

# Steeped in mythology

Landscape designer Phil Stray's garden in Northcote is imbued with special energy, writes Louise Hattam

**A**NCIENT Celtic art and mythology were the inspiration for one of the main talking points in Phil Stray's garden. Reflecting the landscape designer's love of mythology and symbolism, Stray's path features patterned pebble work inspired by an ancient Celtic design.

"It is based on the Tree of Life," Stray says. "I designed it as a tribute to the Tree of Life symbolism from the Book of Kells (Irish manuscript of the Bible). I wanted to create my interpretation of Celtic art."

Stray specialises in stone and pebble work in his landscape business. Constructing the path with its elaborate design was a painstaking process, but a labour of love that took him and a team of craftsmen six days to complete.

In another homage to ancient mythology, a paved area underneath the pergola features a labyrinth pattern with a classic design.

Sawn bluestone was laid over a concrete slab and in-filled with charcoal-coloured pebbles.

"I liked the story of the Minotaur (a mythical monster with the head of a bull and body of a man, confined in the Cretan labyrinth and fed with human flesh) as a kid and I'm interested in the mythology," Stray says.

"This design represents a classic labyrinth, inspired by a Greek pattern. It is a true labyrinth, which is different from a maze which has dead ends, whereas a labyrinth is continuous.

"There is energy in spirals, maze patterns and labyrinths.

"I try to incorporate these patterns in my landscape designs."

Stray's semi-formal garden in Northcote is a suburban oasis with mature fruit trees, kitchen garden, vegie patch and a sprawling ornamental grapevine that shades the north-facing pergola at the back of the house.

Stray moved to his heritage-listed, period home five years ago.

Strolling around his garden, tasting a variety of figs fresh from the tree, Stray reflects on how his garden has grown.

"It has evolved in stages," he says.

"That is the nice thing for me in designing my own garden. You can let it evolve through the seasons and according to the influences on your life. It is evolving organically. I tend to be earthy in my approach and I try to have fun with design."



▲ **Squared off:** The water feature has drystone walls for an ancient look.  
▲ **Intricate:** The pergola (left) features a labyrinth pattern underneath.  
◀ **Confucius say:** The yin and yang shape evolved by accident.

The first project was to rebuild the pergola by adding structural support, so the grapevine could spread.

"The vine gives shade in summer and goes a scarlet, burgundy colour in autumn and I prune it hard in winter."

Stray created a kitchen garden inspired by old-fashioned English gardens.

**F**RUIT trees of many varieties are dotted around the garden, a legacy of former owners.

"They were Greek people and they planted lots of fruit trees, which was fortunate for me," Stray says.

Olive, citrus, tamarillo, pomegranate, quince and loquat are all there, along with many varieties of fig.

The garden has yet another talking point. The "yin and yang" garden is a circular lawn in the shape of the ancient Chinese symbol. The lawn grew in the distinctive shape by chance, Stray says.

"The back lawn was like a dust bowl when I moved in, so I turfed it with Kentucky blue. Over summer, the kikuyu grew back and it began forming a yin-yang kind of shape. A lot of people like it. It's a bit of fun and Asian people love it," he says.



▲ **Best friend:** Phil Stray and his faithful dog Chickpea.

▲ **Symbolism:** The Tree of Life path (top) features patterned pebble work.

◀ **Greek influence:** Fruit trees are dotted around the garden.

Pictures: ANDREW TAUBER



Australia's Open Garden Scheme is at the Stray Garden, 7 Walker St, Northcote, March 26-27, 10am-4.30pm. Entry: \$5.