



# SECRETS OF SMALL GARDENS

Juliet Nicholas and Sue Allison



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# FOREWORD

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Diminished dimensions certainly need not mean compromise. Small gardens can exude an intensity, intimacy and immediacy rarely found in their larger counterparts.

The small gardens featured in this book are all cleverly curated habitats, inspired rather than limited by their size.

At the heart of their success lies careful consideration as to how to best use the space available. “When you’ve got a big garden, you can have a bit going on here and a bit going on there. When you’ve got a small space, you have to make choices,” says Jude Trengrove (*Escape to the City*). Or, as Juliet Mannering puts it: “I only have room for the things I love.” (*The Front Room*).

Designing one’s habitat is a highly personal affair and these gardens reflect a diversity of human preferences. “Less is more,” asserts the creator of a minimalist sanctuary (*Rooftop Reverie*). “More is more,” enthuses Warren Robertson of his bursting bijou backyard (*Inner-city Exotica*). Angie Gawith spurns “stressful colour” for restful green (*Downtown Seclusion*), while flowers are “food for the soul” for Jane Teasdale (*In the Pink*). Some pack their plots with edibles (*Framed with Fruit, Edible Artistry*); others favour naturalistic plantings (*Natural Connections*).

‘Small’ is a relative concept, linked to proposed use of space as much as meterage. A 30sqm courtyard is small by any definition, but so is a regular-sized backyard when it becomes the footprint for a subtropical jungle.

“Grow up,” advises Mark van Kaathoven, dwarfed by towering palms in a garden three times as high as it is wide (*Growing Up*). Vertical structure and layering become all the more important when you are trying to make the most of every square meter, be it ground or air space.

Others use optical illusions to suggest greater space (*Garden of Illusion*) or defy their properties’ perimeters by borrowing from the neighbors, be it the leafy backdrop of a park next door (*Parkside in the City*) or a cityscape viewed over the living wall of a seventh-storey balcony (*Room with a View*).

As people increasingly find themselves in smaller urban quarters or deliberately down-size, the garden becomes an even more important “room” in which to entertain, seek refuge or satisfy the senses.

Gardens, unlike interiors, are furnished with living things and their success depends on a sound knowledge of plants and how they will behave. When space is at a premium, the relationship between man and nature is more intense, the garden’s secrets more intimate and the realisation of the creator’s vision all the more inspiring.

**Juliet Nicholas and Sue Allison**



CHAPTER 1

# Subtropical Playground

A cantilevered deck offers the ultimate in indoor-outdoor living on a lush sloping section.

We wanted to feel as if we were in the middle of the bush, not in a city suburb.

A cantilevered deck, bridge over a small stream and luxuriant planting have turned a bushy suburban backyard into a subtropical playground.

When Tina and Tom Clyma and their two children moved to the property, the house opened to a dark-stained deck which was surrounded by a black corrugated iron fence and had little connection with the garden.

“We wanted to feel as if we were in the middle of the bush, not in the middle of a city suburb,” says Tom.

By reconfiguring the deck and enhancing the natural features, they have created an outdoor living space that is fully immersed in its lush surroundings and connected with the small stream at the bottom of the property.



*On Previous Page:*

The outdoor fireplace and chimney gives the feel of a jungle megalith with tall plantings of Kermadec nikau and kentia palms, tree ferns and cabbage trees encroaching on the human habitat.

Neutral tones and monochromatic accessories add to the sense of tranquility in the garden. The vitex deck is screwed down rather than nailed for a sleek finish.



The new deck is cantilevered into the bush and built of vitex, a creamy-gray hardwood from the Solomon Islands. It has two distinct living spaces: an outdoor dining area under a louvered roof and a larger entertaining area with wood-burning fireplace as its focal point. In place of the previous visual barrier, a glass balustrade wraps around the deck opening both the house and outdoor seating areas to intimate leafy views and drawing the eye to the stream below.

