



alight touch

NATURE AND NURTURE PLAY EQUAL ROLES IN THE LUSH GARDENS THAT SURROUND A NORTH SHORE HOME. ○ TEXT BY MEGAN FULWEILER ○ PHOTOGRAPHY BY STACY BASS



A sequence of well-planned spaces on various levels leads down a hill layered with lush plantings, including existing trees that were maintained wherever possible. FACING PAGE: The owners were drawn to the home's English-cottage style. The grand urns highlighting the entrance, made of Rockport, Massachusetts, quarry stone, were discovered at an estate sale.





even the most effortless-looking landscape can have a problematic backstory. Behind what looks like the unfettered beauty of nature may lie endless tales of drainage issues, massive trees, and stubborn boulders that hindered progress and planting. In a long career, landscape architect Gregory Lombardi, principal of the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based firm that bears his name, has experienced just about

every problem one can imagine. Still, the gorgeous grounds of this hillside home on the North Shore of Massachusetts might well rank among his toughest challenges.

Along with observing stringent coastal regulations, Lombardi and senior associate Troy Sober had to devise a way to make the most of the sloping, just-under-six-acre site while creating the impression that the gardens had evolved in concert with nature over



Boulders interspersed with plantings bring a timeless, natural ambience to the Jacuzzi area; the tub's surround is heated to ensure warm feet. RIGHT: The steps descending to the Jacuzzi are also Rockport granite, hand-cut from salvaged bridge abutments; bronze railings accentuate the curve of the stair. BELOW: The architects collaborated with Skylight Studios in Woburn, Massachusetts, to create the hermit crab shells that adorn the railing.



PROJECT TEAM

LANDSCAPE DESIGN: Gregory Lombardi and Troy Sober, Gregory Lombardi Design

ARCHITECT: Charles R. Myer and Susan Dunbar, Charles R. Myer & Partners

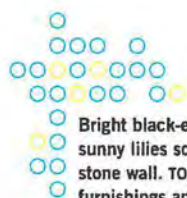
BUILDER: Columbia Contracting Corporation

LANDSCAPE INSTALLATION AND HARDSCAPE: R.P. Marzilli

time. The goal, explains Lombardi, was an “it’s been this way for a long time ambience—nothing formal or pretentious.”

After years in Boston, the homeowners were looking to reconnect with the outdoors. “But we didn’t want to force ourselves on nature,” the wife, an advocate of organic-gardening practices, says. “Even the plants we chose had to like this environment and want to stay.”

The couple’s approach for updating the existing house was similarly respectful. Built in the 1940s, the English-cottage-like stone structure—which once served as a music room for a larger estate—had been added on to in the ’60s. Wanting to update for today’s living while highlighting the home’s core character, they recruited Cambridge architect Charles R. Myer and Columbia Contracting Corporation from Charlestown, Massachusetts, for a renova-



Bright black-eyed susans and sunny lilies soften the grand stone wall. TOP RIGHT: Minimum furnishings and a low-key fire pit at the lawn's edge make for a popular gathering spot without diminishing the incredible views. Such quiet places, Lombardi explains, "allow people to slow down and take notice." BOTTOM RIGHT: Rectangular stone laid in a natural-looking pattern enhances the decorative bench and arbor. The arbor will eventually be home to roses for a spectacular burst of additional color.



tion that, while substantial, maintained many of the house's original elements.

Today, visitors make their way along the drive to the entry through mature oaks and umbrella pines, which are joined by newer recruits such as flowering dogwoods and birches. With Japanese maples and magnolias lending a romantic air to the handsome motor court and pots of bright flowers gathering attention, the home's more modern wings seem less prominent. Massive stone pots sporting an arresting blend of ferns and bold, sunset-hued begonias direct the eye straight to the front entrance.

"The wife loves color, which allows us to experiment with all kinds of daring combinations," says Vanessa Tropeano, field director for Parterre Garden Services, a spin-off of Lombardi's company that helps clients maintain and manage their plantings. Show-stealers like lantana and hibiscus are popular players, marrying with faithful sweet-potato vine and old-fashioned verbenas.

On the property's seaward side, the drama increases tenfold. The landscape architects' ingenious

solution translates to a series of spaces cascading to the shore, providing a number of opportunities to stop and soak up the surroundings.

The scenic journey begins on the top of the ledge where the house is located and sweeps down a curving stone staircase crafted by R.P. Marzilli and Company (the Medway, Massachusetts, firm that handled the garden's construction as well as many of the larger plantings) to the hydrangea-bordered Jacuzzi.

From there, steps descend to the lawn (a boon for sports) and a granite terrace in the form of a parabolic arch. "The shape—rounded but pushing toward the water—suggests nature's movement," Lombardi explains.

There's also a welcoming fire pit, but few sitting here ever focus on the dancing flames; the ocean is mere yards away, after all, stretching as far as the eye can see. From this vantage point—thanks to Myer and project architect Susan Dunbar—the marvelous house expands outward to greet the landscape. The family's pool is tucked into the side of the hill on this same level, flush with the lawn and adjacent

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to the home’s basement for easy access. In summer, the roof and glass walls along the front retract into their dedicated slots. Come winter, they slip back into place and the fabulous outdoor pool becomes a warm spot for indoor swimming.

