

landscape style

An old-fashioned garden makes a vintage home picture perfect. By Karen Di Milia



This side garden is newly worthy of Suzanne and Frederic Johnson's old home (right).

We're people who are in quest of a project, let's face it!" says Suzanne Sullivan, with a laugh. It's a perfect summer afternoon on the wide and welcoming wrap-around porch at the home that Suzanne and her husband Frederic Johnson share with their three dogs: Puck, a Westie; and Finne and Brickeens, a sweet pair of enormous Leonbergers. The restored turn-of-the-century farmhouse sits high on an irregular-shaped 6,000-square-foot lot in southwest Portland, surrounded by tiers of flower beds and shrubs. The land is steep, but through a combination of stairs, retaining walls and foot paths, the skillfully contoured garden is accessible for both strolling and gardening.



Installed just two years ago, the garden seems quite mature, with a distinctly old-fashioned, nostalgic feeling that complements the vintage structure. "We just really love old homes," says Suzanne. "That's one of the reasons we were excited about this property. We wanted the yard to be in keeping with the house, to respect the integrity of the home and to be compatible with it."

Suzanne and Frederic are originally Midwesterners who spent some time living in San Francisco before making the move to the Portland area three years ago. "We are chronic renovators and had renovated two houses previously," Suzanne says. "Our first home in Chicago was a 1906 foursquare. We lovingly restored it, paying attention to every detail in the house." The Portland farmhouse had been remodeled prior to the couple's purchase and didn't require that level of attention.

"It was pretty clear from the time we looked at the house that the big project would be the yard," says Frederic. "It begged for renovation and landscaping." The stony hillside sloped steeply down to the curb and was planted with vinca and some parched rhododendrons and hydrangeas.

"We recognized immediately that it was too big a project for us to do ourselves," he says. "It required bringing in professionals and getting their ideas."

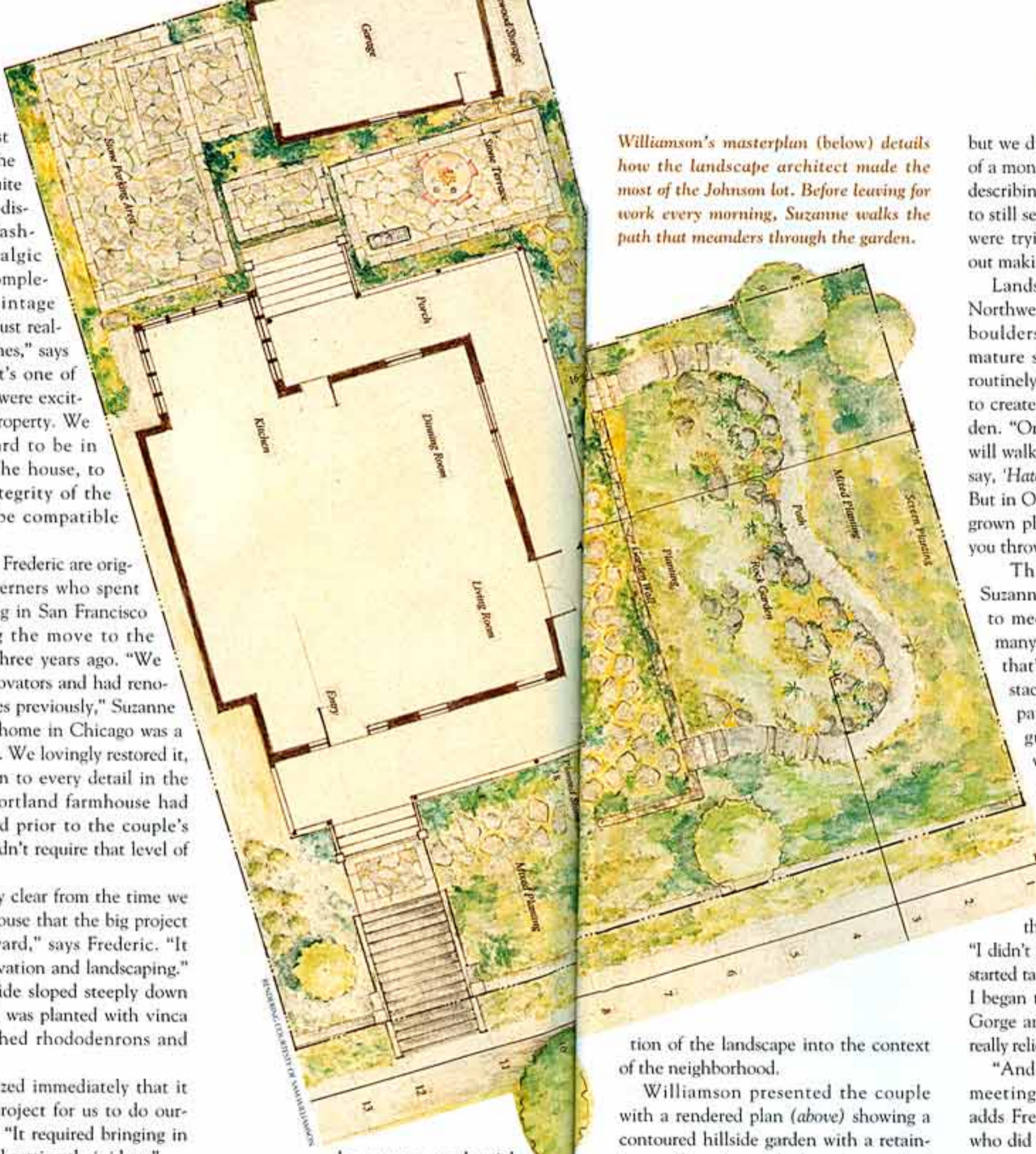
Through an architect they knew, the couple met landscape architect Sam Williamson, who has practiced for more than 10 years and has been located in Portland since 1997. Williamson has designed landscapes in many parts of the United States, focusing primarily on residential work.

