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A NEW OUTLOOK

BY SUSAN HARRISON WOLFFIS

ush lawns. A view of the sea in all its moods and liquid lights. Luxuriant gardens — overflowing with color drawn from the subtle palette of plants.

Some look outdoors and see only what's *on* the landscape.

But landscape designer Mary LeBlanc of Cotuit sees more.

More than walkways and pergolas, terraces and pools, fire pits and hedges. More than container gardens with their enduring popularity and outdoor kitchens that are setting a contemporary trend.

Even more than the simplest of additions to the landscape: chairs set out to see the setting sun.

She looks at someone's property — the slope of the yard, the angle of the sun and the availability of shade, the points of interest, the design she's been asked to create — and she sees "a gathering place."

"Outdoor living is so important to people these days," LeBlanc says. "Everybody has a different story, of course, a different lifestyle. But people come to the Cape to be outdoors ... to be outside ... and so, I look at (their yards) as a gathering place."

So, increasingly, are her clients.

One of every two people who hires LeBlanc — either to "renovate a tired landscape" or design something totally new — requests either an outdoor kitchen or, "at the very least," a fire pit.

"This is something relatively new," LeBlanc says, "but it's big. It's on everyone's mind."

Still, there are so many things to consider before designing a landscape: the salt, the sun and wind and their effects on a garden and yard. What materials to use. Whether a retaining wall is necessary on property that slopes toward the sea.

Take, for example, the desire to create privacy, says LeBlanc, owner of Mary LeBlanc Landscape Design. There are a host of choices to consider: Plant, perhaps, a hedge or build a wall to create privacy. Or incorporate raised beds of flowers.

Or go another direction: a patio, deck or terrace; a pergola to create dappled shade where once there was full sun.

LeBlanc, who has gardened, designed and worked on the Cape for more than 20 years, takes everything into consideration, and no matter what the details of the job are, no matter what the end results of the design, her goal is often the same.

"I help people create living spaces outdoors," she says.

Other trends also are emerging. Many people are concerned about the environment, seeking advice on whether to replace grass — which requires fertilizer and constant upkeep — with native plants that need little care once they are established.

Another frequent request: Many homeowners want to go organic, ready to give up synthetic and chemical fertilizers for something that is safer for the environment.



Even the addition of two simple Adirondack chairs can transform a small grassy spot in a low-maintenance backyard landscape into a magical, welcoming glen.

Treating yards and landscapes as living spaces

PHOTOS BY MARY LEBLANC

At left, rugged stone meets the contemporary lines of stainless steel in an entryway on Pomponesset Island, designed by Mary LeBlanc. Ornamental grasses, right, can be added to urns on a deck overlooking a back lawn, to suggest the best of two worlds: the wild shore and the cultivated yard.





A stone fire pit and a rock wall are the climactic elements in a patio design that features brickwork, linear-laid stone and, at the far end, a grill and sink which underscore the use of the out-of-doors as a living space, intrinsic to the lifestyle of those who dwell within.

LeBlanc calls native plants “the right plants at the right time,” because they don’t require as much maintenance as annuals or even other perennials. She uses them frequently in her designs but warns homeowners that they are “less flashy” than other plants while they are spreading out and taking hold.

One more trend: “People want to go with less lawn,” LeBlanc says, “and more patios and terraces, more ground cover.”

All in all, the direction is toward more “casual living,” LeBlanc says.

Which brings up the most notable development, or at least the most popular request, that she and other landscape designers on the Cape are encountering.

“Almost unequivocally, people say they want low-maintenance yards,” LeBlanc says.

This is the perfect “teaching moment,” when landscape designers can introduce a reality check into plans for the home’s surroundings.

If you have a lawn or a garden — even if it’s a perennial garden — “there’s going to be

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maintenance,” says Elaine M. Johnson, who owns Elaine M. Johnson Landscape and Garden Design and Construction.

“You can’t get out of it,” she says. “There’s going to be upkeep.”

Because so many of her clients are summer residents who are on Cape Cod “to enjoy themselves,” Johnson advises them to hire someone to do the yard work.

“The Cape is a wonderful place to garden if you like to do it, but ...” Johnson says, her

voice trailing off. The inference: There will be challenges.

The sun, the sea, the sand, the salt spray — all qualities that attract people to the Cape each summer — are tough on landscapes.