The feet, too, are drawn to the water with a Monterey cypress jetty cum bridge leading from the deck and extending across the creek. On the other side, a stony path weaves along the bank and appears to head into the bush. While, in fact, it only goes a short distance, the effect is evocative, suggesting a path into a deeper jungle. The drama is increased at night with uplights illuminating the vegetation which, come dawn, resounds with birdsong.

A short flight of giant steps, fashioned out of concrete but resembling flat-topped rocks, leads down to the stream where the children spend many an hour playing in the water or feeding the eels. The over-sized rocks are matched by large-leafed plants and the four-meter fronds and fleshy monkey tails of Australian tree ferns.

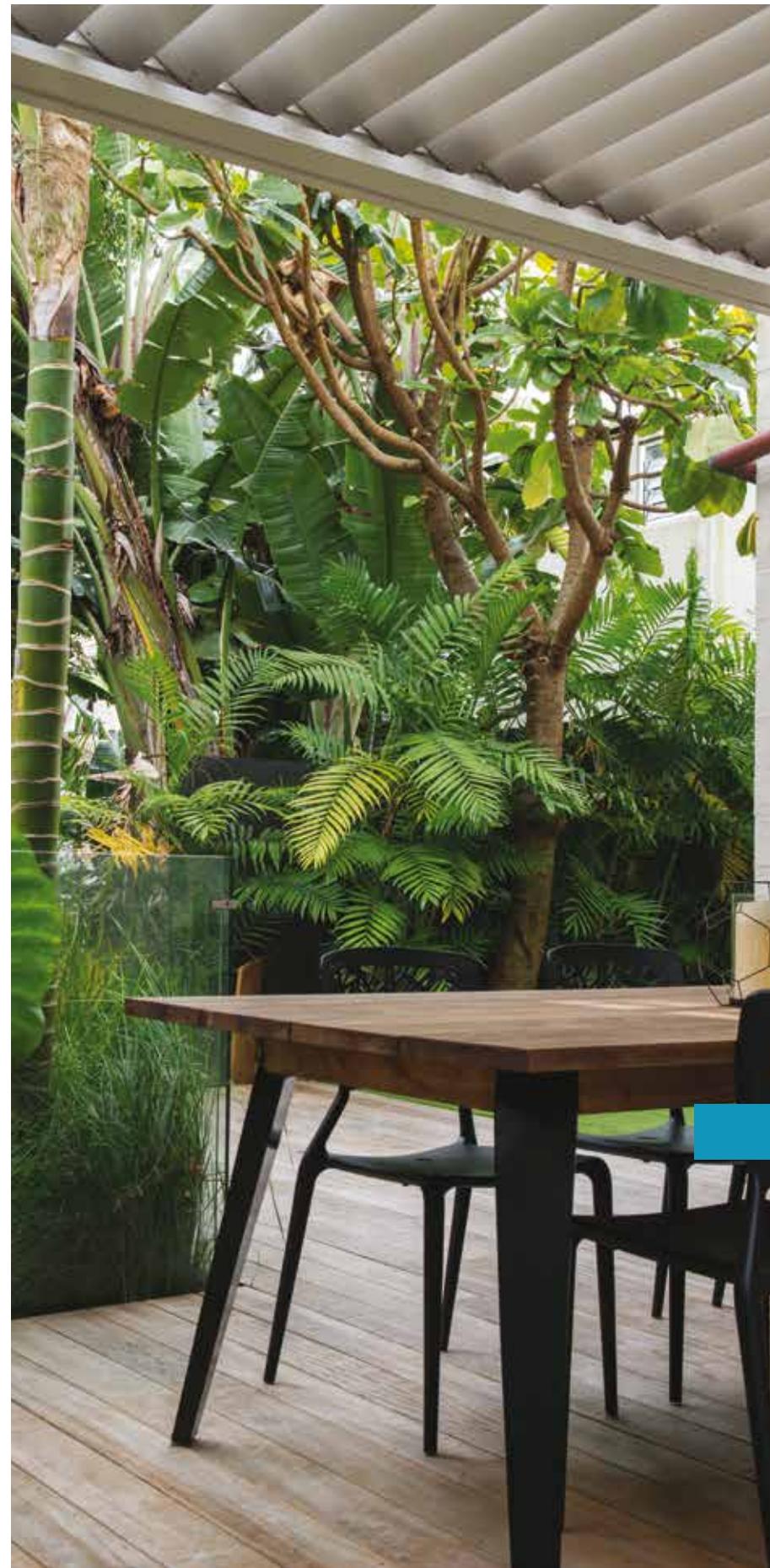
With Tina's Tongan heritage and Fiji the family's favorite holiday destination, it's not surprising that the garden has a Pacific feel with its palms, bamboo and edible taro along the stream's bank.

