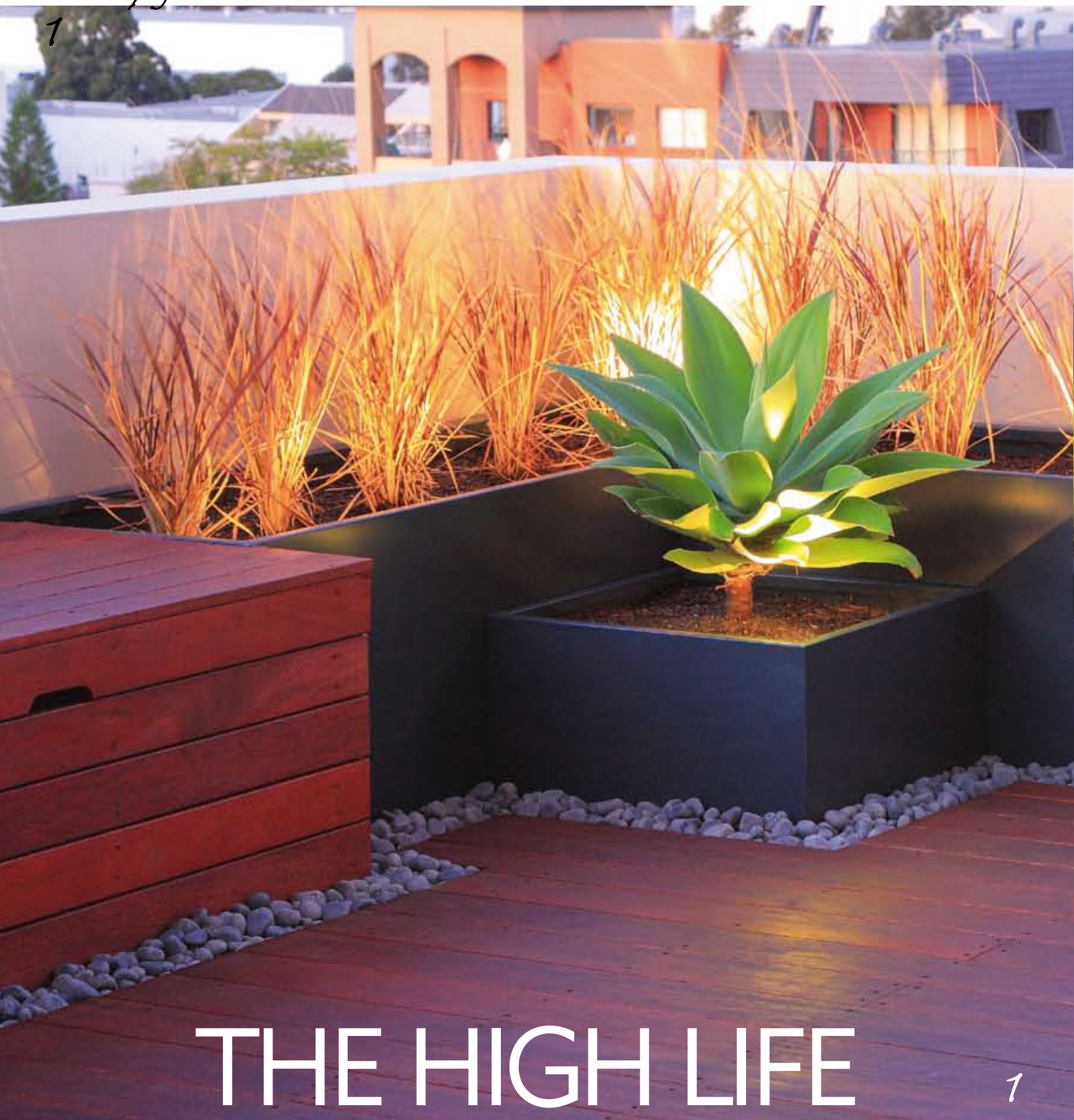


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# THE HIGH LIFE

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Maximise the full potential of your balcony and create the perfect garden up high

Words: Sandra Batley

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**P**erched up high, balconies are wonderful and unique spaces. Although they are often small and confined, exposed to a variety of climatic conditions and have some limiting factors compared to the average ground level garden, balconies do have their advantages, such as offering amazing views and providing a very intimate connection with the interior living spaces of a home.