Johnson, who has offices in Osterville, Barnstable, Chatham and Brewster, reminds clients of some practical issues, like the importance of a well-designed, energy-conscious irrigation system. Like enriching the sandy soil with organic materials and a good six to 10 inches of loam before planting grass or flowers.

Many of her clients are forgoing high-maintenance lawns — Kentucky bluegrass “is a lot of work,” she says — and going back to tried-and-true fescue and other more forgiving grasses that don’t need as much care.

But Johnson isn’t ready to give up on lawns, not by a long shot.

“Aesthetically speaking, nothing shows off beds of flowers more than a well-kept lawn. The lines are beautiful,” she says.

Johnson is a big believer in “a palette of perennials” featuring good foliage, even out of



When a large willow was lost on her clients' property, Mary LeBlanc designed a pergola-covered bluestone patio. Brick detailing was introduced to incorporate elements from the front of this period home.



Vine-covered fencing wraps an irregular stone patio to enhance privacy and evoke a sense of seamless integration with the trees and the natural landscape beyond.

season, when not in bloom. She loves to “create drifts” of color and texture. She has some favorites. Ornamental grasses top the list.

“What could be more beautiful in seaside communities?” she says. “They sway in the wind, and they have tremendous impact for very little money.”

She also loves beds of hostas, although she allows that rabbits find hostas particularly tasty. Also among her suggestions to clients: Plant coral bells, daylilies, astilbes, dwarf evergreens.

Calling herself “a traditional landscaper,” Johnson says she likes to keep the design in the front yard “simple.”

“Save the profusion of color for the backyard ... where you live,” she says.

She has logic, advice and questions she passes on to her clients.

“How many points of focus can you have?” Johnson asks.

She and her clients sit down and talk about space and use of the land. Do they want a walkway that takes people from patio to garden to the seashore? A stone wall for its

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solid durability? A terraced garden or retaining wall not only for interest, but also to hold the land?

• “Those hard-line decisions are made early,” Johnson says.

More advice: She prefers a terrace to a deck, adding that “paving patterns are so much more beautiful” when constructed with bluestone rather than wood. When putting in a walkway, the rule of thumb is to leave enough room for two people to walk side-by-side, about five feet in width. Intersecting paths, whether they are made of stepping stones or pea gravel, don’t have to be that wide.



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A Lutyens-style teak bench, lit in the calming shadows cast by a pergola, custom made by Michael LeBlanc, adds a meditative aura to a sunken stone patio. A thyme-covered stone path, left, flanked with astilbe, opens to an ocean view and beckons visitors to the gate and sea beyond.

As for those traditional Cape Cod oyster shell paths, Johnson simply says: “Charming and romantic, but not practical. They stick in your shoes.”

Whatever the design, whatever the decision, Johnson offers this one last piece of advice.

“When constructing a landscape, there is a natural sequence,” she says. “You need to do things in order. Would you refinish a beautiful wood floor in your house, then plaster the walls? Take things slowly. Talk them out. Make a plan before you start anything.”

Which means that designers and homeowners need to talk.

“Anytime I start a new project, I ask people what they want,” says Angela Rose, who owns Angela Rose Gardens & Landscapes in Falmouth.

The conversation usually starts with the

question of maintenance. “Every landscape has to have maintenance,” Rose says.

Even spaces turned over to native plantings need some work at first. Perennial gardens and native plants are not for the impatient or those who require instant gratification, she says.

“Perennial gardens can be beautiful, but they take time to get that way. They have to be established ... so they can ‘become’ natural and be part of the landscape,” Rose says.

More and more her clients are opting for “low, low, low maintenance,” asking for yards that can accommodate kids and dogs and lots of use. The only flowers they have are container gardens — as many as 10 or 12 of them, filled with flowers on the deck, out of the way of the lawn.

Although Rose uses a combination of annuals in the container gardens, she is

partial to succulents — those heavy-leaved plants that only need watering a couple times a week.

The payoff: low maintenance.

A certified horticulturist, Rose is a believer in composting and a natural fertilizer made by Natural Lawns of America. It is safer for the environment than synthetic and chemical fertilizers, she explains. The natural fertilizer doesn’t leach into the water and requires less irrigation — a gentler alternative all the way around on the environment.

Like Johnson and LeBlanc, Rose recommends homeowners look at their property “and see the outdoor space as rooms.” A terrace or a fence adds “another dimension,” she says.

“By adding structures, the landscape can be divided into spaces,” she says. “It all depends on what people want.” ♦