"We wanted a lush and leafy environment with minimal maintenance," says Tom. "I never have to mow a lawn or trim a hedge. We just do a bit of weeding every few months."

That leaves plenty of time to relax and, not surprisingly, the family no longer feel the need to pack their bags and head to Fiji to do so.



Cluster palm (*Chamaedorea costarica*).



*Top Left:*  
The outdoor fireplace and chimney gives the feel of a jungle megalith with tall plantings of Kermadec nikau and kentia palms, tree ferns and cabbage trees encroaching on the human habitat.

*Bottom Left:*  
Comfortable contemporary woven furniture in steely gray sits lightly on the silvered vitex hardwood deck while a glass balustrade keeps the deck's connection with the garden alive and intimate.

*Left:*  
An Australian tree fern (*Cyathea cooperi*) adds drama and structure with its huge fronds.

*Right:*  
A recycled teak outdoor dining table gets year-round use under the louvered roof.

## IDEAS:

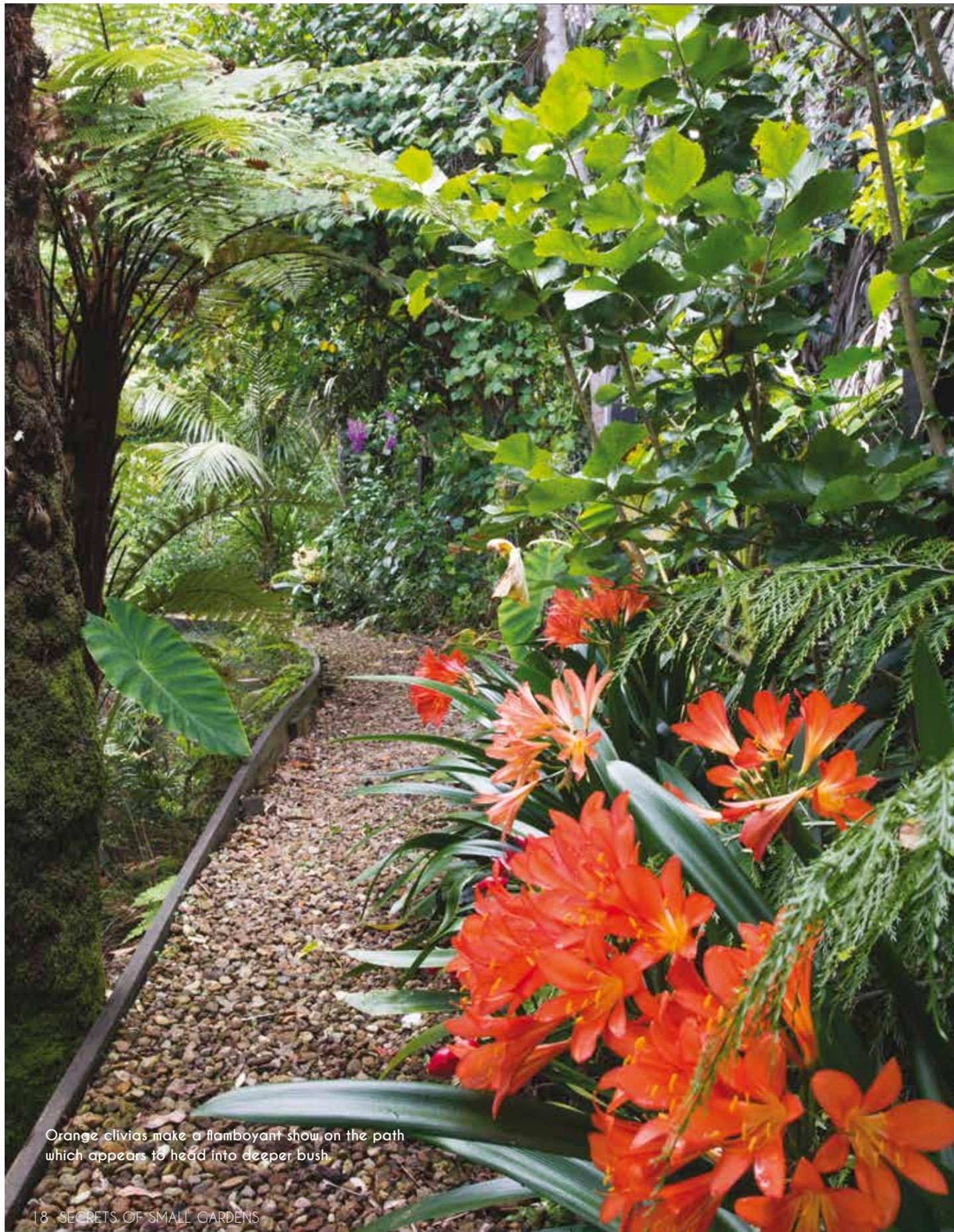
Cantilevering a living space into a small garden maximizes the use of space, creates an intimate connection with the environment and gives lightness to a solid form. The ethereal effect is completed with a glass balustrade.



