

Yin, yang

and Celtic, too

It was a matter of garden over body when Philip Stray made his statement

Words and photography
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Philip Stray was at a crossroads in life. It was time to kick over some traces, follow a few dreams, do some crazy things.

A devotee of matters spiritual, mythological and especially Celtic, this creative and clever designer determined to bare his passions to the world by having his muscular body adorned with the tattoo of a Celtic cross.

It would be a symbolic statement, a way to mark the beginning of a new, more satisfying chapter in life.

But then Philip, a seemingly caring, new-age sort of a guy, figured a tattoo could be a bit extreme.

He figured he was "a little too old". And besides, for years he'd been advising co-workers, and his own children, against tattooing their bodies.

But still he needed to make a statement.

"So rather than scarring my skin, I thought I'd scar the landscape," Philip says.

Centre of attraction

The Celtic spiral path is an enlightening design element (left)

Green magic

Philip Stray began working on his property five years ago (below)



The result is an amazing Celtic spiral in his Northcote back yard, a fabulously creative pebble-work path snaking seductively through the luxuriant foliage of a garden that must rate as the greenest in the close-to-city suburb.

Philip's Celtic spiral took five people six days to build. It depicts a grapevine twining its way from a pot at the end of the path toward the historic mid-19th century Gothic-style house Philip shares with his two teenage sons, Daniel and Ben, and into which he moved from a 2.83ha farm five years ago.

While Philip admits "it's really just pebbles, mate", he says the spiral appeals to most because of its sense of fun and intangible energy.

But then most of this bewitching property, from the Zen garden with its intoxicatingly scented herbs and raw-rock features to the labyrinth design worked into the paving linking inside and out, has that quirky quality.

The labyrinth sprang from his interest in Greek mythology.

"I used the creative energy to bring out the mythology of it all," he says.

"I see it having movement and that Japanese wrapping paper feel."

Another fascination for visitors here, including a recent Japanese television crew, is Philip's Yin and Yang circle, a swirling patch of two different types of lawn surrounded by low hedging.

Here, sitting yoga-style on one of two inner pebble-work caps, Philip regularly meditates with arms outstretched and palms uppermost.

"A lot of people ask where I got the idea for it, and I tell them it's organic. It simply grew," he explains.

Philip credits a former owner of the property for the garden's wealth of mature fruit trees, which include figs, olives, loquats and pomegranates.

With a strong backbone of hedges, pergolas and stone work, Philip refers to this as a "blokey garden", where men can feel relaxed.

But there's no mistaking its romantic and culinary touches, such as the classic and much-utilised herb garden, and a Zen garden, a former chook yard.

Here too is 'the red door', a go-nowhere door attached to the adjoining wall of a neighbour's shed. Many a visitor has been lured into grasping its snake-shaped handle.

Philip admits when he first moved here his intentions were primarily financial, to build a couple of units on the block and enjoy the rewards.

But love quickly blossomed. He fell in love with the garden, Northcote



itself, and the quaint house with a style he describes as "early Australiana".

Today, not surprisingly, about 60 per cent of Philip's garden commissions, carried out via his company, Crafted Landscapes, involve kindergartens and schools, where his talents and those of his "fabulous team of Paul and Mattie", are sought for the intriguing results they achieve.

"We have a bit of fun," he says. "Rather than having institutionalised concrete features, we try to create really interesting stuff."

"I love doing things that are whimsical or a bit crazy, because I think I've probably got a bit of crazy about me."

Too often, he believes, people create effects that have little to do with the soul of their garden.

"I don't want to sound too spiritual, but I feel people don't put enough of themselves into their gardens," he says.

"They see something on one of the television garden programs and think they really want it."

"With my garden, I like to think it's telling a story. I see this garden as the

story of the past five years of my life. And it's gorgeous now... and my life's gorgeous, too.

"Each section of it of it represents a significant development in my life. Philip's garden, at 7 Walker St, Northcote, is open as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme from 10am to 4.30pm next Saturday and Sunday.

Central focus

Philip meditates in the centre of this Yin and Yang-inspired circle (top)

Romantic touch

A love of mythology was behind this labyrinth paving (above left)

Dead end

A snake handle features on the door that leads to nowhere (above)

Liquid assets

Philip's dry-stone work sets this water feature apart (above right)

Tranquil setting

Paths and low hedges make for garden tranquillity (right)