

# FROM SOIL TO SOUL

A FAMILY OF GREEN THUMBS ON THE MORNINGTON PENINSULA HAS NURTURED A COASTAL DREAMSCAPE WHERE PERENNIALS THRIVE.

WORDS JESSICA BELLET PHOTOGRAPHY WILL SALTER

"We're on the top of an old volcano, so we've got a spacious feel all around. It's windy and exposed, and we get all the movement of the grasses, which is really beautiful and immersive and takes you deeper into it," says homeowner Jo Ferguson.

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT plants with garden designer Jo Ferguson, who is based on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, gently pivot from botanical varieties and soil maintenance into the realm of heart, body and soul. “The act of gardening grounds us in the present moment and gets us out of our heads,” she offers. “Breathing in the garden and feeling part of nature connects us to everything.” Jo’s home garden, located on six-and-a-half windswept hectares atop a hill in the coastal town of Flinders, on the traditional lands of the Boon Wurrung/ Bunurong people, is a refuge and inspiring haven for her family. Jo’s husband, Simon Hazel, is a horticulturalist, and their sons Rupert, 23, and Tucker, 20, are fledgling plantsmen following in their parents’ footsteps.

Originally trained as a graphic designer, Jo began working in nurseries in the late 1980s and enrolled in a horticultural degree at the University of Melbourne’s Burnley Campus. Roles in environmental management and regeneration followed, after which Jo returned to study garden design. In 2016, Jo and Simon reunited after a brief separation and their formerly bare seaside plot started taking shape.

“I was thinking, ‘How am I going to save the family?’” Jo says. “The answer was to make this garden, so I just started buying plants.”

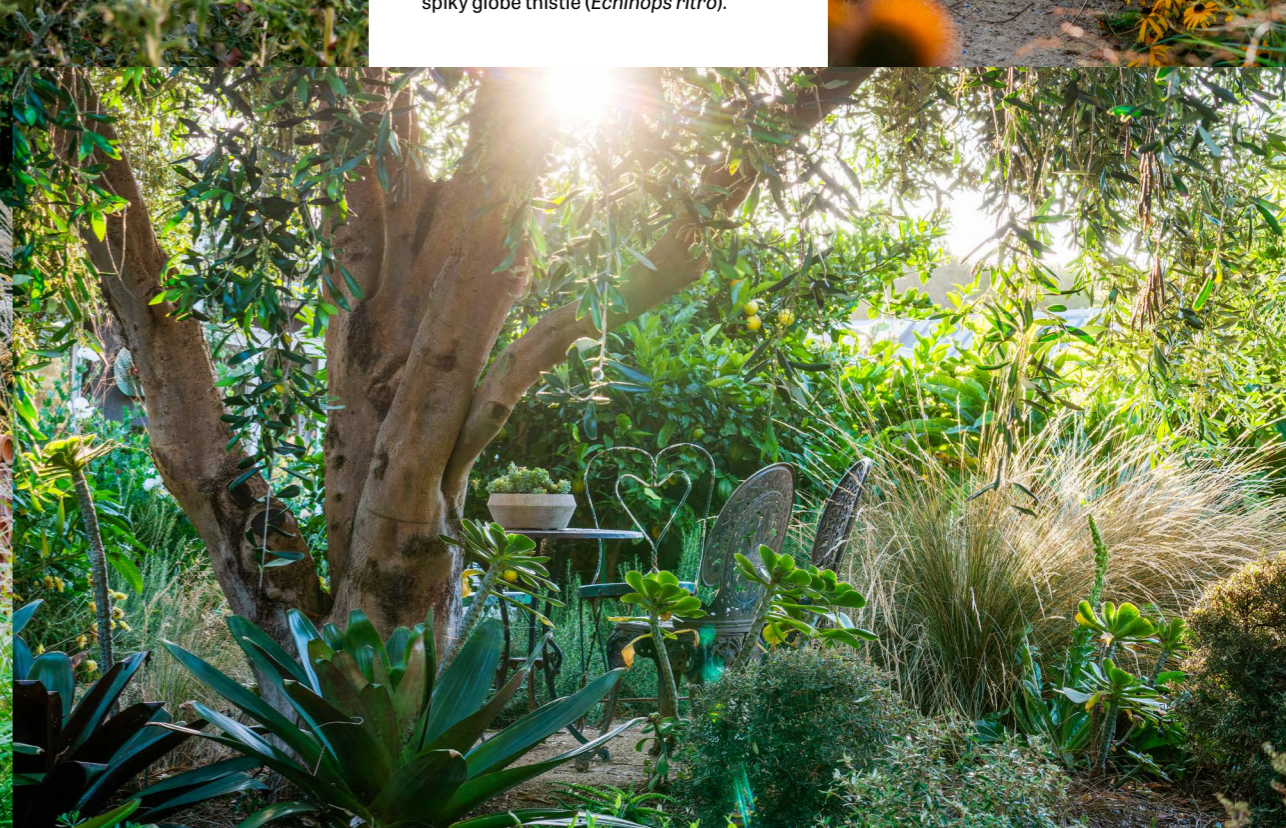
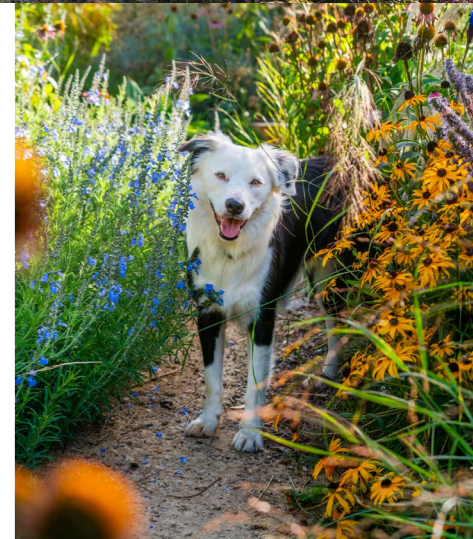
She traced a layout out in the dirt, while Simon carved the land with his digger, levelling areas and creating winding paths leading to tree-canopied nooks and open spaces for gathering and relaxing with Bass Strait views. “I wanted that feeling of deep immersion, head high, and for it to feel natural and wild,” Jo explains.