Being an apartment or townhouse dweller doesn't have to keep you from having a garden. Balconies and courtyards should be thought of as an extra room. The key is to maximise the outdoor living area you have, making it functional as well as welcoming.

Take time to plan your garden, with less space to play with, you have to be more disciplined. In order to create a stunning space to share and entertain in, you first need to understand the many unique issues associated with balcony gardens.

Most apartments have strong concrete floors, but timber balconies on terraces do not have the same weight-bearing capabilities. Use lightweight containers and spread the load over a wide area, instead of one large, heavy pot.

Try not to clutter the area; use rectangular planters or troughs that sit flush with walls or along the edges of the balcony. Where space is really tight, use wall-mounted planters or attach troughs to the outside of the balcony. Hanging baskets are also a versatile and attractive option.



It is also very important to select plants to suit the amount of sun your balcony gets. Most balcony environments tend to be windy and dry. They can be exposed to salt-laden winds, while others can be in the shade most of the day. Choose plants wisely and remember balconies do not get the full benefit of rain because of awnings, guttering or another balcony overhead.

To avoid costly integrated irrigation systems, use dry-tolerant plant varieties that have low water needs. Structural-looking plants with striking form such as New Zealand flaxes (phormium), *Cycad revoluta* (Japanese Sago palm) and *Cordyline australis* (Cabbage tree) require little maintenance and look great year-round. For a more formal look try *Buxus* spp, *Corokia* spp or *Pittosporum* 'Golf ball' clipped into low hedges or shaped into standard topiary balls. →

**1.** Soft lighting adds a magical touch to balconies at night. And being so subtle means the lighting draws attention to the planters without making them over-imposing. Photo courtesy of Balcony Gardens Australia.

**2.** Even a tiny space can accommodate a planter. Here, the planter matches the window trim to achieve a fully integrated contemporary look. Photo courtesy of Balcony Gardens Australia.

**3.** Create a seating area on your balcony by tucking an all-weather lounge chair into a corner. Add a piece of wall art to give the space character. Photo courtesy of The Urban Balcony.



# balcony gardens



- 4. A streamlined dining setting and a portable barbecue are all it takes to create the perfect entertaining area on a balcony. Photo courtesy of The Urban Balcony.
- 5. Lightweight planters provide the perfect container for this small formal balcony garden. A wall-mounted water feature adds a central focal point. Buxus sempervirens forms a low hedge to frame the standard white camellias. Photography by John Eagleton, Outside Edge.

Choose plants that will not overwhelm or grow too big for the space and eventually look out of place. Vertical, narrow foliage allows plenty of light to filter through without causing overcrowding. You are not confined purely to ornamental plants. If you have a sheltered sunny spot, herbs such as parsley, chives, basil and coriander as well as vegetables such as tomatoes and lettuce, and fruits such as strawberries and dwarf citrus varieties are all ideal balcony dwellers. However, you will need to be diligent with watering.

From a design perspective, simplicity is the key; follow the rule of “less is more”. Keep outdoor furniture an appropriate size for its space and avoid bulky pieces. Use a couple of large, simple furnishings in place of several smaller pieces.

Create continuity between the interior of the home and the garden by introducing colour used in furnishings with foliage or flowers planted in containers. If you have a modern home, stick to a strong design theme. Follow



through using plants and materials that fit that style. Select a pot or planter that’s simple and stylish in shape and repeat the combination for a clean, uncluttered look.

If you have the space, other design features or accessories can be incorporated into the space. Self-contained water features, wall-mounted art and lighting add that special personal touch.

In a built-up, high-rise apartment situation, privacy can be at a premium. Plants with a bushy habit can be strategically placed

to screen out prying eyes or purpose-built screens made of bamboo or timber can be put up to give you a sense of privacy. Umbrellas also work really well as they give you a shady spot to relax under and block out an unsightly view above. There are even wall-mounted versions if space is really limited.

It’s easy to bring some life to your balcony and maximise its full potential. By following some simple guidelines, you can create the perfect balcony garden — a special space up high to entertain or relax in. ■