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Say It With Flowers

Landscape designer Jim Douthit's own lush and colorful suburban-Boston yard speaks to his passion for his work and his enthusiasm for life.

TEXT BY LISA E. HARRISON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES MAYER

ABOVE: To separate the patio from the driveway and frame the view, homeowner and landscape designer Jim Douthit used yew hedges, which have a nice structure and rich, dark-green color. RIGHT: Free-standing fieldstone walls were built as a backdrop for the perennial gardens and as a buffer from the road.

Jim Douthit tells a great story. The one about how he stumbled into the landscaping business and wound up founding one of Greater Boston's preeminent outfits is an especially good one.

Having grown up in Hawaii, he was working as a merchant marine on cruise ships when he decided to move to the East Coast. He took a job waiting tables in Brookline's Coolidge Corner and enrolled in nursing school. But, "I would have been the Angel of Death," he jokes—"really popular with the patients, but not at all into the important details like counting pills."

A part-time summer gig working for a man who created





high-end gardens and planters took him by surprise. “I just loved it,” he remembers, “I fell hard; I couldn’t see straight.” His passion ignited, he began taking gardening workshops and reading stacks of books on everything from perennials to composting and irrigation.

Douthit struck out on his own with one client, and for the first eight years his talents spread via word of mouth. Now, twenty-four years later, the scope of a Blade of Grass has vastly expanded, becoming an award-winning operation

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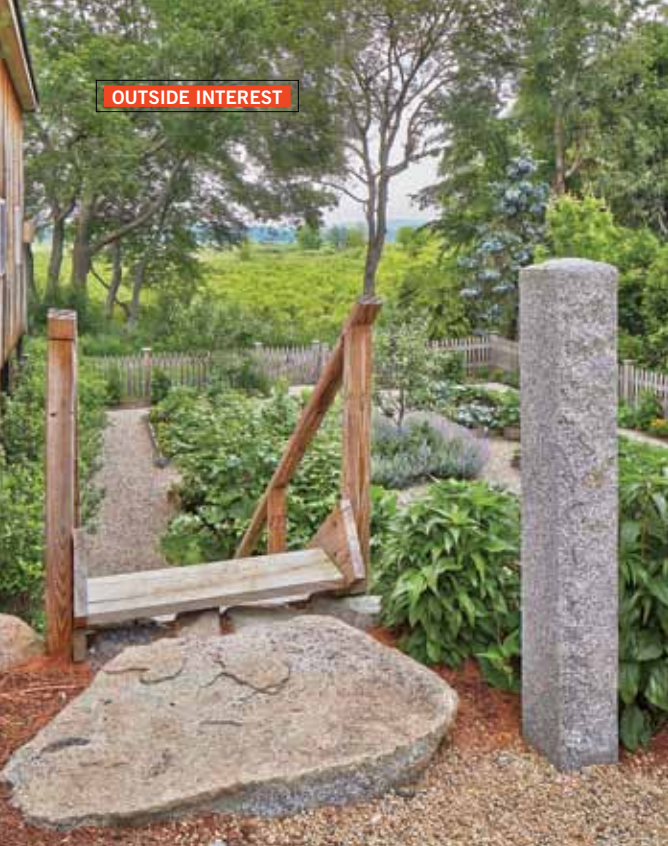
based in Wayland, Massachusetts. Douthit and his team, which numbers ninety during peak season, do it all: landscape design, building, installation, and maintenance.

“Busy” is an understatement, which explains why the designer never found time to work on his own yard. “I was the classic cobbler’s kid with no shoes,” he admits. “For so many years, I was all about the company. We used to grill in the driveway!”

That all changed when Douthit and

his partner, Chris Houghtaling, bought a beautiful circa-1811 farmhouse and barn on a one-acre site in Boston’s MetroWest area. The landscaping was nonexistent,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Douthit incorporated a split-rail entry gate, which is appropriate to the age of the house. He swaps out the plantings in the window boxes seasonally; apricot-colored begonias provide a nice summertime pop of color. Douthit is pictured in front of the entry to the patio and side porch. Rough granite steps suit the farmhouse vibe. A big-leaf banana plant near the fire pit reminds the designer of his childhood in Hawaii.



and the house was very exposed.

“What I did in our place is what I do for most of my clients,” says Douthit. First, he screened out the views he didn’t

want (roads and neighbors’ houses); next he framed the views he did want (the property borders a river and picturesque wetlands). Finally, he devised an intricate planting plan to create lush layers and an outdoor oasis.

Douthit took a five-pronged approach to the plantings. He started with trees like hemlocks, pines, and spruces for

screening, then mixed in deciduous trees, including birches, maples, and cherries. “We put in seventy-two mature trees in three days,” he remembers.

For a visual pop, he added flowering shrubs—hydrangea, viburnum, rose of Sharon, butterfly bush, spirea, and magnolia—and planted evergreens like boxwoods, hollies, and arborvitae to frame the house. Last came the perennials (knockout roses are a favorite) and groundcover.



unstained picket fencing, and a permeable pea-stone driveway complement the design.

In addition to making the outdoor space *look* beautiful, Douthit also wanted to ensure that the yard was highly functional. As with all of his projects, the designer likes to create what he calls “outdoor rooms”—spaces that are easily accessible from the house both visually and physically. It’s important that these spaces reflect each client’s lifestyle, too. In the case of Douthit’s own house, there were a few things to consider: the couple entertains

often, Houghtaling is an avid gardener, and they’re self-described “big crazy dog people” (they have four), so they’re outside all the time.

To keep with the farmhouse aesthetic, the plan called for a lot of antique granite—note the steps, patios, and fire pit. Fieldstone walkways throughout,

FROM FACING PAGE, FAR LEFT: Douthit reclaimed unused space and took advantage of the sunny exposure by adding a kitchen garden adjacent to the barn. An unstained picket fence adds to the overall aesthetic and keeps animals (including the owners’ dogs) out of the garden. Dry-laid stone walls and an antique barn provide a beautiful backdrop for the garden.

To meet these needs, Douthit designed a large patio with both sitting and dining areas. He also added a covered porch off the kitchen, a perfect antidote to a rainy day. He morphed a patch of lawn adjacent to the barn on the far side of the property into a beautiful garden. Here Houghtaling tends to his blueberries, strawberries, and vegetables; the couple also has chickens and beehives.

The end result is a stunning yard that echoes Douthit’s personal aesthetic—full and lush—has multi-season appeal, and more than meets the fun factor (for humans *and* dogs).

Not bad for a guy who admits, “I didn’t even know what a rhododendron was when I started.” •

RESOURCES For more information about this project, see page 203.