

Rosslyn Park garden beds

When we first visited this steep terraced back yard in Rosslyn Park, we were delighted to find that the owners knew one of our recent clients who had planted the seed in them (no pun intended) of growing their own veggies.

They were all super excited at the possibility.

Location, location, location

With their charmingly cute 2 year old in tow, we wandered around the yard, chatting about the pros and cons of timber versus galvanised, and examining the potential spots that would receive enough sunlight to grow veggies as well as being protected from radiated wall heat.



Sometimes there is a perfect spot.

Sometimes there is not a perfect spot.

Sometimes there is a perfect spot, but it is not one that the householder is willing to give up!

At first it seemed that the back fence line on the northern side of the lawn was the most practical site for raised garden beds, however a row of tall bamboo trees had been planted here which would soon shade this area.

On the very steep eastern slope, rows of white walled terraces step up to the top of the property. This was also not a practical location for veggie garden beds.

We were left with the lawn area and the back steps.



Respecting that the lawn is an important play area for their active 2 year old boy, we came up with a creative idea for putting in raised garden beds. We'd build 2 garden beds on the main steps and 1 bed on the lawn area below the steps where the two concrete retaining blocks had been placed. This way, the lawn area would be retained as well as covering up the odd concrete steps.



Nobody knew why these concrete blocks were put there. We were not about to move them. Instead we would build a garden bed over the top and enclose them!

Work commences

Now you can imagine the logistics involved in making garden beds on steps. Add to this the weight of one side panel of a garden bed made of 3 hard wood sleepers (approx. 75kg), and you'll understand our excitement (not!) at carrying the panels up the steps.

So...let's just begin, and take it one step at a time...

We started by making and placing the side panels for the upper bed.



Two panels are in place, held together with a clamp. The tops of the panels are perfectly level.

Next came the tricky part, building the two end panels to the shape of the step and attaching the panels with steel corners, an exercise in precision woodworking and perfect sequencing. Roger loves this kind of challenge!



Having mastered the unique shapes of the end panels, the next challenge was how to soften the front face of the beds. Thinking that three hardwood panels on the front face may make the raised beds look daunting, we suggested inserting a strawberry bed to soften the face and provide extra growing space.



Here you can see the space where the strawberry bed will go. Roger is working out the horizontal dimensions.

With the two beds in place, next they had to be completely lined with black plastic, not something we normally do, but here it was to prevent water from discolouring the steps. Fully lining a garden bed is not recommended. If soil becomes waterlogged, the space between the soil particles collapses and the living soil becomes starved of oxygen. It can then become putrid and toxic to micro organisms and plants.

So to compensate for lining the beds, we inserted a special drainage system.

This unique garden installation required one innovation after another, after another!



The top bed has the black liner inserted.



Some creative irrigation, with one pipe to let water in and one pipe to let excess water drain out

Raised bed around retaining steps

Our next challenge was the final bed. Not only would it be built to enclose the concrete retaining steps, it would be built on sloping ground. On steep slopes like this, we will make the front panel 3 sleepers high (60cm) and the back panel 2 sleepers high (20cm), but to get the front and back panels level across the top requires some precision laser levelling.



Sally recording measurements from the laser level to fine tune the exact depth of excavation needed for each side of the final garden bed.



Digging out the soil, ready for placing the 4 panels of the garden bed.

Excavating the grass and ground to a precise depth underneath each side panel is essential prior to placing the panels. Once we put those massive panels, we don't want to move them again!



Black plastic covers the entire base of the bed, including the retaining steps, to prevent invasion from the kikuyu grass.



*The third bed is easily filled with soil using the digger's bucket.
The two upper beds on the steps are now lined and large rocks have been dropped into one side to assist drainage.*

Filling the two upper beds on the steps was not quite as easy as the one on the grass! Neither digger, nor wheelbarrow can help us here. Roger had to fill up a series of buckets with the soil, climb up the steps and manually drop it into the beds.



The four buckets of soil are sitting in the digger's bucket. Extension arms for the digger are now on our bucket list! (Pun intended)

With all three beds filled, it's time to run the drip irrigation lines across the beds and then comes our favourite part, planting out the new garden!



The newly planted garden.

Although not a huge garden, this was probably the most technically difficult one we have installed to date. Every step seemed to present at least one or two more challenges and the challenges spiralled exponentially as the job went along. From cutting timber and steel corners to match the steps and odd angles, to levelling the tops of the beds, attaching lining to the beds, water drainage, filling the beds with soil, and even the placement of plants to match the shallow soil and deep soil on either side of a bed...the list goes on....

But the final outcome is a stunning arrangement of garden beds, that is perfectly functional and an aesthetic complement to the contemporary design of the house.

In time, these karri hard wood beds will fade from their natural red colour to a silver grey and in doing so, they will age like a fine wine, settling gracefully into their new environment.