

SMALL IS GOOD Your outdoor area may not be the size of a soccer pitch but there are clever ways to make it appear larger than it is, writes **David Sutherland**.

THE TREND TOWARDS bigger houses on smaller blocks means less outdoor space.

Most designers and landscapers have their own techniques, tricks even, to reap every advantage from small outdoor areas, whether it's an enclosed garden, a courtyard, rooftop garden or balcony.

It might involve creating an illusion of space or providing interest and colour to enhance the small area available.

Garden designer Sandra McMahon believes in bringing structure to a garden through the strategic use of plants.

"There's nearly always that desire to create some sort of sanctuary or private oasis outdoors," she says. "The look of the space then depends on the individual tastes of the client and how they plan to use the space, whether they want to entertain or get their hands dirty in the garden, or simply relax away from the hustle and bustle."

Tiers of plants of different heights stretch the distance around the space, McMahon says.

"And if you can soften any fence line, the most obvious reminder of the limits of the space, by using different levels of screening plants, it gives an impression that the garden goes on endlessly."

McMahon also recommends taking advantage of any canopy from larger trees nearby. The "borrowed landscape", she calls it.

Landscape designer Scott Brown has more than a decade's experience of making the most of small outdoor spaces. With the recent boom in high-rise apartments in Melbourne, Brown says more people want landscaped gardens on rooftops and balconies.

The specific conditions in these high places greatly affect how the area is used, he says.

"Wind is the obvious element that affects the types of plants that might work in these environments," he says.

"The aspects, whether they're sunny or shady, also are a vital component of any decision on planting."

At ground level, Brown suggests creating mystery by forming a series of sub-rooms.

"Obviously this won't work if your



New tricks

yard is the size of a phone box, but if you can partially divide up the space, with hints of what might lie beyond or around the corner, the mind can be tricked into believing that the space is bigger than it actually is."

Brown also warns against forgetting the utilitarian uses of outdoor areas such as clothes lines and bins.

Installing retractable clothes lines and attractive screens to hide bins are good tricks, he says.

in designing a small outdoor space is trying to do too much.

"There's nothing worse than a landscape that looks cluttered. It's like a small lounge room with too much furniture."

He suggests a judicious selection of plants that can bring life, colour and a softening effect.

"Small spaces tend to have so much hard landscaping in them, which I call the bones of the landscape, so that makes it doubly

important to get plants in there, to add flesh and skin to the garden."

Browning also likes the effect of garden art. "Creating focal points in the garden draws the eye away from the boundaries and what's beyond the boundaries to the exciting things happening within the space."

Landscape architect Cameron Grant says water features work well in small spaces.

"Often courtyards and small gardens have a lot of ambient noise

coming from outside," he says.

"Trickling or gurgling water from water features can dilute or wash out that noise a bit, and bring its own aural beauty."

Grant often uses mirrors to enlarge a small space.

"They can be used quite subtly," he says. "A series of small mirrors can look like little windows, as if they pop out of the space somehow, like there's suddenly an avenue to somewhere else. A wall is a very definitive end to a space, but with mirrors it's like the space doesn't end at that wall."

Another technique is to provide some elevation, with a raised deck or a paved area higher than the rest of the yard.

"It kind of pulls you up out of the space and makes it seem bigger," he says.

"You get more sky view, which makes any garden seem more spacious, and if you put plants in at ground level so they're slightly below you then they don't seem to encroach as much."

Tricks and more tricks. It just goes to show that however small your outdoor area there are always ways to make it shine.

There's nearly always that desire to create some sort of sanctuary or private oasis.

With outdoor furniture, less is better than more.

"Try not to use really chunky furniture, keep it lean and more finely sculpted so it appears to take up less room. A glass-topped table can also help."

Melbourne designer Mark Browning from Cycas Landscape Design who returned triumphant from this year's Chelsea Flower Show with a silver gilt medal for his garden design, says one of the biggest traps