

Making Moments



A property that started as a blank slate now provides a lush summer escape for the homeowners. The plantings were chosen because they thrive in the seaside setting and require only minimal care, which is perfect for a low-maintenance getaway.

This Coastal Cottage Garden Tells the Sweet Story of Summer

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Breezes from Narragansett Bay whisper over the garden of this Newport, Rhode Island fishing cottage that is used as a summer vacation home by its residents. The homeowners asked New Jersey-based design-build firm Groundswell Design Group to create a landscape master plan for the cottage, which dates to the late 1800s. "They wanted a space within a space with lots of moments that felt connected and were fluid and cohesive," recalls David Fierabend, owner of Groundswell.

Fierabend describes his design process for creating those moments. "Every property tells a story," he says. If you have a Greek Revival house or a log cabin, that architecture tells a specific story." A home's architecture provides the first clues for creating a landscape plan. And this cottage, located just two blocks from the bay, demanded specific selections. "We wanted coastal plantings. Things that are fluffy, light, airy, whimsical, and fall onto each other," says Fierabend. "The property isn't formal, so it didn't tell the story of hedge boxwoods. It called for more of an English-style landscape with border gardens that bleed into each other." Next, topography plays a role. Fierabend considers the lay of the land, how the water runs, and where the sun hits the property. Most importantly, the designer discovers how the homeowners fit into the story. "I ask clients how they see themselves using the property. The clients don't have to envision what the space will look like. That's our job. It's more about asking 'Do I picture





Four Tips for Creating Special Moments in Your Garden

1 Think of your garden as a story with a beginning, middle, and end. For example, if you use the space to entertain, will the evening start with hors d'oeuvres and drinks on the deck and then move to dinner under the stars? Will you have after-dinner drinks by the fire pit? Prepare your space to follow the progression of an evening.

2 Plan pleasant surprises. Hire unusual plants or unique statuary so they can only be found when guests wander through the space.

3 Let hardscape direct the story. Use stepping stones to lead from space to space within your garden to suggest a path for your guests to follow.

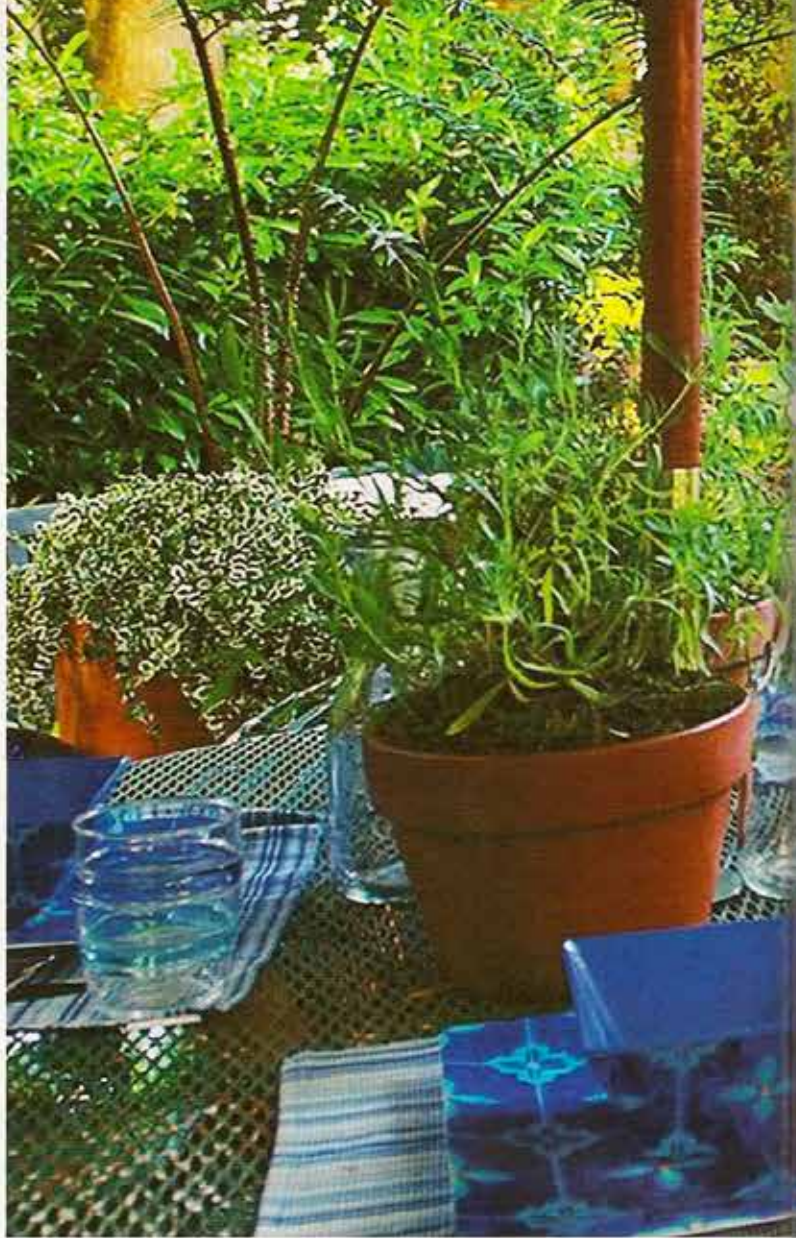
4 Be true to yourself. Your garden is a story about you. Make sure your personality shines through in the plants, hardscape, and artistic elements you use in your garden.

