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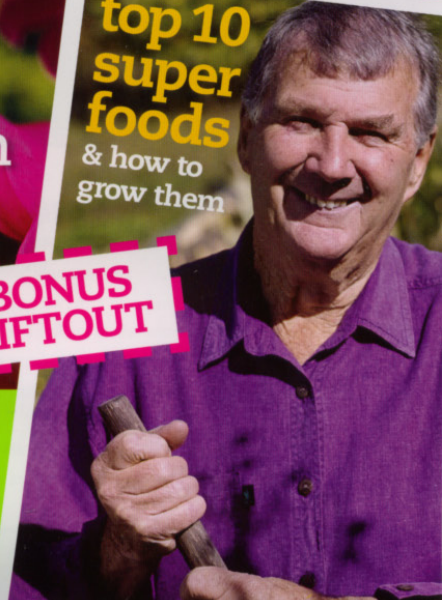


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cinema garden



Australians love watching movies and adore being outdoors, especially during the warmer months, so it makes sense to combine these pleasures. JENNIE CHURCHILL meets two innovative designers who have created a practical garden that is beautiful by day and a magical movie theatre by night.

The outdoor home cinema. It's a wonder the concept has been such a long time coming in this country of warm summer nights with a population that loves movies. Inspired by the outdoor cinema held over summer in Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens, two friends undertook some creative brainstorming before building one of Australia's first outdoor home cinemas in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales.

Landscape designer Kent Martin and his brother-in-law, audiovisual expert and home-theatre specialist Aran McBride, are the brains behind this beautifully designed back garden that functions equally effectively as a family courtyard, an intimate entertainment area and an exciting outdoor theatre.

"The cinema has given us an outlet to enjoy our leisure time together as a family, as well as plan gatherings around a great movie or major sporting event."

Kent says his backyard has become a very popular venue for family and friends. "The cinema has given us an outlet to enjoy our leisure time together as a family and for us and our friends to make time to see each other and plan gatherings around a great movie or sporting event."

After the initial planning, the project

proceeded quickly and was completed within two months. Installation was made easier by being done in tandem with the construction of the Martin's new garden, rather than as a disruption to an existing garden. This meant the required underground cabling, hard wiring for the outside lighting and other elements of the cinema were in place well before the planting and hard landscaping began.

Garden by day

The outstanding aspect of this project is the fact that the installation of the cinema equipment has not detracted from the excellence of the garden design. With its pleasing symmetry and dense planting, it is a practical garden that is used daily by a young family.

Through the large French doors at the rear of the house, the visitor is led across a substantial wooden deck, down broad sandstone steps

and over the central lawn to a circular area filled with crushed quartz and surrounded by plants. A large sandstone bowl, filled with gently bubbling recycled water, sits in the centre of the circle, which is bordered by a raised wall that provides extra seating.

This wall also retains a bed of lush plants. The foreground is dominated by

Liriope muscarifolia 'Samantha', *Heuchera* 'Pewter Veil' and the shiny leaves of the oyster plant (*Acanthus mollis*). These hardy plants are ideal in this cool climate and their different foliage textures and colours create a rich backdrop to the circle of white quartz.

At the back of the bed stands a *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem', with two red-stemmed maples (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku') on either side. The final evergreen layer is provided by a hedge of *Camellia hiemalis* 'Hiryu'. This has surprisingly small flowers but their deep maroon colour and velvety texture more than compensate for their diminutive size. Towering over these relatively new plants are several old eucalypts.

A solid wall of very tall bamboo runs along the main side boundary. The bamboo – an original feature of the

Top left. The red and green colours of *Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku' complement the *Acanthus mollis*.

Top right. The hardwood Asian-inspired frame acts as a window to the garden beyond as well as a structural support for the screen.

Bottom left. This sandstone water feature provides the soothing sound of trickling water to the garden.

Bottom right. Purple flax highlights *Nandina domestica* 'Gulf Stream'.





Meet the designers

The brains behind this outdoor cinema are garden designer Kent Martin (right) and audiovisual specialist Aran McBride (left). Kent runs the garden design company Tranquil Earth Landscapes, while Aran operates AV Input, an audiovisual design and installation consultancy.

■ Tranquil Earth Landscapes

Phone (02) 4889 5556
Email design@tranquilearth.com.au
Web www.tranquilearth.com.au

