



# Picture Perfect

Chic rooms and lush landscaping define a Rockport seaside home

Cape Ann is little more than a rocky outcrop on the coast of Massachusetts, just north of Boston. At the tip of the cape is the town of Rockport, which is known for artists, fishermen, and granite. With its picturesque, rocky coastline and thriving artist community, it is the ideal place for Rocky and Jane Forsyth to enjoy their retirement. And in 2004, they found the perfect home. Well, almost perfect.

“I was looking through the real estate section of the paper one day and I saw this house,” says Jane, who lives near Boston. “It was built in 1910 and was close to the beach, so I called the real estate agent and asked if we could see it the next morning. We zoomed up to Rockport, walked in the door, and even though the house was very tired, it felt like home. We made an offer that morning.”

Over the years, several additions had been made to the house, but they were not in keeping with the original architecture and detracted from the home’s beauty. But the property had a lot of potential, and Jane knew exactly which professionals she wanted to work with to make sure it achieved that potential: architect Patrick Ahearn, interior designer Robin Pelissier, and landscape designer Stephen Bagley.

To restore the home to its original style, the earlier additions were removed; the interior was gutted; and clapboards, shingles, and shutters were added to the exterior. As the space took shape, large-scale crown molding and high wainscoting were added to the interior to bring it back to period design. The result is breathtaking, but the use of so much wood can pose a challenge for interior designers. Pelissier, however, was undaunted. “We wanted to soften some of the heaviness of the woodwork that had been applied, so we used sea grass and woven wall coverings, which are weighty enough to balance the room and stand up to the woodwork,” Pelissier says.

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PRODUCED BY MARSHA JUSCZAK

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Facing page: Rose photo by Stephen P. Bagley.





As you walk in, you enter a large living room that sets the tone for the entire house. The slightly muted colors of the fabrics were inspired by sea glass and are set off by pops of orange that brighten the space. Light blue couches are paired with armchairs upholstered in floral prints from Brunswick & Fils. “We used duck egg blues, greens, and tea-stained linen fabrics,” Pelissier says. “We wanted the space to have a little character and not look too new.”

In the dining room, McGuire rattan and bamboo chairs lend a casual elegance to the space and blur the lines between the indoors and outdoors. That sense of casual elegance continues in the kitchen, where white cabinets are set off by bright red print curtains. A breakfast nook with a small round table and barrel-back chairs looks out onto the deck and across to the ocean. But the most popular place to enjoy a meal is the bar.

“Rocky wanted a sports bar,” Jane says, laughing. “So he drew his own concept on a napkin, and the bar was built. It’s fabulous—it’s like *Cheers*! At game time, Rocky invites the neighborhood over and he’s got all his Red Sox and Patriots paraphernalia. We even have a neon Red Sox sign, and when it’s turned on, you can see it from the road. I always wonder if someone will just stop in for a beer!”

During the warmer months, the party spills out onto the two-story porch that looks out over the backyard to the ocean. The porch is distinctive, featuring furniture by Janus et Cie. “The house is so classic and so traditional that we wanted to do something not quite expected—a little avant-garde and chic,” Pelissier says.

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At the end of the porch, between the bar and living room, is a relaxed lounge space with a sofa, coffee table, and two club chairs. A sleek and modern table for *al fresco* dining sits just outside the dining room and kitchen, where three oversized swivel chairs, perfect for cocktails, sit in the sun. “When you have a porch of this size, you have to be conscious of using too many pieces,” Pelissier says. “You have to break the space up visually so it doesn’t look like a bowling alley.”

But for Jane, the front stoop has a special appeal. “I grew up in Newark, New Jersey, and we used to sit on the front stoop all summer,” Jane explains. “In the late afternoon, I’ll take a glass of wine and sit out on the front stoop. It gets the afternoon sun, so I get to enjoy that side of the house.”

From here you can see the graceful cobblestone entry and sweeping curve of granite that leads to a simple white fence. The pea stone drive is edged with cobblestones, creating a clearly defined courtyard. Gardens surround the courtyard, adding color and fragrance. It is here that you catch the first glimpse of Stephen Bagley’s artistic vision.

