank the land up around the structure to >





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reduce its prominence and give the effect of drawing the building down into the landscape. “We spent months with bulldozers and excavators to reconfigure the form of the land, working the soil, which was a dry, light clay. This was combined with organic matter to make a rich growing mix.”

As the land was bereft of trees, the judicious placing of mature species was a significant part of the design. That’s where Will’s supply of crepe myrtles came in. These were joined by Chinese weeping elms, Queensland bottle trees, Moreton Bay figs and weeping willows. Combined, they introduce sculptural form, colour and a sense of romance.

The dusty state of the land also led Will to bring water into the property; he designed two adjacent lakes to the east of the house. Water is pumped up from a bore into the top lake, which then gravity feeds into the bottom one. A sizeable slab of rock connects the two bodies of water and hand-laid stones give a naturalistic effect. Filled with perch, and with the weeping willows planted around their banks, it is hard to believe the lakes are relatively recent additions.

At the south end of the house, Will built a masonry wall covered in fragrant murraya. “With the verandah wrapping around the entire exterior, it was necessary to close it off at one end in order to create a logical sense of entry.”

At the rear of the house, a robust timber pergola, housing a stone fireplace, a barbecue, and a dining and lounge area, is overgrown with wisteria and orange trumpet vine, and backs onto a forest of native eucalyptus trees. The steps up to this area are made up of substantial sections of hardwood, set into the grassy bank in irregular lengths. This renders them sculptural as well as functional, while the simple design sidesteps the fussy.

In the balance of the relationship between house and garden, this project tips very much towards the garden in its expansive sweep of lush grass, mature trees and views. The house is positioned to survey not only the immediate terrain, but also to have long, unencumbered valley views. As such, the connection with nature, near and far, is complete. *CS*  
*This is an edited extract from Garden by William Dangar (Murdoch Books, \$59.99). For more information or to buy a copy of the book, visit robertplumb.com.au*

**CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE** Rustic hardwood steps lead up to the timber pergola, which houses an outdoor dining area and is overgrown with wisteria and trumpet vines. The pergola backs onto a forest of eucalyptus trees; a Chinese weeping elm tree grows out of the centre of a circular bench seat, which has been perfectly positioned to admire the lake edged with weeping willows; Chinese windmill palms grow at one end of the pergola; Queensland bottle trees have been planted along the property's driveway. The steel rings at their bases are used to create a neat border between the lawn and soil.