The path winds on down the slope to a stone dining pavilion, where a fireplace makes the spot a coveted destination for cozy gatherings as well as sunny events. With tables and chairs always at the ready, impromptu gatherings can happen at a moment’s notice. Leggy daylilies and small forests of lime-green sedum dot the little building’s perimeter. Nearby, wildflowers blanket a generous meadow. Spring’s graceful lupines and columbine (a favorite for hummingbirds) give way to summer’s black-eyed Susans, Echinacea, and native milkweed. “Bees, mice, butterflies—whoever wants to live there is welcome,”

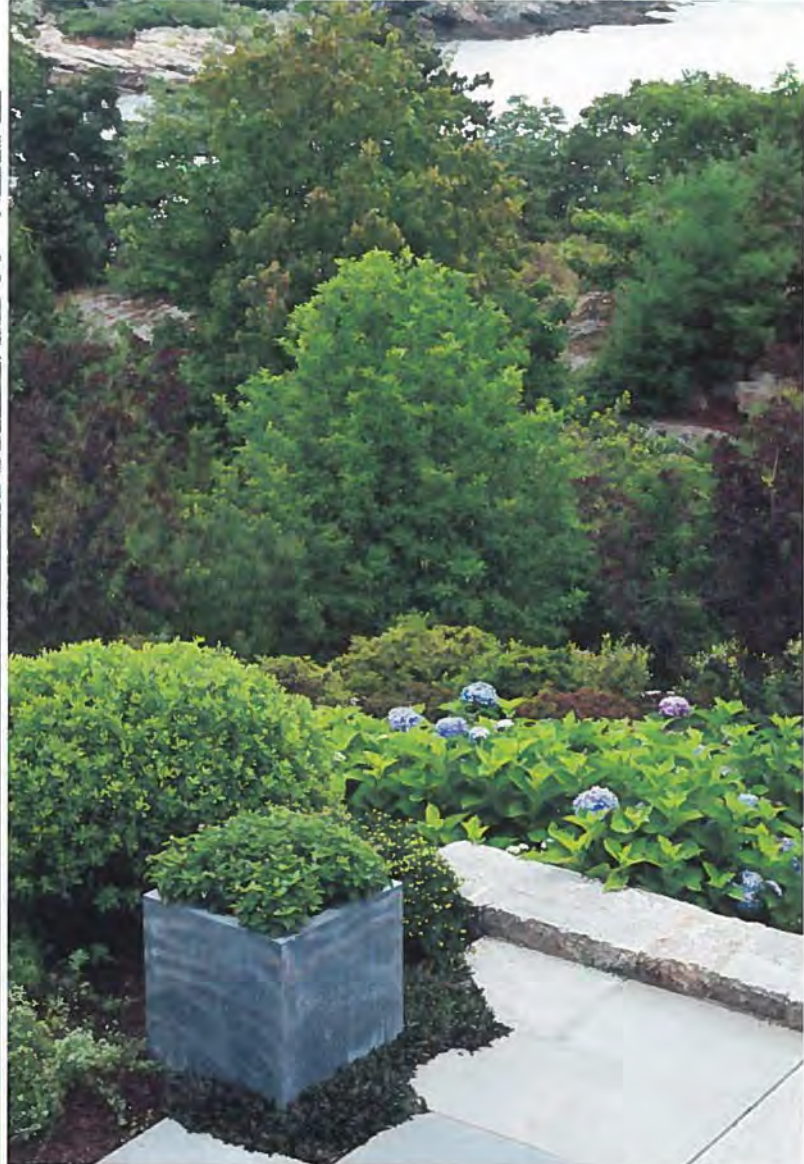
says the eco-conscious wife, who encourages all her flowers to reseed at will.

From the meadow, it’s a short walk to the beach where father and son launch their kayaks. Long forgotten are the logistics of workmen and machines traveling precariously up and down the hill. The lovely landscape, as the owners hoped, resembles one that’s been in place for generations. “It’s a sort of managed evolution,” says Lombardi, one that’s complemented by an “honesty of materials and attention to details.”

Take the stunning and soon-to-be-rose-covered arbor bench Lombardi designed to block the view of a neighboring house, or the incredibly handsome stonework. Paths and stairs built with existing rocks and those mined during construction lend a sense of history. A hefty stone bench by the outdoor shower



The once-overgrown dining pavilion was refurbished and surrounded with perennials, such as coneflower and lilies, that demand little care and multiply with time. RIGHT: A zinc planter surrounded by a dense sea of Chocolate Chip ajuga lends another bit of fascinating texture. BELOW: Comfortable teak furniture weathers beautifully.



makes a convenient spot for dropping a towel or putting on shoes.

And bronze railings—crafted by Valle's Forge, in Wales, Massachusetts—are so artful they belie their function. "We wanted a bit of a nautical feel," says Lombardi of a graceful newel post. At its center rests a sphere of lustrous labradorite that mimics planet Earth. Heightening the magical—what Lombardi calls the "childlike sense of wonder" this garden awakens—are a trio of cast-bronze hermit-crab shells along the railing. The last, the landscape architect relates, tilts to the side, and out crawls a crab heading for the water. It's a fitting decoration to underscore the owner's affection for our planet with all its glorious flora and fauna. •

EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information about this project, see page 211.