Stellar Pink dogwood is the main ornamental tree. The dogwood not only obscures the garage, which is made entirely of fieldstone, but serves as the backbone of the flower beds and sets the color palette of soft pinks, whites, and pastels. Highbush blueberry, ‘Red Heart’ rose of Sharon, and ‘Nikko Blue’ and Endless Summer hydrangeas were planted among ‘Peach Blossom’ astilbe. But the true star is Mayflower viburnum, also known as Korean spice viburnum. “The windows are really high in the front of the house, so I used mature Mayflower viburnum as the key plant,” Bagley says. “I just love the fragrance.”

Next to the garage, an arbor covered with the deep pink and cream blooms of Eden rose marks the entrance to the backyard. A bluestone path between the house and garage features climbing hydrangea, hosta, ‘Winter Green’ boxwood, and Japanese painted fern. After going through the gate and descending four granite steps, the pathway continues, connecting the poolside lounge, a terrace with built-in grill, and the porch.

Stepping down from the terrace to the heated, saltwater pool, the bluestone is replaced with large slabs of granite. A small lounge area at the foot of the pool and the surrounding coping define the space with clean, bold lines. “Bluestone is the look that we wanted—very casual and coastal,” says Bagley, the Forsyths’ son-in-law. “But when designing the pool deck, bluestone doesn’t work because it gets very hot. We wanted to use some traditional, durable materials that are still going to look good 80 years from now.”

The granite ties in architecturally with the granite ashlar used to build the foundation of the house. The granite of the pool coping and deck was quarried in Barre, Vermont, while Rockport granite was used for all other elements such as the walls, pillars, steps, and spa. “The cool thing about this material is that it’s local to the area,” Bagley says. “Rockport has a long history in granite quarrying and stonemasonry. But granite can be a little bit monumental, a little bit stark. So the challenge became how



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to make the granite, bluestone, and slate intermingle with each other. I developed a distinct design vocabulary to govern the use of these materials and create a harmony of elements.”

Next to the pool, nestled underneath the branches of a large magnolia, is a custom-made saltwater spa that incorporates the same stonework used in the other hardscape elements. Perennial gardens surround the spa, integrating it into the landscape. Large boulders, uncovered during the excavation for the pool, add texture to the gardens. The smaller of these were used to create a simple pathway through the ornamental herb garden. The stepping-stones are inter-planted with woolly thyme. “The thing that’s the most beautiful around that spa happens during a certain month, when these little plants come up between the steps to the tub—they’re a kind of herb—and they are soft underfoot,” Jane says. “It has amazing colors and just crawls around the stones.”

Behind the spa are two large saucer magnolias and a mass of mature shrubs including winterberry, serviceberry, and highbush and lowbush blueberries. “When I first saw the property, the plantings seemed haphazard,” Bagley says. “As I spent more time on the site, I could tell that the health of the blueberries indicated an underground spring. Where my initial instinct was to open up more lawn, I ended up having more respect for the somewhat random placement of the plants and we used them to hide the pool equipment and create a different type of garden.”

A simple pathway connects the woodland garden to the rest of the landscape. “It didn’t occur to me that it would be a great spot for a path until well after the pool was installed,” Bagley says. “I kept walking around and thought that the corner would be the perfect access point to the beach. The magnolias are really old, and their habit is wonderful—they have these great, gnarled branches. So it turned into this dramatic experience of walking through the trees. It really has a majestic quality.”

“My granddaughter calls it dinosaur woods,” Jane says. “We’ll walk down the path and she can climb those magnolias and just let her imagination go.”

The white fence at the end of the path provides a perfect backdrop for a large perennial garden. Both solar orientation and xeriscaping principles played a major role in selecting the plants. The garden features pastel ‘Moonshine’ and ‘Heidi’ yarrows and ‘Becky’ Shasta daisies, which are also seen in front of the house. But a purpleleaf sand cherry adds a maroon element that is a bit different from the rest of the palette. “When you establish your design vocabulary you need to keep working with it so there is harmony,” Bagley says. “The sand cherry is an interesting plant, but its tone is different from the soft pastel colors, so we needed to thread that tone through the rest of the property as well.”

The final result is stunning, and the home has become a true sanctuary for Jane and Rocky. “It’s hard not to be happy in Rockport,” Jane says. “Even Woody, our golden retriever, gets there and goes into a wild sprint round and round! It’s about as close to contentment as you can feel. I look at my husband, and he has this same stupid grin on his face that I do, and it’s totally involuntary. We feel like the luckiest people in the world.” ■

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