



# WILD

## BY DESIGN

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**Designing and building a garden that seamlessly connects with the surrounding indigenous landscape is no easy task.** We wanted to learn how to transform the spaces around a home into native habitat while keeping great design the focus. Here are three wild gardens along with 20 smart strategies to help you build a well-designed ecologically friendly garden of your own.

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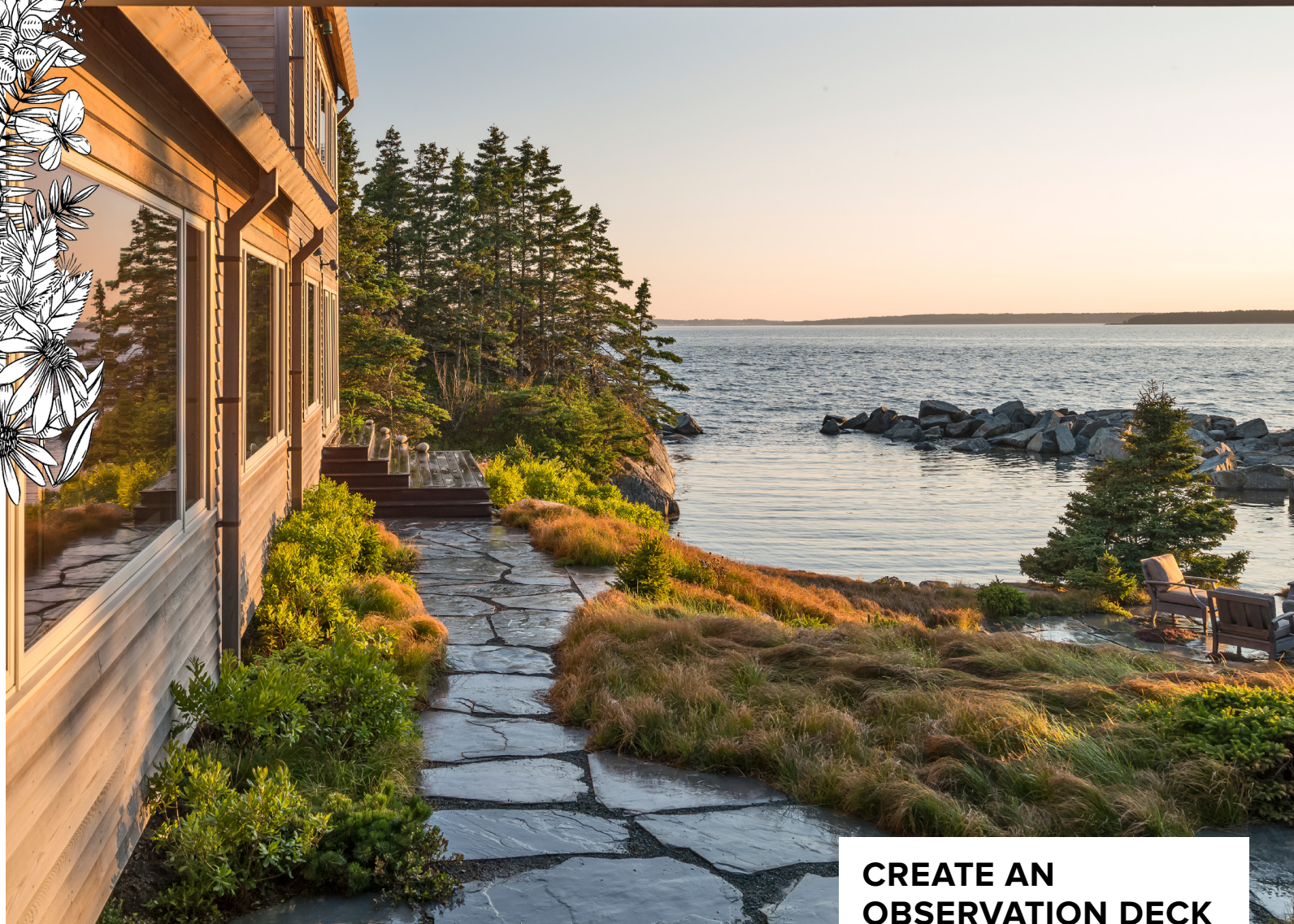




Strategic siting of this rural retreat on Nova Scotia's south shore ensures that the ocean, sky, and forest envelop the architecture, landscape, and both human and nonhuman inhabitants. Trees seen in silhouette: white spruce, balsam fir, and black spruce.



## BRINGING BACK THE BEAUTY



## CREATE AN OBSERVATION DECK

**T**his secluded property on Nova Scotia's south shore, about one hour south of Halifax, was part of Canada's last whaling station. Years of commercial use and new home construction had ravaged the site. When its new homeowners, Andrea Henderson Fahnestock and George A. Hambrecht, bought it, they knew they wanted to heal the land.

