

A COUNTRY COURTYARD

BY LAURA JEAN WHITCOMB

PHOTOS BY GARY SUMMERTON AND JOHN SULLIVAN



“Go have fun” is one of the best ways to work, says landscape architect John Sullivan. And the landscape he created for a Claremont, N.H., farmhouse is a great example.





After: the front entrance features granite steps and a garden of lady's mantle, huchera, periwinkle and astilbes underneath an existing crabapple tree.

John Sullivan isn't the type of landscape architect that looks at your land, goes away for several months, then comes back with a plan. Just ask Maureen Cullen, a homeowner in Claremont, N.H.

"I had a drainage problem in the backyard. Water accumulated under the house. I needed someone who knew how to save my house and make it look gorgeous. That was the challenge that I gave John," she recalls. "But during our first meeting, he asked me, 'What is your vision?' I wanted an Irish country garden. And that conversation was the beginning of an awesome working relationship we have developed over time."

"It's important that people have ownership in the project," says Sullivan, owner of JSLA, LLC, a landscape architecture design/build firm based in North Sutton, N.H. "Landscape is personal. It's important that people are on board with the process as it develops so it is exactly what they want."

Water in the Ditch

The old farmhouse was the home Cullen had been waiting for all her life. "Despite the landscaping, the house was gorgeous," the nurse practitioner says.

The farmhouse, Sullivan surmises, was probably one of the first built on the street. The house sits at the bottom of a hill, and everything drains toward the house. When another house was built above the farmhouse, the drainage just got worse. The backyard was a puddle, the driveway was a soggy mess, and the sills, the house's timber framework, were rotting out.

Sullivan and Cullen came up with a plan to relocate the parking area. With the previous landscape design, people would pull into the driveway — past the puddles and the front door — and enter through a side door. Cullen wanted to

improve the front entrance, make it more welcoming, so it would be used as the main entrance.

Sullivan created an inviting front area with lady's mantle, huchera,



Before: the front entrance before Sullivan went to work.

periwinkle and an array of astilbes underneath the existing crabapple tree. He poured extra material on the cement slab — to reuse what was already there — capped it with a large, flat stone and layered granite steps in front of it. The side access to the house — which had a ramp made

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out of tar — now has a patio with a mini-seating area in a “warm, sunny pocket of the yard, which brought the two entrances together,” says Sullivan.

“We talked about basics — moving earth away from the barn and building a retaining wall,” says Cullen. “But then John would say, ‘A stone patio would look nice.’ And I would say, ‘Hey, what if we...’ and he would say, ‘Hey, that is a great idea.’ He is perfectly capable of sticking to the original idea, but it was great that it kept mushrooming. The flow of ideas back and forth is wonderful.”

I See a Whale

Sullivan started landscaping and working with stone while in high school, and has worked with a variety of landscape design firms since then. But he wasn’t primarily designing outside spaces like he is now. So when he relocated to the Sunapee area in 1996, he



Sullivan is working on a sunken patio, which is not only gorgeous but also directs water away from the farmhouse. “Stone does a lot of the talking for you,” he says. “But it’s an acquired eye. I frequently go on hikes to see how these amazing things occur in nature and get inspired. Nature does it like no one else.”



Sullivan planted a Stewartia tree off the screen porch along with several other sun-loving plants in the area of the stone retaining gardens. “A portion of this front bed was used for squash and cucumbers, as the leaf adds a nice texture and is functional,” he says.

decided to get back to landscape.

Sullivan notes landscaper Jim Baker and landscape architect Thomas Church as two of his major influences, but it was a Concord, N.H., project that shaped JSLA’s mission. “It was a public work project, and you were working with volunteers on a community-based effort,” he says. “People had ownership in the project.”

When Sullivan started his own firm in 1997, he included client input as a core component of his business philosophy. “I adopted the idea that I am changing people’s environments, which is helping them change their life in the way they experience it,” Sullivan says. And getting people invested in that change starts with the initial meeting. “I interview them to learn about their family’s lifestyle. Do they like art or athletics? When are they most likely to be outside? One family told me that they are on a boat all summer, so the color in the garden doesn’t matter to them during the summer season.”

Cullen and Sullivan probably don’t have the typical landscaper/client relationship. Take, for example, their morn-

ing meetings. Sullivan had unearthed stone on the property, but, a year later, they still weren’t sure what they were going to do with it. Cullen looked at the stone and said, “I see a Labrador retriever lying down.” Sullivan looked and said, “I see a whale.” Soon they knew what to do with the stone: the rock became a whale in a whale garden with a sea of hostas for movement and a “spout” courtesy of a plant called snakeroot.

“I love when people start to take charge of the design as the space develops. It starts to feel different and it should,” says Sullivan. “I always ask the client, ‘Is this what you expected? Do you like how it is developing?’ It opens up a door for discussion to make sure the landscaping is right for them. I tell them I’m only here for a short time — you have to live with it.”

My Little Acre

There’s only an acre of land around the farmhouse, but it feels like much more. This is because the backyard is layered into compartments — smaller garden areas that are in scale with the farmhouse. “It’s not one, large, linear

backyard,” describes Sullivan. “It’s really three sections — a sunken patio, a wildflower area, and a winding staircase to the side yard. They are connected visually, but you can’t see them all at once. The landscape draws you in.”

“Every place you go, there’s a new little secret,” agrees Cullen. “You start walking through, and there’s a nice garden, a nice patio, then a set of stones you haven’t discovered yet. Then you walk further and there’s a little garden over here, and a tiny glimpse of something else that you might want to see. Trees and bushes trick your eye, and prevent you from seeing the next section until you actually get there. Every time you walk around, it is different.”

Now people pull into the driveway, and use the front door. Sullivan moved the drainage ditch, took out a few trees to make the swale wider to handle more flow, and few people would realize that this decorative garden area controls all excess water. “It’s gone from a water problem to an amazing thing that has

developed over the past four years,” says Cullen. “Everything has come to play.”

Which brings Sullivan to their client meeting last fall. “John, it’s been four years,” Cullen said.

“Are you telling me that I need to graduate?” Sullivan replied.

“No, I’ll find something for you to do for a mighty long time,” Cullen said. She adds: “After four years, John’s a member of our family. He always will be contracted to maintain it, and we’ll see him at least once or twice a year forever.” ■



John Sullivan is trained in the art of stone masonry. “I like working with stone,” he says. “For me, it helps organize the space. A landscape designer once told me that ‘A garden without stone is like a body without bones.’ And he’s right; stones are the backbone when plants aren’t in bloom.”

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