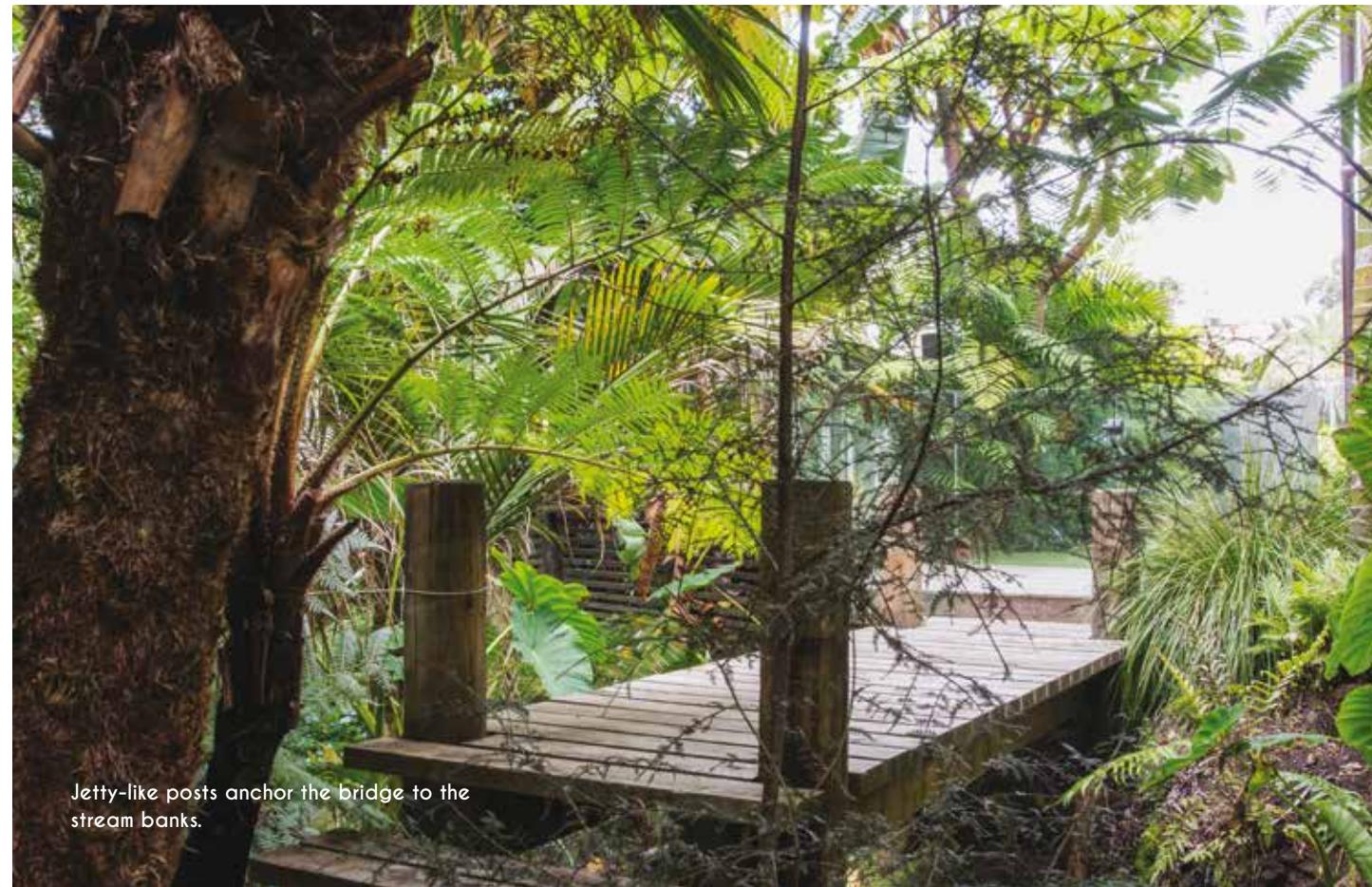
The deck steps down through a glass gate to a bridge over the stream. The stream, alive with eels and other wildlife, can become a torrent after heavy rains.