"Our objective for the entire project—the landscape and the home's interior and exterior—was to honor and celebrate the beauty of this extraordinary setting," says

Henderson Fahnestock. "We knew the surroundings—ocean, islands, rocks, and spruce woods—would dictate all design choices." So they hired award-winning naturalistic landscape architect Virginia Burt to restore the property.

When Burt first came to the site, the house had been built and the land around the building site was compacted soil and bedrock. There was also a 10-foot elevation change between the home's raised floor and the dirt surrounding it. "This was a stunning yet wild headland—highly

Develop places in your garden that you love to be in. Here, the owners' "Sunset Terrace," where they sit nearly every night to watch the sun set over Mahone Bay. Sedges such as *Carex pensylvanica* surround the patio and soften the transition from house to terrace.





after ↗

sensitive and damaged by its industrial past as a whaling station and by new construction activities,” Burt says. “It had shallow soils over bedrock, salt air, and strong winds—a harsh triumvirate for integrating new structure and establishing new plantings that look like they occurred naturally.” Burt and the homeowners discovered four areas that would require their focus: connecting the house to the land, placing the deck and terrace so they look integrated with the property, restoring the woodland, and reinvigorating the forest floor.

To begin reconnecting the home to the property, Burt added a transitional terrace, steps, a deck, and platforms around the home; the deck, steps and platforms were all made from the same weathered ipe wood. She also brought plantings up to the edge of the home to give the appearance that the house had been lifted into place. “I wanted it to look like a helicopter set the house in the forest,” Burt says.

They also wanted the terraces to sit below the house to preserve the views, which presented a number of challenges. Being so close to the Atlantic shoreline, the deck and terrace would need to withstand heavy weather and storm surges. Burt constructed a 5-foot-tall concrete wall on the more exposed side of the house and added a deck above the wall. Then she placed blast rock, salvaged from the construction debris, below the wall for added protection and to break up wave energy. “It’s beautiful and acts as a breakwater,” Burt says. On the more protected side of the house, surrounded by a small inlet, a slate flagstone terrace was added closer to the water. “We watch the most dazzling sunsets imaginable from this terrace,” Henderson Fahnestock says. “It overlooks Mahone Bay, and we can see bald eagles, hummingbirds, and chipmunks. We feel part of the natural world here.”

As she did with the house, Burt



## CONNECT HOUSE TO LAND



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To connect the house to its surrounding, plant natives right up to the foundation. Burt placed a smattering of natives next to the home on both sides of the path and beyond. Plantings include serviceberry, bayberry, arctic raspberry, lowbush blueberry, cinnamon fern, twinflower, and creeping snowberry.

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**“I WANTED IT TO LOOK LIKE A HELICOPTER SET THE HOUSE IN THE FOREST.”**





## READ THE SOIL

Soils on the property ranged from 0 to 30 inches deep. In areas with deeper soil, white spruce and balsam fir from an abandoned Christmas tree farm were planted close together to emulate how the existing woods had grown naturally. Smaller shrubs like bayberry were added where soil was thinner. In spots that had less than a foot of soil, kinnikinnick, Pennsylvania sedge, and ivory sedge were planted. Letting the soil dictate planting, as it would naturally, keeps the design from looking contrived.



before ↗



↖ after

designed the deck and terrace to blend into the site—the deck constructed of natural ipe wood, the terrace of locally sourced slate flagstone. The surrounding plants also went through a rigorous selection process. “I knew we weren’t going to plant petunias,” Henderson Fahnstock says. Instead, directly around the deck and terrace, they planted grasses. Native Pennsylvania sedge was used around the Sunset Terrace; nonnative blue oat grass was used above the concrete wall and breakwater. Beyond the deck and terrace and along paths that connect the house, garage, and guesthouse, a plethora of native plants provide for wildlife: bunchberry, lowbush blueberry, *Rubus arcticus*, lingonberry, and *Empetrum eamesii*. “Low-growing *Carex eburnea*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*, and groundcover mats make a seamless transition from Nova Scotia blue gravel paths to taller native trees and shrubs,” Burt says. “In moister areas we added more cinnamon ferns. We planted about 895 of them for a fern dell, sited in a low-lying part of the property.”

Restoring the forest immediately surrounding the home made the biggest visual impact. For ideas on where to begin, the team looked to the surrounding woods, which are filled with a mix of balsam fir and white spruce.

“We wanted any new trees to look natural and windswept like the existing trees,” Burt says.

