



Photo: Dianne Norris

Tropical punch

For a holiday at home experience, go wild and give your garden a tropical-style makeover

Words: Jacki Brown

They say a change is as good as a holiday, but imagine if going home was as relaxing and refreshing as spending your time at a tropical island resort. Just picture it. Oceans of lush foliage and flashes of vibrantly coloured plants; the movement of sparkling water (whether from a pool or a water feature) in the background — now doesn't that conjure up memories (or daydreams) of an island paradise?

Tropical landscapes evoke wonderful sense memories and create an ambience that is relaxing — so relaxing it can transport us far away from the stresses of our busy modern lives.

Essential design elements

Start with the three main elements that make up a tropical landscape: water, brightly coloured features and lush, deep green foliage. If you have plenty of these, you'll be well on your way to your tropical paradise.

Then you can add features and design details using timber, bamboo, stone, pebbles, steel, glass, shade structures such as a Bali

hut or cabana, sculpture and statues, cane furniture and lighting.

Tropical landscapes represent a lifestyle of abundance — leisure time in the sun; long, warm days; and fresh food from the richness of the surrounding environment. They are also havens of biodiversity with many varieties of different plants and their associated insect and bird life.

While modern marketing might try to convince us that nature needs to be controlled and shooed out of the home, gardens remind us that the small details of nature exist all around, interacting as an ecosystem — a spider catching flies in its web, a frog raising tadpoles in a pond or a shy marsupial pottering around in the undergrowth. To play this kind of role, a landscape must include plenty of plants — and lush tropical styles certainly do.

In non-tropical locations

Although drier, colder climates, such as the southern and western states of Australia, won't

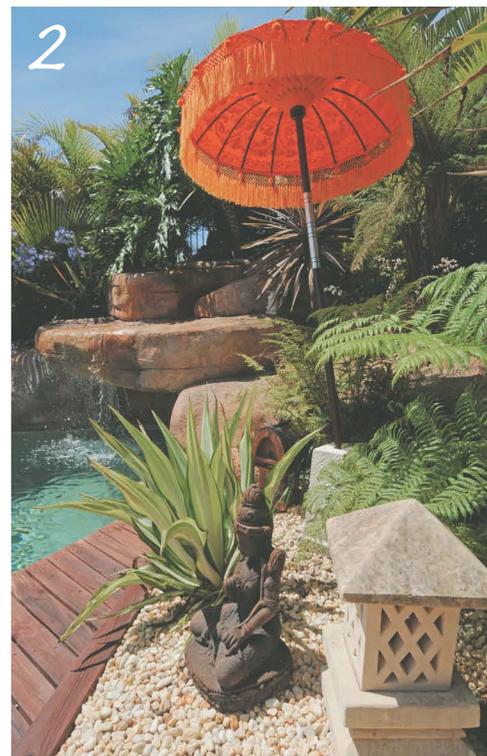


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support the water-loving plants of the tropics, there are drought-hardy and cold-tolerant plants that will give the same effect.

Some commonly used hardy plants with a tropical look include cordylines, cannas, yuccas, agaves, alpinia ginger, frangipani, sago palms and the bird of paradise. If you live in a cool climate, plants that will work well range from bamboo, cycads and ferns to mondo grass, lillies, dietes and the iris.

Australian species native to nearby rainforest environments are likely to suit a moist, tropical-style landscape. However, planting in modern tropical landscapes often takes inspiration from Bali, Vietnam and India, where plants grow lush and colourful. Many exotic tropical plants are readily available due to their popularity indoors and in home poolside areas. Contrast the plants' vibrant colours with structures and surfaces of natural, rich browns and pure whites.

While the focus is on interesting foliage, flowers in tropical gardens usually have unusual forms — for example, ginger, flax, cliveas and gylmea lilies produce flowers that give an exotic flair. Colours of foliage and flowers for contrast often include reds, purples and yellows.

Getting the decorative details just right

Tropical landscapes lend themselves to having a sense of journey with the use of dense foliage, garden rooms and screening. Steps and level changes add to this flight of fancy, making one think of treks through mountainous wilderness or a tropical rainforest. Narrow pathways that wind through tropical foliage can be used to give a sense of enclosure. Paths may use natural pervious materials such as gravel, wood chip, pebbles, crushed rock or recycled terracotta — this adds a natural look and allows water to permeate through to the soil where it can do some good. Gardens can also be tucked into small pockets where you might not normally think of having plants.

Seating for alfresco dining is a must in a tropical setting — it allows you to be outdoors enjoying your luxuriant surroundings. Lighting also extends the enjoyment of your landscape into the warm summer evenings.

Water, as one of the essential elements of a tropical landscape, can be included as a water feature, pool, spa or a distant view of water. You might include subtle marine themes suggestive of boats, sailing and beach culture.

1. Lush layered planting creates a sense of sanctuary. Garden décor, supplied by Bali House & Garden, completes the look.
2. Details are important, which includes the use of lanterns, statuary and colour. Water also plays an essential role.
3. The Iluka Bali Bench is made from FSC-approved timber and will add a tropical touch. Available from Mitre 10.

Echo the appearance of sparkling clean water with shiny steel elements, glass and mirrors reminiscent of mirrored sunglasses with reflections of the bright summer sun sparkling off them. Water conservation and water-sensitive design should be considered in the process of designing a tropical landscape, especially when the local climate is dry or temperate. A dry creek bed or groundcover planting can symbolise a body of water.

Creating shade and privacy in a garden

Creating shade or dappled shade provides microclimates that are similar to tropical forests, as long as there is enough moisture. Shade can be made with trees and large plants, shade screens or covers such as sails, pergolas and cabanas.

Resort-style landscapes inspired by the tropics can be made dramatic through movement contrasting with stillness. For example, the movement of water, foliage waving in the wind or the flickering flames of tiki torches or raindrops falling onto large leaves contrasted next to sturdy static features such as decks, walls, stone lanterns, hardwood posts and structures such as pergolas and poolside pavilions. The clean lines of hard landscape features such as decks, walls, and screen fences, contrast well with the large leaves of colourful or highly textured tropical plantings.

It is possible to achieve a resort-style tropical landscape in most climates to suit many different styles of architecture — from modern residence to beach cottage to traditional homes — with attention to detail and an understanding of the plants. ■

This article was prepared by Jacki Brown and the team at ecodesign on behalf of the Australian Institute of Landscape Designers & Managers (AILDM). If you would like to find an AILDM member in your area, visit the website: www.aildm.com.au.

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