The wide bridge offers a chance to linger over the stream before descending to a gravel path on the far side.



Orange clivias make a flamboyant show on the path which appears to head into deeper bush.



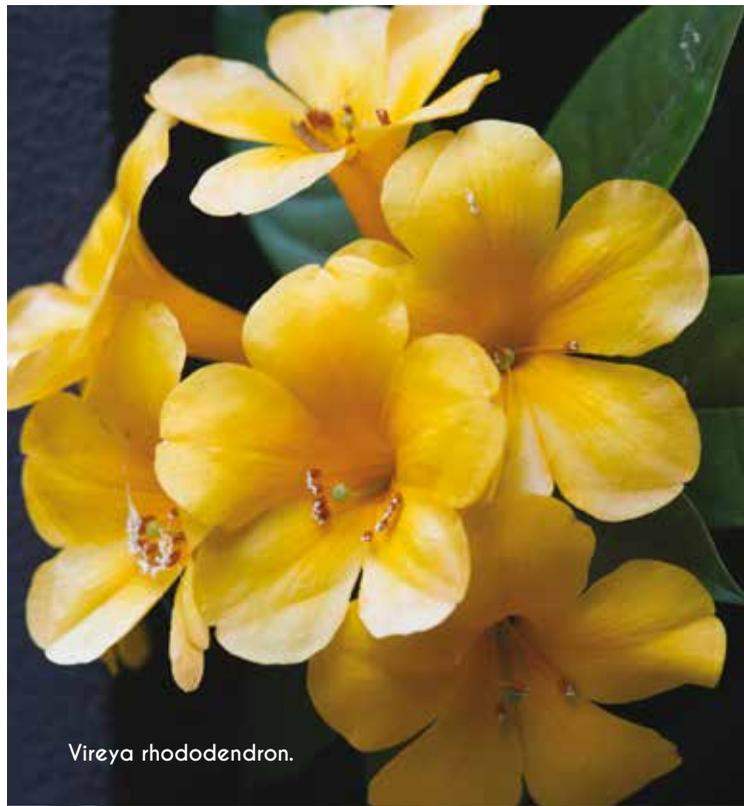
Jetty-like posts anchor the bridge to the stream banks.



Kentia palm and fruit.



