



wallflowers

How do you create a feeling of space in a courtyard when you're faced with a wall? Think vertical, says **Paul Bangay**.

Additional reporting Peter Barrett
Photography Eamon Gallagher and Neil Newitt

All gardens have a boundary, whether it is a hedge, a timber-paling fence or simply plantings of some sort. For those gardeners who have a brick or masonry wall, the joys of what I call "vertical gardening" are many.

Busy grandparents John and Denise Nabb like nothing more than coming home and gazing out at their lush rear courtyard garden. But it wasn't always like this.

After moving from Berwick, where they enjoyed spectacular views over Western Port and Port Phillip bays, the only views at their new Armadale residence were of an ugly block of flats and a derelict patch of weeds, complete with rickety shed in one corner. They wanted a new, low-maintenance front garden and a rear courtyard that would be great for outdoor entertaining, as well as providing relaxing, private vistas from the large picture window in the lounge.

The catch was that their new garden was not only small to begin with, but renovations had moved the whole rear of the house from one side of the block to the other. This left an awkward exterior pathway and a stretch of bare wall along one side of the lounge – not the greatest outlook in the world.

Denise and John needed to soften the impact of the wall, to provide something interesting to look at from the wall of windows down the side of the house, and to create an illusion of space in the rest of the garden. And it all had to be low maintenance. Impossible?

The solution was vertical gardening. There are plenty of small inner-city gardens bordered by brick walls and the size limitations place greater emphasis on the vertical surfaces. In larger gardens it can often be beneficial to disguise the boundary, creating the illusion of a larger space (if you can't see where the boundary lies you can be tricked into believing it's further away). But for smaller gardens, where

bed depth is minimal, the wall itself has to become a focal point. The ingenious solution here was to build recesses into the wall using a pattern of single and double-thickness bricks. Into this recess grows a creeper, kept in check through occasional trimming. One of the best creepers for this role is *Ficus pumila*, which provides an evergreen panel needing little maintenance. *Parthenocissus tricuspidata* (Boston ivy) can give a more dramatic, deciduous effect; both these creepers will tolerate very narrow planting beds and are quite drought resistant, which is important if you don't have much time or space. They cling to the wall with their own suckers, so do not require wiring.

The courtyard was paved with stone-look squares. As well as looking good, these are good value, they need only a good scrub once a year, and they remain grippy underfoot all year round.

By building the rear of the courtyard up a level and adding a simple concrete water feature, the Nabbs had a nice focus for their courtyard. The water feature is controlled by a timer to save electricity but has a manual override so impromptu guests can enjoy the waterfall "soundtrack".

To complete the illusion of space, the garden employed a clever planting technique that uses layering to great effect. First, around the edges of the pavers ran a line of hardy box hedge. Behind this was planted waist-high hydrangeas. Bradford pears came next and serve to block out those flats, although they lose their leaves in winter. Finally, covering the rear walls is Boston ivy, which goes a beautiful shade of violet red in autumn and provides a lush summer backdrop. An automatic drip-feed sprinkler system leaves Denise and John free to throw garden parties and enjoy time with their grandchildren. **(m)**

Create the garden

- Naturally** coloured handmade paving stones look great and won't blow your budget. Available from Anston Paving Stones, 60 Fussell Road, Kilsyth. Phone: 9728 6111 or visit www.anston.com.au. Earth colours \$58 per square metre, classic colours \$63, plus GST.
- Water features** can give your garden a relaxing focus. This one has a sump pump in the bottom of a concrete bowl and one in the top pond to keep the water agitated. Similar bowls are available from Made In Concrete, 6 Ramsay Street, Spotswood (by appointment). Phone: 9391 3317 or visit www.madeinconcrete.com. An 870-millimetre bowl costs \$410, 1060-millimetre bowls are \$630.
- Wrought-iron** garden furniture weathers beautifully and because it is usually so heavy, it's safe and stable for kids. Try French Style, 497 High Street, Prahran, for traditional French and one-off chairs (from \$330) and tables (from \$480). Phone: 9510 5833 or visit www.frenchstyle.net
- Drip watering systems** are water efficient and cheap to install. With stage-two water restrictions, automated systems must switch on and off between 11pm and 6am.
- English box** (*Buxus sempervirens*) is a tough, evergreen hedge needing little watering and clipping once a year, and it is virtually disease and pest-proof. Use wooden pegs and string to keep your rows nice and straight and allow five plants per lineal metre.
- Creeping fig** (*Ficus pumila*) is an evergreen creeper that stays relatively flat along the wall, making for less maintenance. Unusually, both the climbing ficus and the box hedge will take either full shade or full sun.
- Good soil** is crucial. Here it is a five-way mix blended with sandy loam, \$56 per cubic metre, from Fulton's Sand and Soil, 15-19 Hall Street, Hawthorn East. Phone: 9822 3041 or visit www.cfulton.com.au

Top left Layered planting of box hedge, hydrangeas and Bradford pears creates the illusion of more space.

Top right *Ficus pumila*, an evergreen creeper that needs little maintenance, grows in recesses built into the wall.