



## Like Mother, Like Son

The birds and bees, bugs and butterflies in this eco-friendly Mystic landscape can thank a mom for inspiring the next generation.

**☞ If you've ever sold Girl Scout cookies or** hoped people would support your charity run, you're no stranger to hitting up those close to you for money. In 2015, a Long Island woman asked her son to help fund a small pollinator garden for her retirement community. In the happy way of certain good ideas, the request inspired a second eco-friendly project.

The son and his wife were building a home on a salt marsh in Mystic where landscaping was going to be key. The house, designed by Newport, Rhode Island-based architect James Estes, would consist of three modernist pavilions, dressed unobtrusively in white cedar shingles and gray metal roofs, forming a loose U around a street-side parking courtyard. The land at the back of the structures sloped down to the ocean and offered expansive views of Fishers Island. With their

Essex-based landscape architect, Anne Penniman, the homeowners were already thinking ecologically, planning to save two specimen red oak trees, add native species to the shoreline, minimize lawns, and leave a field strewn with boulders untouched. Why not go even further and make a pollinator habitat?



**ABOVE:** Much of the backyard is a boulder-strewn glacial moraine that has been left largely untouched. A scree garden and a wildflower meadow are in the distance. The granite paver path to the left leads to the dock. **LEFT:** At the front of the house is the parking courtyard with a wildflower meadow and a single red cedar, neatly defined by a granite curb.

| TEXT BY DEBRA SPARK | PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEATHER CONLEY PHOTOGRAPHY |





**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** A view from the road shows a specimen red oak, native plantings, a granite retaining wall, and granite banding at the driveway's entrance. Granite steps at the back of the house lead to the seaside gardens. A saltwater marsh lies beyond the wild meadow. A granite paver path connects the main pavilion to the guest pavilion.

With that thought in mind, botanist and landscape designer James Cowen of North Stonington's Cowen EcoDesign joined the team. He had defined the wetlands prior to the site design. Now, he was going to use his expertise to select plant matter that would attract pollinators and butterflies to an upper meadow at the front of the house and a lower meadow along the shoreline.

Some clients, says Penniman, want as much lawn as possible, but not this couple. "They were going to go with meadows and a messier landscape, which is inherent in ecological design." Messier is relative, however, as the clean lines of the hardscaping and distinct nature of the individual gardens create tidy areas, in which plant matter can go wild.

The street side of the lot has a locally quarried granite retaining wall and flush granite banding at the entrance to a gravel parking courtyard. Native trees and shrubs (including bayberry, winterwood, highbush blueberry, and tupelo) further delineate the property from the road and neighboring land. Red



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cedars dot the front yard, and a wildflower meadow fills the space around both the parking courtyard and the granite paver walkway that links the main pavilion to the guest house.

Out back, slabs of granite form a staircase that connects the back porch to the seaside gardens. Here, the different soil conditions as the land slopes toward the water allow for a range of gardens with appealing variety. In descending order is a kidney-shaped rain garden irrigated by roof runoff, an



### PROJECT TEAM

**Landscape design:** Anne Penniman, Anne Penniman Associates, and James Cowen, Cowen EcoDesign

**Landscape contractor:** Landscape Creations

**House architecture:** James Estes, Estes/Twombly Architects

**Builder:** Steve Ray, Steve Ray Construction



## Outside Interest

A view of the house with the scree garden in the foreground. Landscape architect Anne Penniman chose plants that like the sandy soil here, including blue-eyed grass, common juniper, bearberry, wild pink lupine, and small yellow wild indigo.

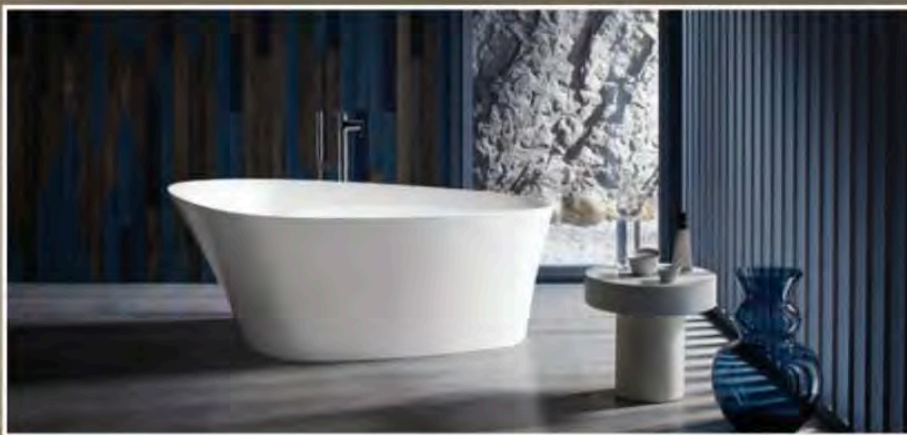
**FACING PAGE:** The wall incorporates irregular solid rectangles of locally quarried granite that are fitted imperfectly together with smaller stones to fill the gaps.



existing boulder-dotted glacial moraine that was left largely untouched, a mown area, a scree garden with dry-tolerant plants, and finally the coastal meadow, which extends to a neighboring property that the couple also owns.

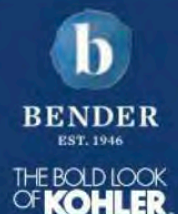
The upper meadow limits itself to white echinacea, butterfly weed, and two varieties of switchgrass.

The coastal meadow is another story, with numerous colorful native and salt-tolerant species including yarrow, lupine, black-eyed Susan, evening primrose, bee balm, seaside goldenrod, false indigo, beard-tongue, and beach pea. "Insects evolved with native plants," says Cowen. Bringing back native insects means bringing back the birds that eat them. "If it's



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**“WHEN YOU WORK AGAINST NATURE BY DOING SOMETHING ARTIFICIAL, THEN YOU’VE GOT TO FIGHT NATURE ALL THE TIME TO KEEP IT FROM COMING BACK,” SAYS THE HUSBAND.**

not providing habitat value for wildlife, why plant it?” he asks. The homeowners agree. As the husband says, “Grass is just an artificial monoculture. It’s an ecological dead zone. The concept of having a vibrant ecosystem that supports the pollinators totally makes sense.”

In other words, “Thanks, Mom.”

Conveniently, the meadows are low maintenance, and the coastal meadow (which grows to about three feet) does not obstruct the view, as invasive shoreline grasses once did. “When you work with nature, you realize nature works with you, but when you work against it by doing something artificial, then you’ve got to fight nature all the time to keep it from coming back,” says the husband.

Nature’s gifts, in this case, are the butterflies and



blooming wildflowers. But a desire for beauty is only part of what the homeowners are after. “It’s just the right thing to do, to support nature in any way we can,” the husband says. “Hopefully people will replace lawns or parts of lawns with pollinating plants, and we will have lots of places for butterflies.”

The mother’s garden inspired the next generation. Perhaps, her son’s will inspire the rest of us. ■■■

**RESOURCES:** For more information about the professionals involved in this project, see page 158.

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