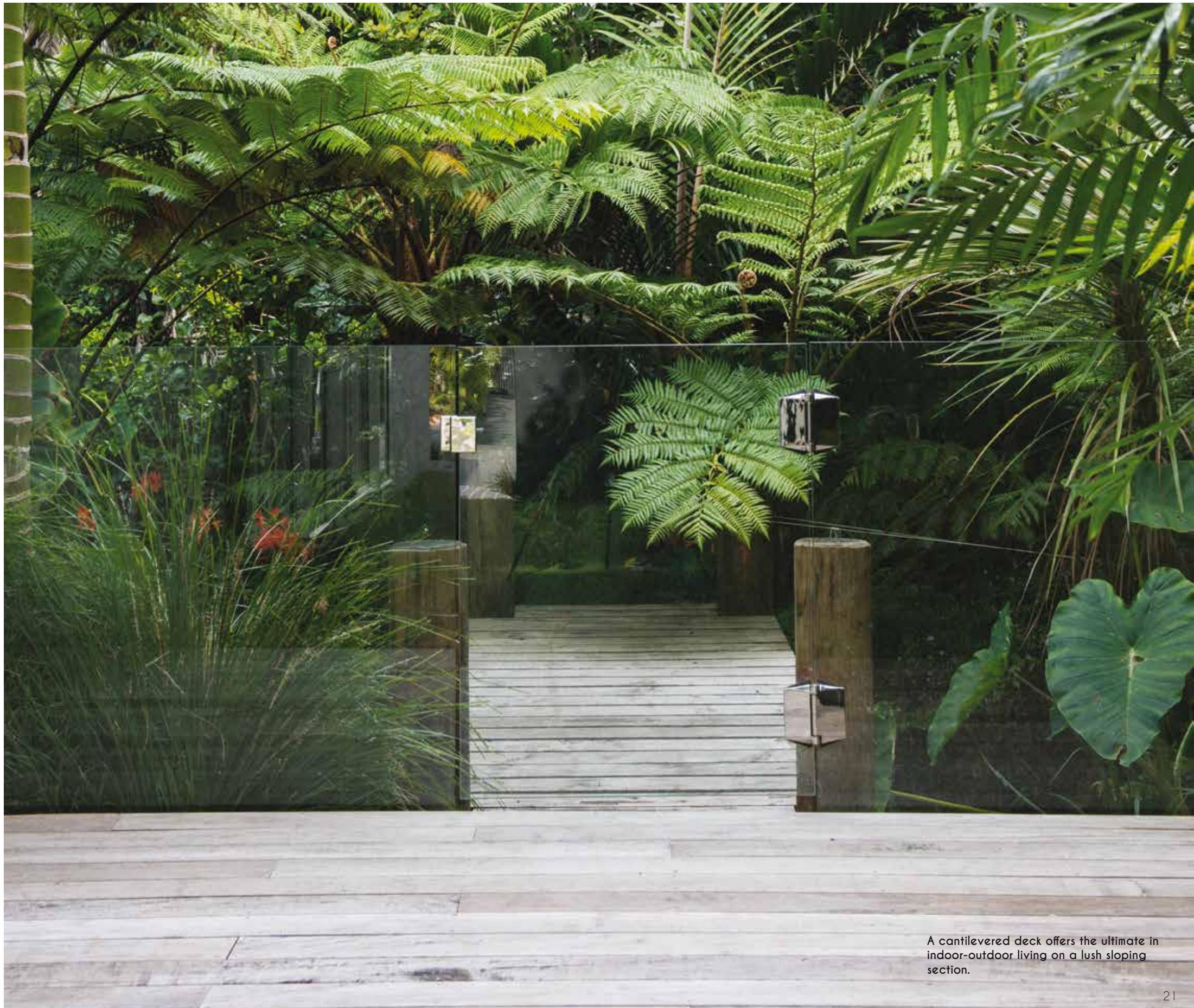
Orange clivias.



Vireya rhododendron.



Edible taro.



A cantilevered deck offers the ultimate in indoor-outdoor living on a lush sloping section.

CHAPTER 2

# Edible Artistry

Raised beds anchor a garden bursting with edibles.