

THE MAGAZINE of *SPLENDID HOMES and GARDENS* • MAY/JUNE 2016

DESIGN

NEW ENGLAND

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LIVING FROM
CAPE COD TO
THE GREEN
MOUNTAINS



DESIGN
A BLADE OF GRASS

Wonderland

A small backyard becomes a children's delight of wildlife and plantings — and the grown-ups like it, too

WRITTEN BY REGINA COLE • PHOTOGRAPHED BY KINDRA CLINEFF

STANDING AT THE edge of the koi pond is Lukas Sinclair of Sydney, Australia, who was visiting his cousins in Newton, Massachusetts. Fed by recirculating water dropping from a stone outcrop, the man-made pond is home to a school of well-fed fish.



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GARDEN

THE POND'S EDGE, which is shaded by large trees on neighboring property, is planted with evergreens, threadleaf Japanese maples, and river birch, as well as aquatic plants such as yellow pond lily and arrowleaf.



DAVID SINCLAIR and Sandra Luikenhuis (ABOVE) stand in the garden with (FROM LEFT) their nephew Lukas and their children, Madeline, Benjamin, and Natalie Sinclair. Madeline walks Charlie, the family pet (LEFT), along a fieldstone path planted with woodland shrubs.

Most suburban homeowners want yards with grassy lawns and no snakes. David Sinclair and Sandra Luikenhuis, however, see their quarter-acre property in Newton, Massachusetts, as an opportunity to avoid a chemical-driven landscape and encourage wildlife of all kinds. It is a place where their three children, Madeline, 12, Natalie, 10, and Benjamin, 8, can wander through deep thickets, feed fish, and watch birds and insects. A ribbon snake they named Pumba visits regularly. There is not a scrap of lawn anywhere.

Luikenhuis, who studied molecular biology and genetics in her native Germany, says: "It takes a lot of work and a lot of chemicals to maintain a lawn. David and I agreed that instead of that kind of monoculture, it's a lot more interesting, as well as a lot more eco-friendly, to have a lot of different species."

Sinclair, who is well known for his research at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the mechanisms of aging, agreed that



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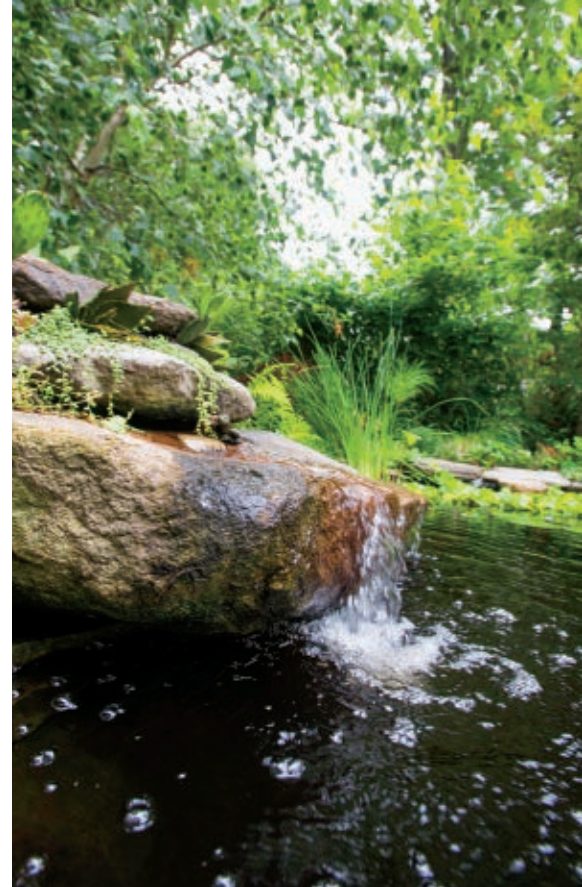


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GARDEN



WHILE MANY OF the plantings are native species, designer Tom Wilhelm makes no apologies for including showy plants such as Japanese maples and tuberous begonias (ABOVE LEFT) that bring architecture and color to the garden. A granite outcrop (ABOVE RIGHT) hides water pipes while creating a waterfall that recirculates into the koi pond. Lukas follows his cousin Benjamin (LEFT) as they leap from stone to stone around the pond, where the koi are always ready for a handout.

the backyard should provide educational opportunities for the children by harboring songbirds and other wild animals. A native Australian, he also endorses his countrymen's penchant for anything that takes place out of doors. He and Luikenhuis wanted a three-season family gathering space and outdoor dining area, and to bring their vision to life, they engaged Tom Wilhelm, senior landscape designer at A Blade of Grass in Wayland, Massachusetts.

