

THIS PAGE A double row of pleached 'Heaven Scent' magnolias are on a base of 'Eggshell' pebbles from Eco Outdoor. Sandstone paving is softened by more pebbles and naturalised moss.

# BALANCING ACT

Achieving equilibrium between built surfaces and plants is a delicate art, crafted to perfection in this Melbourne garden.

PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON GRIFFITHS PRODUCTION + WORDS RICHARD UNSWORTH



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ONE CAN CERTAINLY SEE  
HIS BACKGROUND IS IN  
HORTICULTURE – AT HEART  
HE IS A PASSIONATE  
PLANTS MAN."

THESE PAGES The strong linear style of the poolside gazebo echoes the work of iconic American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Urns and a bronze sculpture, *Flora Exemplar* by Andrew Rogers, decorate the niches. The swimming pool appears to have just been 'dropped' into the landscape.



One of the marks of a talented garden designer, for me, is one who can find a balance between the hard and soft landscape. Too often, vast expanses of paving and retaining walls dominate, overshadowing a planting scheme that fights for recognition, almost as though the plants were included as an afterthought.

In all his work, garden designer Rick Eckersley effortlessly creates built structure and planting in equal proportions. Both forms co-exist in perfect harmony. Rick is well known for his painstaking attention to detail, and clever use of scale. In his projects one can certainly see his background is in horticulture – at heart he is a passionate plants man.

Rick has been a major player in the Melbourne landscape design field for more than 30 years, and offsets his decades in the industry with the fresh input of his two younger partners, Scott Leung and Myles Broad.

In addition to his design firm, Eckersley Garden Architecture, Rick is also a founding partner of progressive landscape supply firm Eco Outdoor with his brother, Ross, and Ben Kerr.

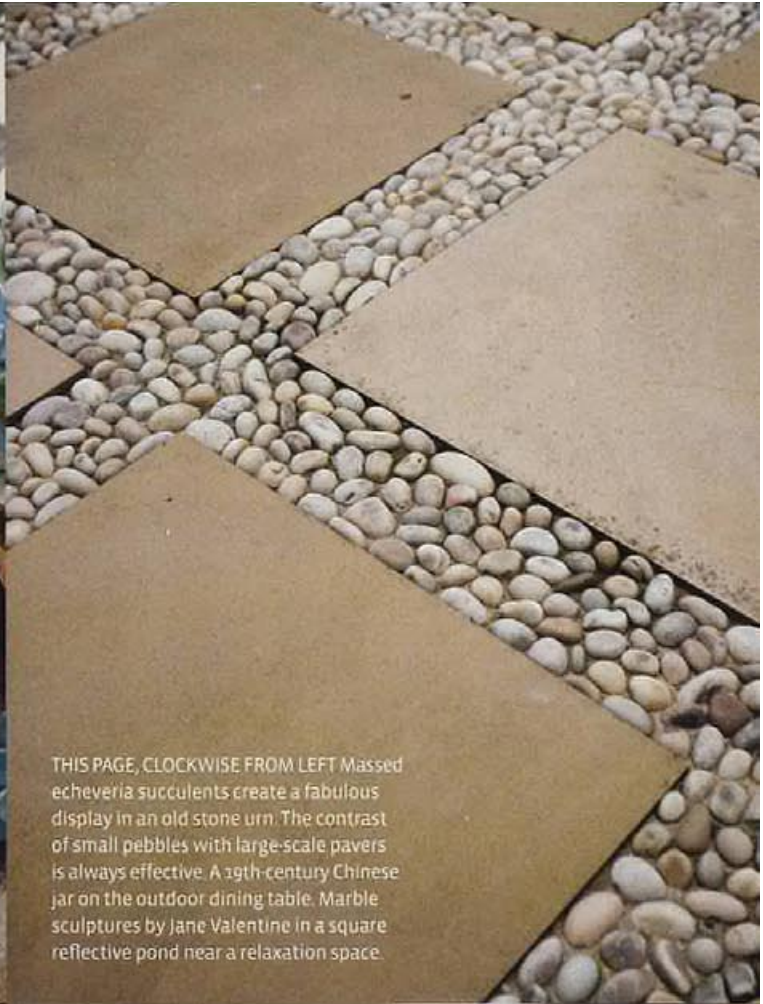
Rick's philosophy is to "create gardens that clients feel they can take ownership of", he says. "I see our role as a catalyst for implementing the [clients'] brief, rather than producing a cookie-cutter style of garden.

"We want to make gardens really livable, so they must have some sort of soul. If a visitor wants to stay in the space for half an hour or so, that's the mark of a good garden. If something keeps you there, then we have succeeded."

In this slick yet serious Toorak garden Rick had an open, practical brief from the client to create a livable family garden that complemented the bold and formal contemporary home designed by architect Ivo Krivanek. This garden is only six years old yet there is a sense of maturity that belies its youth.

The formal, structured design is compartmentalised into a series of squares and rectangles. The hard landscape starts with 1m-square Tasmanian sandstone slabs into which the swimming pool seems to have been 'dropped' seamlessly. Although it is not a huge canvas, the oversized flagging gives the garden significant scale and form to match that of the house.