"We chose Sam because he had fresh ideas and I felt he really listened to what we were interested in," says Frederic. "We'd be able to have an involvement in the project, and felt that Sam would

be easy to work with and would be comfortable with that. Suzanne doesn't have a lot of time to spend in the garden, but it's important to her. One of the main features that we wanted was something that would create a sense of relaxation and an unfolding experience while walking through the garden. Sam picked up on that and incorporated it into the design. The garden isn't big, but it's very nice to walk through."

In addition to the challenges of the site, Williamson discussed the integra-

Williamson's masterplan (below) details how the landscape architect made the most of the Johnson lot. Before leaving for work every morning, Suzanne walks the path that meanders through the garden.



tion of the landscape into the context of the neighborhood.

Williamson presented the couple with a rendered plan (above) showing a contoured hillside garden with a retaining wall at the curb, low dry-stacked stone walls and circulation throughout the garden by stone paths and stairs. Planting beds allowed for a rock garden, shrub border and cottage gardens. "It was amazing to have him come here and show us the plan and say, 'This is what we want to do,'" Frederic says, recalling his reaction to the proposed design. "We were committed to the project and very happy with everything we saw."

Williamson delights in recontouring a landscape. "We were trying to create some places that were a little bit flatter,

but we didn't want to try to do it in sort of a monumental way," says Williamson, describing his approach. "We wanted it to still seem connected to the street. We were trying to create level spaces without making it too engineered."

Landscape contractor Horticulture Northwest preserved the existing mossy boulders and relocated many of the mature shrubs and vinca. Williamson routinely recycles mature plant material to create an established look in the garden. "On the East Coast, more clients will walk around a property with me and say, 'Hate it . . . Hate it . . . rip it all out!' But in Oregon, people say, 'This is a full-grown plant; will you relocate it or will you throw it away?'"

The installation process gave Suzanne and Frederic an opportunity to meet and appreciate the work of many craftspeople. "We run at a pace that's fairly fast, and watching the stacked wall evolve was a lesson in patience," recalls Suzanne. "The guy who laid the stacked wall was truly an artist. He must've taken at least a month to build it. Every rock was placed lovingly and carefully."

Williamson specified Camas gray basalt for the stonework. "That was part of the learning for us," says Suzanne. "I didn't know what basalt was until they started talking about these rocks, and then I began to understand that's part of the Gorge and the geology of the area. We really relied on Sam's expertise."

"And there was also the pleasure of meeting artisans like Berkley Tack," adds Frederic, "who is the blacksmith who did the handrail. He's a joy to deal with, a terrific craftsman." The handrail is designed to echo a motif which is found on the planters at the staircase entrance from the sidewalk.

"The band on the outside of the pot is a Louis Sullivan design," says Suzanne. "We lived in Chicago—and you can't come away from Chicago without being a great lover of Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan. So we asked Berkley to pick up a sense of the design used on the planter, which you see in the railing and in the gate that he did for us as well."

Working with Williamson gave the



Before

A goal of the landscape plan was to better connect the house with the sidewalk so it felt less “perched” on a hill. Landscape architect Williamson envisioned a 3- to 4-foot-tall concrete wall, punctuated with piers, that would visually anchor the house to the street—and to the rest of the neighborhood as well.