"Installing a lawn would have been difficult because there is so much shade cast by tall trees on abutting properties," Wilhelm says. "So it was wonderful when their first order of business was 'No lawn!' They told me that they want their gardens to delight their children, to educate them, and to entertain them."

Set on a quiet cul-de-sac, the property abuts Kennard Park, a 32-acre Newton conservation area that, in turn, abuts an additional 100 acres of Brookline, Massachusetts, conservation land. Thus, the house lot appears much larger as it blends into the adjoining woods. The conservation land includes fields, forests, a large pond, and miles of hiking trails.

"There was a lot of programming in a very small space," Wilhelm says. "The backyard only measures about 2,000 square feet. They wanted a play set, a fireplace, a patio, a fish pond, walking paths, and screening plantings. Sandra and David said we should create hidden corners for the children to explore, and also to plant shrubs that screen the neighbors' houses so that the garden would feel private."



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GARDEN



The centerpiece of Wilhelm's design is a koi pond with recirculating water that spills from a rock outcrop. Surrounded by blueberry bushes, viburnum, Solomon's seal, hydrangeas, astilbe, and other shade-loving plants, the pond is home to fish that have learned to take food out of the children's hands.

"We get frogs and dragonflies that lay eggs and make the fish happy," Luikenhuis says. "Deer come and drink water out of the pond. In the winter, the koi go to the bottom and rest. It was designed to be about 3 feet deep, which is deep enough so that the fish can overwinter."

The plantings are especially beautiful during the spring and fall, she says. "In the spring, there are about 1,000 bulbs blooming."

A PAVED FLAGSTONE patio focused around a granite fireplace (FACING PAGE, TOP) provides comfortable seating and is a favorite family gathering place. The right edge of the terrace, planted with a boxwood hedge, overlooks the koi pond. On the deck (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM), a stone wall runs perpendicular to the house and anchors the grill. It also hides gas and electric lines and hosts lighting.

“They had an awful deck at the back of the house,” Wilhelm recalls. “We designed a new deck that has a stone wall perpendicular to the house. That wall acts as a backdrop and hides the gas line for the grill and the wiring for the lights.” The inspiration for the stonework, which is actually a veneer over a poured-concrete wall, came from stone walls Wilhelm saw at the Heritage Museum & Gardens in Sandwich, Massachusetts.

The deck has a dining table and chairs; electric heaters make it an outdoor dining room usable from spring to fall. “We had dinner out there in early March, and we love to eat there on chilly autumn nights,” Luikenhuis says.

Adjoining the deck is an expansive patio. Paved with fieldstones laid in a geometric pattern, it has a tall stone fireplace at one end. Overlooking the pond, the patio is a popular family gathering place that affords views of the surrounding nature.

The waterfall spilling into the koi pond attracts birds that use the pond as a bath on quiet mornings. A path hidden behind the waterfall is lined with white astilbe, rodgersia, and hostas and is a favorite of the children. Varieties of hydrangea, especially loved by Luikenhuis, grow throughout the yard. Begonias, brugmansia, and other tender plants bring color.

“We used native species as much as possible,” Wilhelm says. “But our biggest focus was to introduce variety.”

Even though “the paths have to be weeded,” Wilhelm says, the maintenance of this garden is considerably less onerous than a lawn would have been. “Everything grows and fills in, so after a spring cleanup, there is really not so much that needs to be done.”

On a recent afternoon, the children showed off their backyard to a cousin visiting from Australia. After running and jumping over paths and stones, they gather at the edge of the pond and wait for Pumba to make an appearance. ■

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