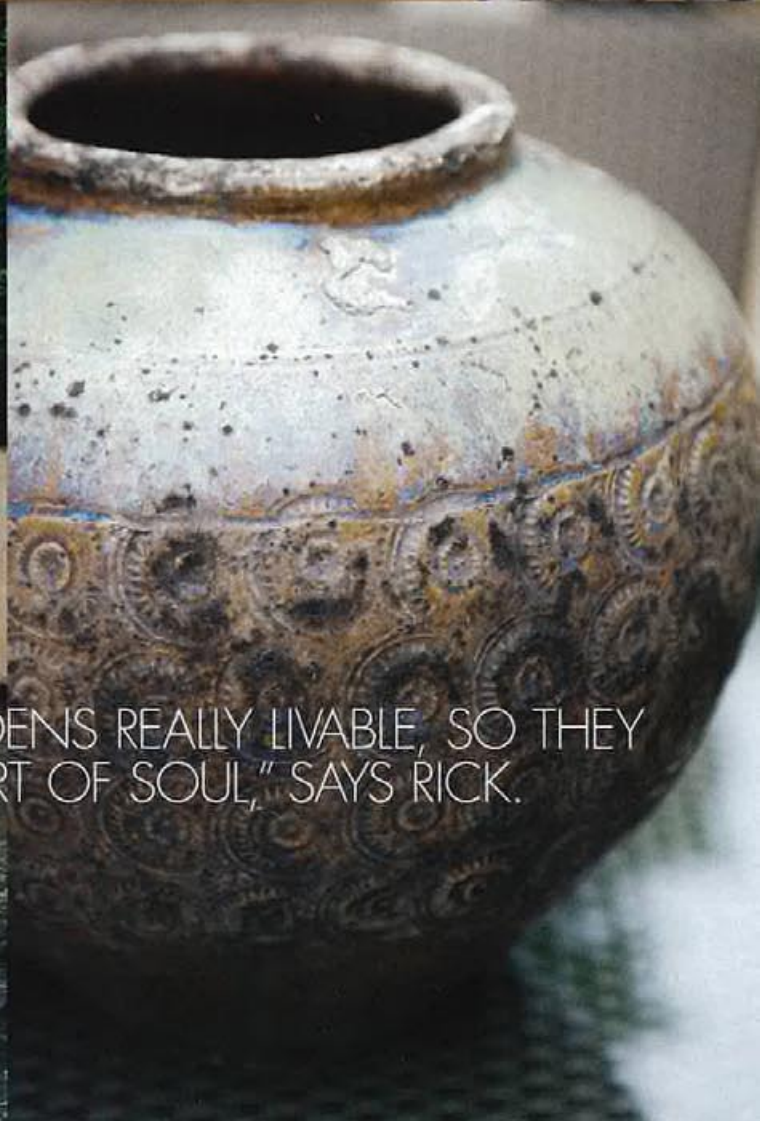
GARDEN



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Massed echeveria succulents create a fabulous display in an old stone urn. The contrast of small pebbles with large-scale pavers is always effective. A 19th-century Chinese jar on the outdoor dining table. Marble sculptures by Jane Valentine in a square reflective pond near a relaxation space.



"WE WANT TO MAKE GARDENS REALLY LIVABLE, SO THEY MUST HAVE SOME SORT OF SOUL," SAYS RICK.





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The outdoor dining area is paved with 1m-square Tasmanian sandstone slabs. Dedon table and chairs. Oversized urn and, in the background, Andrew Rogers's *Flora Exemplar* bronze sculpture. The swimming pool is framed by symmetrically positioned artworks and greenery.

In the rear garden, lines of intermittently spaced *Magnolia x soulangeana* 'Star Wars' provide a stunning spring display of pink cup-shaped flowers. Framing the apron of stone, they separate the built form of the pool and paving from the contrasting softer landscape on either side.

To one side of the house, naturalised moss grows between the large 'Eggshell' pebbles from Eco Outdoor which are hand-placed below a double row of pleached 'Heaven Scent' magnolias.

Rick worked with the owners to select art for the new garden. Organically shaped marble sculptures by Sydney-based artist Jane Valentine sit in a square pond of reflective water next to the private relaxation area. Again, pebbles are used to contrast with and soften the sandstone.

A small edition of sculptor Andrew Rogers's *Flora Exemplar* bronze adds focus to the gazebo at the back of the pool. On the opposite side, a bronze by Melbourne sculptor Anthony Pryor sits on a sandstone slab above an expanse of dwarf mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nana'). This large spread of grass provides a soft velvet texture at ground level, with verticals of hedged cypress forming a geometric backdrop.

Boundary walls are either hedged with clipped conifers (*Thuja plicata*) or covered in Chinese star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*), providing vertical green sections and perfumed white flowers. Large heads of scented white flowering *Luculia grandiflora* add fresh winter colour, while *Cotoneaster dammeri* falls like a curtain, softening the retaining walls.

This perfectly composed garden is a wonderful example of Rick's work, and it's easy to see why he endures as a versatile, creative force in his field.

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