



Solutions for garden design dilemmas

Garden beds full of pebbles, overgrown plants, dangerous Yuccas, and a backyard that is an overwhelming blank slate. We can find ourselves owning a garden that is challenging and restrictive but take comfort knowing that every garden has its problems. As noted by Kendra Wilson in her book *My Garden is a Car Park and other Design Dilemmas*, “Sometimes a really successful (garden) is defined by the imperfections of the site.”

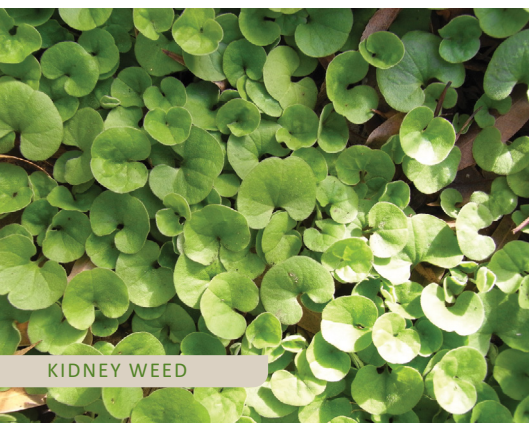
So, embrace your garden’s imperfections and read on for some simple design solutions to common garden dilemmas.

My garden beds are full of decorative pebbles...

There are many reasons why people decide to put pebbles in garden beds – ‘the mulch keeps blowing away’, ‘the dog digs up the garden’, ‘they last a lifetime!’ Decorative rocks may seem like a long-term solution to many problems, but they can be costly, unsustainable, and a frustrating material to keep weed-free. Pebbles and rocks can look beautiful in the right garden- carefully grouped in different sizes and shapes; defining a dry riverbed, in an organically shaped garden bed or a cacti garden. However, a garden filled with decorative pebbles all the same size and colour rarely looks good, and your plants will struggle to survive.

If you have inherited a garden with pebbles, you may discover layers of weed mat, black plastic or landscape fabric placed under the stones. Often installers will treat the soil with herbicide to kill weeds before laying the weed matting. This practice starves your soil of organic matter and kills off microorganisms that provide nutrients to plants and improve the structure of your soil. Pebbles and weed matting also raise the soil temperature leading to stressed, thirsty plants, and over time organic matter, such as leaves and dirt, will accumulate between the stones creating opportunities for weed seed germination.

Using pebbles can be unsustainable if they are imported over long distances (most decorative stones are imported from China, India, and Indonesia) or taken from natural living landscapes where their removal can result in erosion and loss of habitat for our native animals. If you are buying rocks and stone for your garden, always ask the supplier or retail outlet where they came from. The most sustainable supplies of stone are quarry surplus, rock removed during land and road development, or recycled rock and stone.



KIDNEY WEED



WILLIE WAGTAIL

Time for change

To remove your pebbles – get some help! It’s a big job and can only be done manually. If removing all the pebbles is too overwhelming, consider removing a small section of stones 1 x 2m. Cut back the weed matting and remediate the soil with compost and plant a small patch of indigenous garden that you can add to later.

Creating a sustainable, beautiful, wildlife friendly garden is about bringing the land back into balance. Start small and your confidence will grow.

An organic chunky bark mulch is the best mulch for your garden, or even better- plant indigenous groundcovers such as Kidney Weed (*Dichondra repens*), Creeping Boobialla (*Myoporum parvifolium*) or Ruby Salt Bush (*Enchylaena tomentosa*) to cover the soil. This will discourage weeds and stop birds flicking bark onto your paths. These plants are tough and sustainable, and they will not need to be replenished each year. Plants also provide foraging areas for small insectivores such as the Superb Fairy-wren and the Willie Wagtail.

My friend gave me a Yucca cutting, it's now 5m high and deadly

The Yucca plant is native to the open high deserts of the southwestern United States and Mexico. They are extremely drought tolerant, evergreen, thrive in full sun and have become ubiquitous in Australian gardens. However, these plants do not belong in a small suburban backyard. The Yucca plant can grow to 5 metres in height, and their trunk and taproot can reach up to 500mm diameter. The Yucca's arrow-like leaves are the leading cause of gardening related ear, and eye injuries – a recent study shows that one in seven of Yucca injuries resulted in the patient suffering permanent hearing loss. A Yucca puncture can also deliver the plants toxic chemicals directly into the body, and they are also poisonous to dogs and cats.

Removing a large Yucca can be a big job, we recommend hiring a professional to do it for you. If you are pruning or removing a Yucca be careful, wear protective clothing, including gloves, glasses and a wide brim hat and dispose of the plant in your green waste bin – don't dump it in the bush, they resprout easily.



LEAFLESS ROCK WATTLE

Strong, bold native alternatives to the Yucca include the Leafless Rock Wattle (*Acacia aphylla*), Gynea Lily (*Doryanthes excelsa*) or indigenous plants such as the Fine-Leaf Desert Cassia (*Senna artemisioides ssp. filifolia*), Flax Lily (*Dianella brevicaulis*) or the Spiny-Headed Mat Rush (*Lomandra longifolia*).



GYMEA LILY



PURPLE CORAL PEA

My garden is a blank slate

The best advice for anyone starting a new garden is to create garden beds as wide as possible – a minimum of 1 metre wide. A garden bed less than 1 metre results in an area that only has space for one or two plants – you are simply replicating the line of your fence and making your garden look smaller. A generous garden bed allows plants to reach their full potential, boundaries to be blurred and gives you room to layer groundcovers, small shrubs and bushes and trees. Layering plants gives your garden depth and interest. Don't fall in the trap of making lawn or paved areas bigger at the expense of garden bed width.

Layered planting also provides continuous layers of foliage and habitat for birds to move, forage, rest, breed, and avoid cats, rats, and foxes. Predators eat over 70% of all native birds eggs each season so consider planting a spiky shrub in a quiet corner away from paths for nesting and sheltering. The Tree Violet (*Meliccytus dentatus*), Sweet Bursia (*Bursia spinosa*) or a thicket of tangled vines such as the Purple Coral Pea (*Hardenbergia violacea*) or Small Leaved Clematis (*Clematis micropphylla*) are ideal nesting habitat for small birds.

A diversity of plants will encourage a diversity of wildlife.

If you have a narrow garden bed along your drive or down the side of your house, consider installing a trellis and growing a vine or climber such as the Purple Coral Pea (*Hardenbergia violacea*). Tall indigenous grasses such as the Tall plains Spear Grass (*Austrostipa bigeniculata*) are also a great option for long narrow garden beds. Resist the temptation to plant tall shrubs or trees – they will need to be pruned hard to fit into the narrow confines of the bed.

Before you begin planting your new garden, paint your fence a dark colour that will compliment your plants. Often your boundary is a mix match of new and old palings and materials. By painting your fence a dark colour such as grey or black, your green plants will stand out and give your garden interest and depth. A light-coloured fence can become visually dominant and make your backyard feel smaller. Avoid a green fence or a colour that matches your foliage- you want to highlight your plants rather than make them disappear. Painting your fence is a weekend project that has a big impact on your garden.