The hardscape elements in the garden provide both direction and space delineation. The jagged flagstone paths direct visitors to wander through the grounds; whereas the flagstone circle and reclaimed hardwood platform define specific seating areas.

myself in that Adirondack chair having a brandy?' If they answer, 'Absolutely!' then it's the right thing."

Initially, the landscape presented a blank slate. The previous owners were not gardeners and did little to the grounds. "It was very stripped down with just a few shrubs and no structural elements," says Fierabend. "As a company, our philosophy is to repurpose, recycle, and reclaim, but there was very little to speak of on this property."

With a blank canvas, size was the only limitation. The cottage itself is 900 square feet and the entire lot is just short of 5,000 square feet. Groundswell made use of every inch. From outside, you enter the garden through a gate that leads from a parking area covered in crushed white shells. Tall copper planters flank the entrance and blooming hydrangeas greet visitors.



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE: Potted mandevilla adds a flowering red accent to complement the same color in the seat cushions. Blue table settings and glassware mimic the blues and lavenders of the abundant hydrangea. Low-maintenance succulents thrive in the coastal climate.



Stepping stones lead from the gate to a potting shed. The shed was prefabricated, but Fierabend gave it a custom feel by adding eye-popping red paint, window boxes, and cedar shingles.

As you enter the yard, you are overwhelmed by lush plantings. Because it's a summer home, the homeowners wanted a low-maintenance plan that would still be beautiful during that time of year. They like to garden, but didn't want to use their entire vacation time working in the yard. "As designers, we always think of the 365-day aspect of the space. This garden was a little different. It really was about the Memorial Day to Labor Day use of the garden," explains Fierabend.

The path from the shed leads to the pergola, which sits atop a small riser, adding height and separation. A local artisan crafted the pergola from reclaimed wood. A chandelier planted with succulents provides a focal point for the pergola sitting area. Outdoor wicker furniture invites guests to sit and stay for awhile, and red appears again in the cushions. The addition of the fiery color happened during the design process. "We ask clients

about colors that mean something to them or evoke emotion," says Fierabend. "For these clients, red was associated with one of their mothers. It reminded them of her. We picked up on that and ran with it. Using those associations adds to the story."

The path meanders around the lot and leads to unexpected surprises like a repurposed cherub statue that was once part of a larger fountain. "It's hidden among the plantings, so you only find it if you follow the path," says Fierabend.

The denouement of the garden's story is found in red Adirondack chairs that surround the fire pit. "The owners wanted an intimate after-dinner area for winding down the evening, a place to sit and make s'mores over the fire or have a brandy," says Fierabend. The relaxed seating area is just one of many spaces in the garden that truly capture the essence of the homeowners.

"The best compliment we get as designers is when someone walks through a space and says, 'Oh, this is Bob and Mary's, or whoever's house,'" says Fierabend. "Their personality is here and it shows." ■