



BEFORE



Bringing Nature Home

A reborn suburban yard welcomes lush plants, inquisitive kids, and all kinds of creatures—snakes included

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Madeline and Natalie—along with Cadie the black Lab—keep an eye out for wildlife while strolling the fieldstone path to the koi pond. The pond is deep enough that koi can overwinter at the bottom. They're helped along by an aquifer and heater. Small stone caves give them a hideout safe from those local fishing pros, the blue heron.

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On moving day a spirited young family of five started life in their new home on a kid-friendly cul-de-sac in the Boston suburbs. But outside the house, on the quarter-acre lot, it appeared all other life had moved out—permanently—leaving behind only a decrepit oak tree and a few scraggly scraps of lackluster lawn.

“It was forlorn,” Sandra Luikenhuis says. “We had no idea what to do with this yard.”

Not to say Sandra, a scientist, and husband David Sinclair—a geneticist lauded for his research on reversing the aging process—didn’t have a wish list. They were thinking patio, fire pit, some kind of water

feature, maybe a path to a nature-rich nook for the children to explore. And, here’s the kicker: no lawn.

“I was thrilled!” landscape designer Thomas Wilhelm says. “I don’t get to hear ‘No grass’ very often. I was excited about creating a landscape that would educate and entertain the kids, a backyard that’s more than just a place to kick a soccer ball around.”

The designer from the somewhat ironically named a Blade of Grass in Wayland, Massachusetts, set about summoning a little piece of paradise. First, though, he needed to wipe the slate completely clean. “The existing deck had to go,” Wilhelm says

of the splintery, builder-basic structure. “It was awful.”

Its replacement, crafted from rich mahogany, tucks under a new roof supported by classic columns. Stairs direct traffic to the side of the deck and down to the terrace, instead of straight into the outdoor dining table. The grill slips in next to a stone-veneer privacy wall. It’s American granite, sliced thin and lightweight to clad blueboard drywall.

Wilhelm used the same granite to build an outdoor fireplace, the linchpin of a new terrace, banded with 12-inch-wide blue-stone. “The fireplace is my favorite thing



Outdoor living The whole family—Sandra Luikenhuis (holding Charlie, a silky terrier/poodle mix), David Sinclair, and kids Natalie, Benjamin, and Madeline—enjoy relaxing on the terrace by the fire during the evenings and eating dinner on the new deck. Infrared heaters team with the fireplace to guarantee comfort even in early spring and late fall. **Plants** The garden, which abuts conservation land on one side, is home to many native New England plants, but containers offer a chance to enjoy other species, like this shrimp plant (*Justicia brandegeana*). Its red flower bracts tempt hummingbirds and butterflies.

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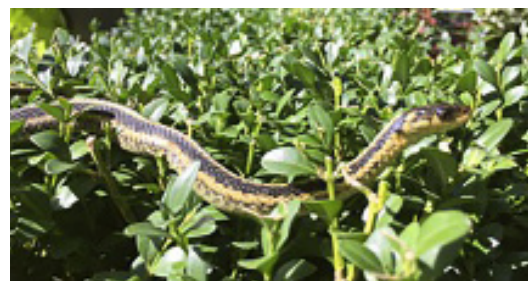


Garden layout The renovation project helped the house flow easily to the expanded deck and down to the terrace, with a seating area built around a stone fireplace. From there, fieldstone paths lead to the koi pond, serene nooks, and to the conservation land that adjoins David and Sandra's property.

Alfresco rooms Teak furnishings on the deck (left) and the terrace (below left) stand up to New England weather. David loves to grill dinner on the deck, where heaters and outdoor lighting (paths also feature low-voltage lights) keep gatherings going even after the sun sets. Container plantings connect to the garden.

Secluded nooks Pathside benches, a hammock, and the pond—circled with flat stones—beckon for reading, daydreaming, and spotting wildlife, including Pumba the snake (below).

Plant The Sinclairs' potted lemon tree lives in the garden during warm months, then overwinters indoors.



about the garden," Wilhelm says. "It fits the way this family entertains. It's more sophisticated than s'mores by a fire pit, but still casual. The snap, crackle, pop and the beauty of the flames draws everyone in."

Leading from the terrace, fieldstone paths with moss joints wind to secluded reading nooks and a koi pond fed by a tiny gem of a waterfall.

"The pond is the focal point for us," Sandra says. "We go out several times a day to look at the plants and feed the fish. Birds fly in for a bath, deer get a drink, frogs hop around, and the local ribbon snake makes an appearance."

Wildlife also can't resist fruit-laden shrubs like viburnum and blueberry, part of a plantscape that includes bulbs, rhododendrons, astilbes, red-twig dogwood, hostas, and hydrangeas. "I designed for beautiful four-season interest," Wilhelm says.

He called on 'Green Giant' arborvitae to act as a living privacy screen. "They're hardy, deer-resistant, and do great in shade," the designer says. "Plus, their very narrow, vertical habit suits a tight setting." Additionally, they're resistant to insects that, sadly, are devastating native hemlocks.

The naturalistic garden means low-maintenance, homeowner and designer

agree. "It looks good without doing much at all," Sandra says. "We're working with nature, which means we don't have to fight nature to keep it going. Everything's happy."

The happiness spreads to the Sinclair kids, now devoted nature lovers who let their joy overflow in a letter to Wilhelm: "Our garden is like a mini adventure park. There are places to run and hide, flowers to inspect, rocks and walls to climb, and many more fun things. Our koi eat from our hands, and we have a resident snake named Pumba! We love our garden and never want it to change." ■

Landscape designer: Thomas Wilhelm
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