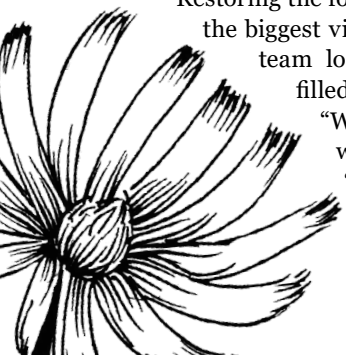
“We were also fortunate to find a Christmas

tree farm that the owner had let go, and it happened to have a lot of balsam fir. The trees were unkempt and fuzzy, just like we wanted.” Ultimately, about 1,200 trees were added to the property—mainly balsam fir but also white spruce, black spruce, alders, and gray birch. Burt’s team planted them close together as they would appear in nature, to mimic the adjacent forest and allow for natural succession to occur. Where there was deeper soil to lend support, they planted larger trees. Where the soil was thin, they planted shrubs, ferns, and mat-forming plants such as low blueberry.

The restoration’s final stage involved returning native species to the forest floor near the home and along the 1/2-mile entry road. To achieve immediate erosion control, naturalization, and visual impact, the area was carpeted with large scoops of groundcovers, mosses, and other species salvaged from a forested area slated for demolition at a local quarry. “In each scoop I often counted 13 or more different species growing together,” Burt says. “It would have been difficult to plant like this by hand.”

Now moss grows heavily on the property. “One key indicator of forest health is the presence of old man’s beard lichen growing on fir trees,” Burt says. It blends with the ancient forest that surrounds it. “I take people to the site, and they get out of the car, tour the property for a half hour and then say, ‘OK, now show me the stuff you’ve done,’” she says. “That’s the ultimate compliment.”

**“I KNEW WE WEREN’T GOING TO PLANT PETUNIAS.”**





## USE RUGGED MATERIALS

Weathered wood decking, board-formed concrete walls, and blast rock left over from construction protect the house from storm surges and strong weather. Materials like these look natural to the area. A concrete bowl on the corner of the deck is filled with stones collected from the adjacent cobble beach. “It just wouldn’t work to fill the bowls with flowers,” Burt says. Blue oat grass, the only nonnative used on the project, fills the planters.



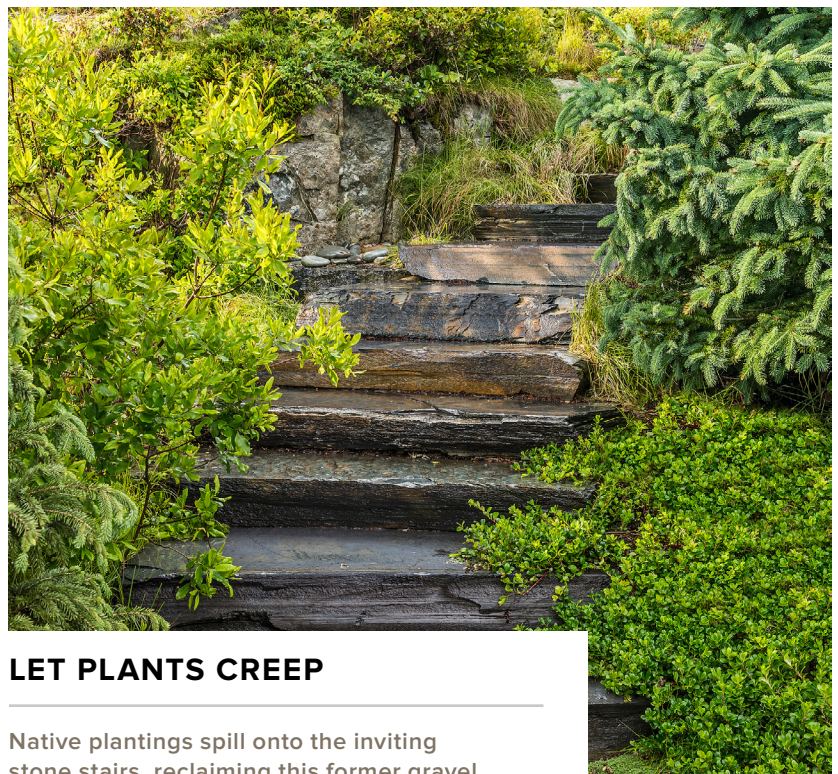
## RETURN THE NATIVES

Along the path to the guest cottage, new native plantings restore the damaged landscape. To address the damage done during construction, 895 cinnamon ferns were reintroduced along with 150 male ferns. Other plantings include white spruce, lowbush blueberry, bunchberry, twinflower, and creeping snowberry.



## REBUILD TRANSITIONS

Groundcover and mosses slated for demolition at a quarry site were relocated along the verges of the entry road to blend with the balsam fir forest. The replanting of the forest floor and the verges included groundcover mats of arctic raspberry, lowbush blueberry, cinnamon fern, twinflower, creeping snowberry, Schreber’s moss, haircap moss, plume moss, and stair-step moss.



## LET PLANTS CREEP

Native plantings spill onto the inviting stone stairs, reclaiming this former gravel embankment. Plantings here include kinnikinnick, Pennsylvania sedge, bristleleaf sedge, bunchberry, lowbush blueberry, bayberry, and white spruce.