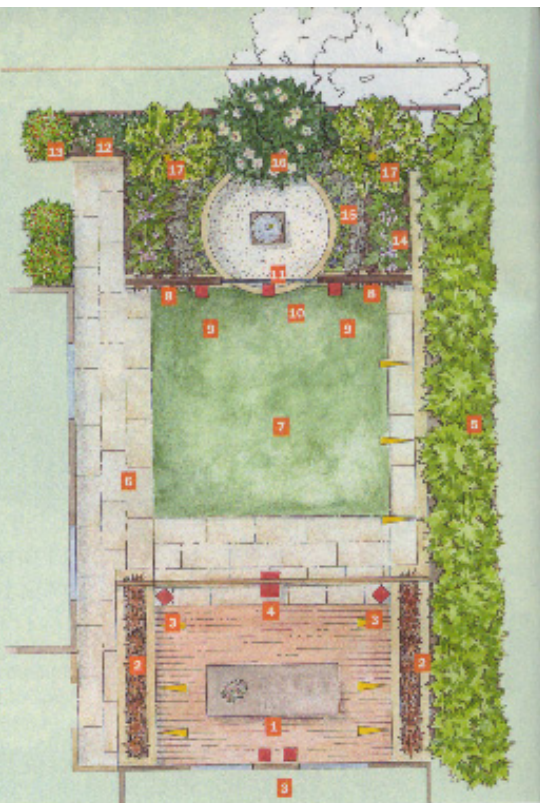
■ AV Input

Phone 0407 667 135
Email design@avinput.com.au
Web www.avinput.com.au

■ For more information on outdoor cinemas, visit www.outdoorcinemagardens.com

How it works

You enter via a wooden deck **1** that is flanked by purple flax **2**. Here you'll find the rear speakers **3** and projector **4** mounted on a timber frame. To your right, a row of bamboo **5** provides privacy. Steps lead to sandstone slabs **6** along the lawn **7**. At the end are hardwood frames **8** that hold the front speakers **9** and screen **10** and lead to a gravel area with a water feature **11**. Camellias **12**, kumquats **13**, *Acanthus mollis* **14**, *Liriope muscari* 'Samantha' **15**, *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem' **16** and *Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku' **17** create a stunning backdrop.



property – is contained within rendered, sandstone-capped retaining walls with purple flax (*Phormium tenax* Purpureum Group) in the foreground. This dense screen of bamboo creates a sense of intimacy and provides complete privacy when the movie is screening.

Two large timber crossbeams face each other on either side of the lawn. These structures add a strong, sculptural element to the garden, forming a double colonnade that frames the courtyard and also emphasises the garden's symmetry. But these hardwood frames are more than just decorative: they are, in fact, the critical supports for the screen and projector. The cinema equipment's permanent cabling and fixtures are well hidden along the beams and by day there is no hint that they have another purpose.

Theatre by night

At night, the courtyard is completely transformed. The low-voltage halogen lighting is romantic, intimate and subtle, creating a sense of drama that enhances the cinematic experience.

Small, hooded outdoor lights are inset at regular intervals into the retaining walls, and uplighting emphasises favourite plants, such as the red-stemmed maples and gum trees. A light placed in the base of the central water feature gives the impression that it is a submerged, flickering candle, and the ethereal atmosphere is enriched by tea lights and other outdoor candles that are scattered throughout the garden.

When the movie rolls, the lawn becomes a seating area. Low-slung fold-up chairs are placed across the rear of the grass and the audience can also enjoy the movie sitting around the low table on the wooden deck. The combined effect of the softly lit background plants, the gently moving water and the stars above adds enormously to the cinematic experience.

This multi-purpose garden has been carefully designed to fulfil the practical needs of a young family without sacrificing good landscaping principles and sets the scene for a unique cinematic experience.



Top left. The screen lowers automatically when the DVD player is activated.

Top centre. The front speakers sit high near the screen, producing foreground noise.

Top right. The front, central speaker is detachable and produces the main audio.

Bottom left. The projector is connected to the home theatre system and is attached to a large timber crossbeam.

Bottom centre. The entire system can be controlled by one remote control.

Bottom right. Dense bamboo gives the viewers privacy.

The cinema

To create an outdoor cinema in your own backyard you will need audio and video equipment and a projection screen, with all the cabling submerged underground. The cost of this cinema was about \$30,000 as it used top-of-the-range equipment. The need for superior projection capacity and all-weather cabling in an outdoor setting will always raise the cost significantly compared with an indoor home theatre system.

The installation and design of an outdoor cinema requires the services of an experienced AV home theatre specialist who has the expertise to understand the different design and equipment requirements of an outdoor project.

Apart from the all-weather cabling, the major pieces of equipment – such as the screen, projector and speakers – are not weather-proof but have been designed so they can be clipped onto the viewing and projection beams and can be ready to screen a film or sporting event within 10 minutes.

Here are the basic components of any outdoor cinema.

■ **Home theatre system** This is the main component of the home cinema and is made up of a receiver, or an amplifier through which a DVD player, VCR or even a PC can be run. In this case, the system is kept inside the house and is connected to a weather-proof box to the side of the garden, which allows the system to be controlled by a single remote control. For a quality outdoor cinema, you will need a mid- to top-of-the-range system, which costs about \$20,000.

■ **Projector** The projector is connected to the home theatre system and projects images from a source (for example, the DVD) onto the screen. Again, a mid- to top-of-the-range projector is needed for an outdoor system and will cost about \$5,000 to \$10,000.

■ **Screen** The screen is where the images are displayed. In this garden, the screen is radio-controlled and automatically drops when the home theatre system is activated. A good-quality screen costs about \$2,500.

■ **Audio system** To achieve digital, cinema-quality audio, this system uses six-speaker surround sound. Each speaker has a role to play in producing the surround-sound effect.

The central speakers in the front and back of the cinema garden produce the main audio – for example, the central conversation occurring on screen. Another two speakers are set high on either side of the screen and these produce the foreground noise, such as people chatting or cars going by in the movie. Two speakers set further back produce background noise, such as distant conversations or cars going past. Finally, a sub-woofer produces any low, rumbling noises that add to the film's drama.

The speakers in this system are not weather-proof, but they can be quickly and easily attached to permanent connections. Speakers for a system like this will cost around \$800 to \$900. Marine-grade, weather-proof speakers are available for this purpose, but they can cost up to \$800 a pair.