During

couple the added bonus of meeting his associate Kailla “Kai” Platt, who became an important part of the design team. Platt was educated in landscape architecture and has a strong horticultural background. Plants have always been part of her life, a passion that was cultivated by her grandmother Jane Platt. “In a fairly small site, Suzanne and Frederic wanted a rock garden, a perennial garden, mixed shrubs—and they wanted interest all year round,” explains Platt. “Those are very doable things, especially in the Pacific Northwest, but to integrate all those elements into a small space and have them relate to the architecture of the house and the site, that was a challenge.”

Suzanne and Frederic learned that their old favorites would thrive in the friendly climate of the Pacific Northwest. “You see old friends like forsythia

and spirea—plants that we were used to in the Midwest,” says Frederic. “And they’re just so abundant here.”

Platt appreciated the enthusiasm the couple brought to the process. “Being new to the area, Suzanne or Frederic would call and say, ‘I was over on the corner of this street and that street, and I saw this plant and it looks kinda like this and I love it. I want one of those.’ And so I’d figure out what it was. There were a lot of conversations like that. What worked really well was, they were responsive and respectful of the knowledge we brought to it, and their enthusiasm and interest made it fun.”

Platt worked with Suzanne to put together a plant list that ultimately included 120 different species. Frederic remembers that day. “Kai agreed to come over for an hour on a Saturday,” he says. “She arrived with a stack of

plant books about that high, with Post-its sticking out all over them. She and Suzanne sat down and she ended up staying for three or four hours.”

“We had a wonderful time,” Suzanne says, “I didn’t come in with a wishlist but I wanted to be involved in the choice of the plants in the garden and Kai really did engage me and taught me things. She pulled out of me what I might be interested in. I was a Midwesterner and I didn’t know what would work in the Pacific Northwest. It was a joy to be exposed to things and have her suggest plants. She took many of the wonderful plants that were in her grandmother’s garden and helped me put them in this garden.”

Although the different garden areas are separated by paths and by the contours of the land, they’re tied together in the way the plants relate. “We pulled some perennials from the perennial area and put them into the rock garden,” says Platt. “Some of the more sculptural perennials made that jump really well because of their strong forms.”

“In Detroit, you experience a garden from June to October,” says Suzanne. “I began to understand that here, a garden can give you great pleasure throughout the year.”

Grasses were useful in tying together the rock garden and perennial beds. Variegated *Molinia* and Japanese blood grass are small and their wonderful texture and color work well in the rock garden, while larger grasses, like feather reed grass and zebra grass, were placed in the perennial border. To create that cottage garden feeling in an area that is shaded part of the day, Platt used

monkshood, *Thalictrum* and foxglove.

The couple has also learned about the pleasures of year-round gardening. “Sam and Kai did a wonderful job of choosing plants that work throughout the seasons,” says Suzanne. “I grew up in Detroit, where you spend many months under snow, talking to the ground, waiting for the tulips to come up. There, you experience a garden from June to October. I began to understand that here, a garden can give you great pleasure throughout the year. It unfolds—every season is an awakening.”

For winter interest, the garden includes Beautyberry (*Callicarpa*), a fountain-shaped shrub which bears small purple berries through much of the winter; three different varieties of dogwoods; *Osmanthus heterophyllus Purpureus*, an evergreen shrub with fragrant flowers in winter and early spring; and the conifers *hinoki* cypress and weeping hemlock.

Suzanne has come to appreciate the wide variety of plants that thrive in the Pacific Northwest. “The climate does a



Historic handrail or newly forged? Only their blacksmith—Berkley Tack of Ranier, Ore.—knows for sure. Actually, he fabricated the custom semi-egg-and-dart motif railing that picks up the detail on the flower planters that top the entry piers. Greg Larson Construction built the retaining wall.

lot for you—it made my thumb a little bit greener!” she says. “There’s a lot of gratification. I had a garden in the Midwest, but it didn’t give me the same positive reinforcement for all my hard labor. Here, I don’t do very much and the garden springs back at me.”