She cites the Dutch garden designer Piet Oudolf, a lead in the naturalistic New Perennial movement, as a key source of inspiration; however, the garden’s spirit is anchored on a more intuitive, personal level. “Everyone has memories of special places from when they were little, and if you can bring that into the garden, you can remind them of those joyful times,” says Jo, who holds on tightly to her childhood recollections of exploring sun-bleached dune grasses while holidaying at nearby Merricks Beach.

“Sitting in those grasses was my refuge,” she says. “I asked Simon what brings him the most joy in the garden, and he said bees on flowers; a memory taking >



**CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT**  
 “Humans have lost the ability to sense,” says Jo. “The most important thing is a sensory connection and oneness with nature.”; “I love it here in the summer when the exotics frizzle up and the native grasses sing,” Jo says. “It’s so immersive. I love the heat, but the fear of fire is always in the background.”; “Spot is so smart,” Jo says of her koolie-border collie. “Dogs really respond to biodiversity; they become so alert.”; a serene spot for quiet contemplation; a curved wall made of salvaged terracotta agricultural drains buffers the wind while providing glimpses of the surrounding garden; spiky globe thistle (*Echinops ritro*).





**CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT**

Jo considers her garden a delightful rule-breaker: "People might say you can only use a certain amount of colours or can't mix exotics with natives... just do whatever you want! It's your garden."; dainty-looking, spherical Persian onion (*Allium hollandicum*); Jo and Simon with lovable Spot, who's always at their heels; "I play with colour pencils a lot," Jo says of her landscape creations. "I don't tend to do planting plans, but I create combinations for garden beds and then work it out on the ground as I go."; the landscape is viewed as a big grassland with beautiful wildflowers intermixed; delicately pretty echinacea flowers.

him back to boarding school, where he looked after a vegie garden and beehives."

Eight years on, hero ornamental grasses, such as Calamagrostis 'Karl Foerster', golden oat (*Stipa gigantea*) and miscanthus, rise over a potpourri of perennials, hardy natives and sculptural succulents. The swathes glow when backlit by a low sun, blurring boundaries and blending the chromatic riot of pollinator-attracting florals. "I'm using bang-for-your-buck flowers from around the world," says Jo, who, along with Simon, experiments endlessly in the plot. "I love all the agastaches and asters, rudbeckia and heleniums, as well as Joe Pye weed, paper daisies, and some of the Californian wildflowers."

The garden's bursting scheme is unified by wattle wood and wire fencing, plus sand-toned, crushed granite pathways. Inspired by Japanese culture and landscapes, Tucker grows bonsai and dwarf conifers on the home's wind-battered southern side. Meanwhile, Rupert is fascinated with ancient tree species and has established an arboretum of oaks and araucarias in an adjacent paddock. The family's one-year-old koolie-border collie, Spot, darts through the masses of foliage, as do families of twittering blue wrens and spinebills.

Jo has added some clipped forms to the garden to lend a sense of order, "but we're not out there pruning and tidying all the time because I like nature to take the lead role." Case in point: the mounds of tussock grass (*Poa labillardierei*) that house bugs in their strawlike dead matter. "I don't clean up the poa because the bugs attract the blue wrens," says Jo. "I look at all the layers of story and meaning in a landscape and how that can help the planet and benefit all sentient beings – humans and animals."

The immersive dreamscape offers a magical setting for life-drawing classes and sound healing sessions. Jo is tinkering with more ideas on sharing the therapeutic aspects of the evolving landscape with others, never losing sight of the fact it's a sanctuary for her family first and foremost. "Being in this garden is bliss, which goes beyond just how it looks," she says. "It's about how it opens you up to all your senses and makes you feel." *CF*  
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## GARDEN FLINDERS VIC

Breathtaking views surround the family home throughout the seasons. "Nature is always the one that makes it work, not you," Jo muses. Sadly, the family's koolie, Bindi, is no longer with them. "She has passed now. We miss her. She was 12 and a pure koolie. We have Spot, and also Oogie who is eight. He's a corgi crossed with a koolie. We love koolies!"

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