



Hard
Gardening



slippery SLOPES

Sloping sites have brought many a seasoned gardener undone, but you don't have to be a mountain goat to make them workable spaces for the family. DERYN THORPE explains how it's done



Hard Gardening

As a child, I loved rolling down hills or sliding down on a piece of cardboard, but as a gardener, steeply sloping sites pose more challenges than thrills. While homes on sloping sites often have great views, and a slope adds interest to the garden, the steep terrain needs careful landscaping to retain the soil, stop slippage and create drainage. Left in their natural state, it is very difficult to establish plants, because slopes are usually windy and exposed, and run-off may cause erosion.

Lawn is often the mainstay of suburban backyards, but general recreation and entertaining is impractical and mowing is too difficult on sites with more than a 1:5 incline. Ensure soil is weed-free and prepared with compost before establishing lawn. Lawn seed is not ideal for slopes, as rain and watering wash the seed downhill. Roll-on turf is the best option and should be laid across the slope, otherwise water can run between the rolls and wash away the soil. You can plant lawn runners, but lay wire mesh first to help prevent the soil and runners from slipping down the slope. When the grass grows, the leaf blades will disguise the mesh.

shaping the land

On gentle slopes, gravel pathways can meander across the incline, lying just off the contours. The near-level paths slow the flow of water, reducing erosion and allowing moisture to soak into the soil, while providing access to garden beds for maintenance.

For a natural meadow look, plant gentle slopes with perennial native grasses and grass-like plants, including knobby club rush (*Ficinia nodosa*), native pennisetum (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*), *Conostylis* spp., fescue (*Festuca* spp.) and fine-leafed lomandra such as 'Seascape'. Weed removal prior to planting is essential. For spring flowers, sow annual meadow seed in autumn, and incorporate bulbs such as daffodils, Spanish bluebells and snowdrops.

Swales are useful for sloping ground. These are channels that are dug across the slope to slow down and capture water run-off, storing moisture deep in the soil for plant use. The excavated soil is used to create long mounds (known as berms) on the downside of the trench, creating a greater depth of soil for planting things such as fruit trees and ornamental shrubs.

For access and usability, the best solution for steep sites is terracing. It creates stable areas that catch water, reduce erosion and provide level or near-level surfaces on which to entertain and garden comfortably. Terraces can be linked with pathways and steps that

"While a slope adds interest, it needs careful landscaping"

allow access to different levels. Retaining walls can be constructed with rock, treated timber, gabion boxes or pre-cast cement blocks. Install drainage aggregate and agricultural pipe behind the walls, and 'weep holes' in the walls, to remove excess moisture and prevent a build-up of pressure that can cause walls to fail.

planting

Plant out using small tubes and pots. I prefer to plant out blocks of the same plant or a mix of just two or three repeated across the slope for a cohesive look, using the tallest plants at the back for a layered effect.

Choose plants that are drought and wind tolerant, with fibrous roots that stabilise the soil. Low-growing, mat-forming groundcovers and rambling climbers are usually favoured, as they cover big areas. Choose plants that need little maintenance if access is difficult. Smaller plants are usually more wind resistant, but taller specimens will survive if they have flexible stems that bend in the wind, such as palms. Bottlebrush, casuarina, beech, willow, crepe myrtle, Norfolk Island hibiscus and New Zealand Christmas tree are other wind-tolerant options to consider.

Most plants with waxy, leathery, hairy or silvery leaves can withstand wind and drought, and those originating in coastal areas usually suit sloping sites. Choose perennials that grow on Mediterranean cliffs, such as lavender, rosemary, rock-rose (*Cistus* spp.), thrift, olives and thyme. Or select a mix of multinational plants, such as *Russelia equisetiformis*, *Ceanothus* spp., daylily or aster, or succulents such as sedum ('Gold Mound' is a favourite) and ragwort (*Senecio* spp.).

Many natives cope well, including westringias and small-flowered Western Australian native grevilleas such as 'Gin Gin Gem' and the spider-net grevillea (*Grevillea thelemanniana*). Tough strappy-leaved plants such as lomandra and dianella do well. Groundcovers include creeping boobialla (*Myoporum parvifolium*), running postman (*Kennedia prostrata*), *Hardenbergia* spp. and coastal pigface (*Carpobrotus rossii*).

hang onto your soil

Lay geotextile, weed mat or jute fabric on the ground and pin it in place with U-shaped pegs to keep topsoil in place in sensitive areas. These let water through and deter weeds, but remove any weeds before rolling out the fabric. When planting, cut a cross in the material with a knife, and pull the fabric apart to expose the soil. Lay coarse tree mulch over the top to slow evaporation and improve the look while the plants grow. **GA**

PITCH PERFECT
Clockwise from far left Bushy plants frame these stone steps; the use of gravel and bush rocks gives a natural feel; repeating colour draws the eye to a focal point; mixed plantings soften this retaining wall. **Previous page** Flowering groundcovers look pretty and create useable space. Just watch out for bees!

Groundcovers

- Prostrate coastal banksia (*Banksia integrifolia*)
- Grevillea 'Poorinda Royal Mantle' (below) and G. 'Bronze Rambler'
- Shore juniper (*Juniperus conferta*)
- Common Emu bush (*Eremophila glabra*)
- Catmint (*Nepeta* spp.)
- Snake vine (*Hibbertia scandens*)

Low to medium shrubs & perennials

- Red hot poker (*Kniphofia* spp.)
- Dianella (*Dianella caerulea*)
- Coastal rosemary (*Westringia* spp.)
- Abelia (*Abelia grandiflora*)
- Daylily (*Hemerocallis* spp.)

Medium to large shrubs

- Rock correa (*Correa glabra*)
- Plumbago (*Plumbago auriculata*)
- Hopbush (*Dodonaea viscosa* 'Purpurea')
- Cliff bottlebrush (*Callistemon comboynensis*)
- Laurustinus (*Viburnum tinus*)
- Coastal tea-tree (*Leptospermum laevigatum*)

Small trees

- She-oak (*Allocasuarina* spp.)
- Olive (*Olea europaea*)
- Honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos* var. *inermis*)
- Coastal banksia (*Banksia integrifolia*)
- Smoke bush (*Cotinus coggygria*)
- Coastal moort (*Eucalyptus platypus*)