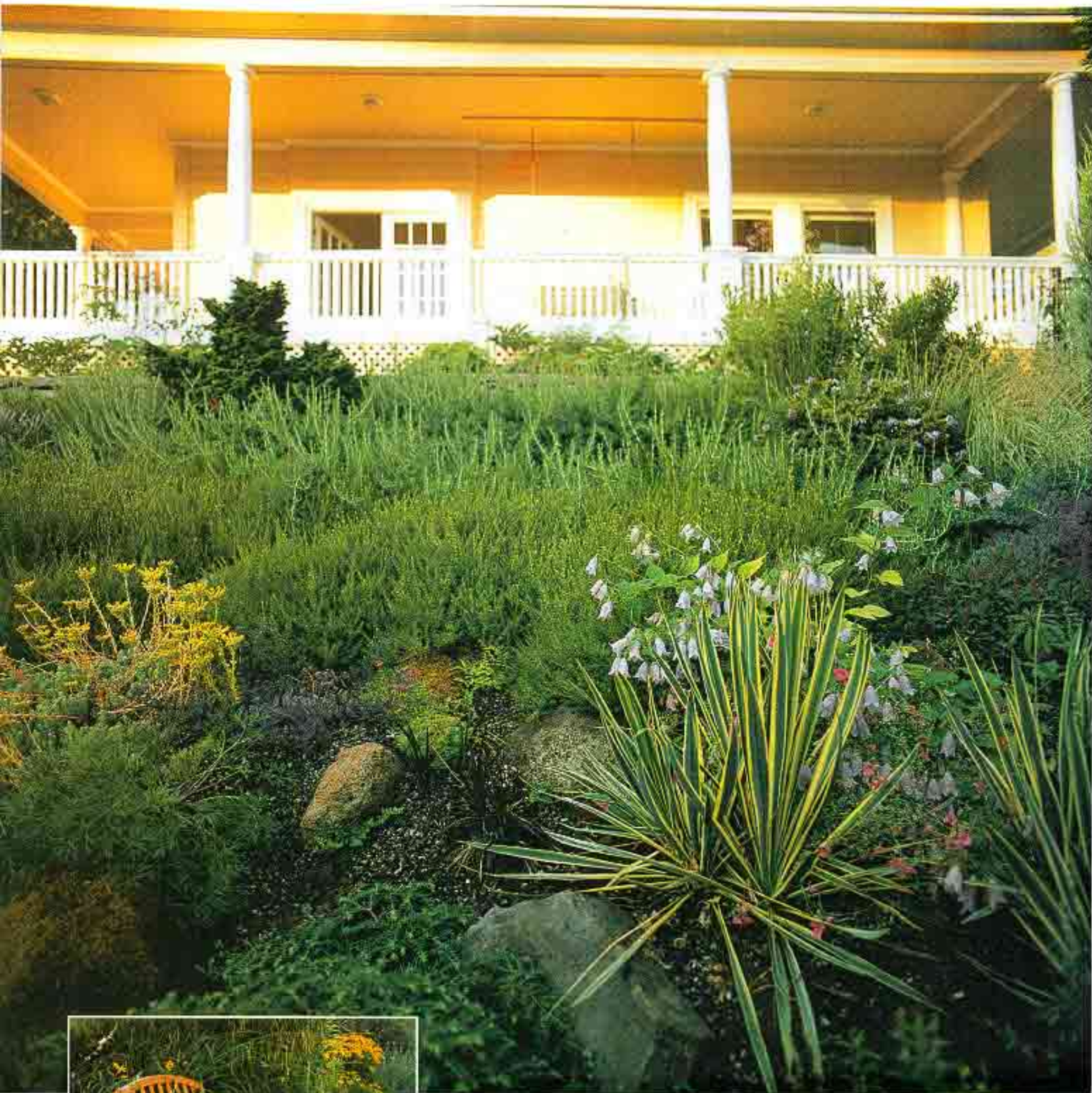
“It’s only the second full season,” Frederic muses. “In 2001, when they did the installation, it took most of the summer. I remember last year standing on the porch in early March, looking down at the yard and thinking, *This is a*



“This is the wow year,” says Frederic. “We’re just beginning to appreciate the cycle the garden goes through.”

pretty sad-looking garden. A month later everything started to grow and you could see there was nothing to worry about, the garden would look fine. This year is the wow year. We’re just beginning to appreciate the cycle it goes through. Every two weeks it recreates itself. We hate to go away for any length of time because there’s always something new blooming.”

“We had foxgloves out here this year; I couldn’t reach the top of them,” Frederic marvels. “They were gigantic. And the astilbe! We used to have astilbe in Chicago, and they were nice little plants. Our astilbe got 5 feet tall. The hydrangeas have taken over that part of the garden. Growth like that amazes us.”



A new path leads you from the front steps to a wooden bench in the garden's corner (left) before it meanders back up to the side porch (above) and continues on to the garage door.

For Suzanne, the new garden was an opportunity to incorporate memories of family into a new setting. "I put lots of plants in the garden that I remember from when I was a child," she says. "My father grew up on a farm. He kept that love of the earth and I put into this garden many of those things I'd had at

home. My dad would buy crates of tulip bulbs and we'd have to help him plant the bulbs, so dad also has been a wonderful part of this garden. I go bulb shopping in the fall and I spend way too much. But just sticking them in the ground and waiting to see what'll come up next year—that's really fun!" **ESB**