

# Cape Cod & Islands HOME

Living & Gardening on Cape Cod,  
Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket

*windswest*  
Seascapes





It's supposedly one of the  
**windiest sites** on the East Coast.  
In fact, a windmill once stood where  
a homeowner's **gazebo** now sits.

"Mini" New Guinea impatiens and depladenia stand up well to the sun, wind, and salt spray of Seaside. Hot pinks add drama to the muted blue/grays of the ocean and bluestone patio.



## WINDSWEPT SEASCAPES



Large fieldstone columns require substantial planters, like these limestone bowls. Though overflowing with bright pink dipladenia, weeping lavender Lantana, and blue/purple scaevola, the planting design is simple, complementing the lines of the containers.

### It's an Olympic-size landscaping challenge:

convert a windswept, salt-sprayed sand dune into a garden paradise to complement million dollar-plus summer homes. Besides some tough strains of grass, scrub oak, and pitch pine, nothing is growing in this harsh environment. This landscaping job is not for the faint of heart.

WRITTEN BY LAURIE KAISER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY POMMETT



## WINDSWEPT SEASCAPES



The boulder edge and waterfall hold back the embankment for this sunken pool area and create their own special sight and sound effects. A large flat stone serves as a diving board.

### Enter Mary LeBlanc,

the Cotuit-based landscaper who faced this challenge and flourished at Seaside, an ocean-front community of seasonal shingle-style homes. Begun six years ago, Seaside is in New Seabury, an upscale development in Mashpee. Planned to accommodate twenty-five homes, Seaside is a work in progress, with eight homes completed, most designed by Janovsky Hurley Architects of Lexington, Massachusetts. The three-level homes, ranging from 3,500 square feet to 12,000 square feet, command a sweeping view of Nantucket Sound. From the third floor, the view spans 360 degrees. On a clear day, New Seabury's championship golf course, the Sound, and Martha's Vineyard are visible. Each cottage sits on a relatively small lot:

75 feet wide and about 250 feet deep. From front to back, the lots have grade changes of up to nine feet. Spectacular views aside, the unimproved lots leave much to the imagination. That's where Mary LeBlanc comes in.

Having worked as New Seabury Company's advertising and marketing director from 1978 to 1984, LeBlanc was familiar with New Seabury. In fact, it was during her job with the company that LeBlanc formed her idea of becoming a landscape designer. An outdoorsperson who loved to garden, LeBlanc was nearing thirty at the time and knew she wanted to start a family. Her job entailed regularly reviewing New Seabury's development plans, and landscaping ideas began to germi-



(above) Excelsa roses and fountain grasses (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*) soften the hard lines of the fieldstone walls and steps.

(front cover) Rose-covered fences define borders and protect privacy, though neighbors enjoy fabulous second-story views. In the foreground, "lilac" bluestone coping, boulders, and beach rocks surround the curvilinear gray pool. A stand of sedum "Autumn Joy" rises from the beach rocks.



## WINDSWEPT SEASCAPES

nate: "I thought, 'You know, landscape architecture would be a good field for me. I need control of my time. I need to find a career that gives me flexibility so that I can work out of the house and raise my children,'" says LeBlanc.

Armed with her bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, LeBlanc enrolled in a graduate program at Radcliffe. Now, she is a master gardener, certified by the Cooperative Extension Service. She began offering her professional services in 1987 as a perennial garden designer. One of her first projects was designing an 80-foot-long perennial garden for the Barnstable County Fairgrounds. Since then, LeBlanc has done landscaping work throughout southern New England, including projects in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and the Boston area.

LeBlanc knew that landscaping Seaside would not be easy, but it is the kind of situation on which this former competitive runner thrives. "It's supposedly one of the windiest sites on the East Coast," LeBlanc says. (In fact, a windmill once stood where a homeowner's gazebo now sits.) "The plant palette is so limited in terms of what will grow there." Before LeBlanc began painting the landscape with a variety of textures and splashes of color, about the only things growing at Seaside were scrawny oaks and stubby pines. And these trees, roughly thirty years old, had reached only five to six feet. In more hospitable surroundings, they grow five to six times this size.

However limited the seaside palette may be, LeBlanc proved that some perfectly beautiful plants will grow—even thrive—in such a wind-whipped, salt-burned environment. They include roses, yarrow, honey locust, bearberry, heather, inkberry, bayberry. Even hydrangeas and day lilies will grow in sheltered locations. "I think the plants that grow well in a particular environment also look best and are most appropriate to the design," LeBlanc says.

Then there's maintenance to consider. It doesn't matter how good the landscape designer's concept is if the gardens aren't maintained properly. "Unlike interior design, where you paint a wall, you set a piece of furniture, and it's somewhat static," LeBlanc says, "a landscape is a living thing, and if people don't maintain a property the way I

envisioned it to be maintained, ten years down the road, it may not be the same property I designed." And that's why LeBlanc believes landscape designs should be practical. A designer has to choose plants that can be maintained on a particular site with relative ease. "Unlike Victorian times," says LeBlanc, "people today don't have a staff of 50 to maintain lavish gardens."

How does a landscape designer create a beautiful, easily maintained landscape on a lot that is, as they say in the business, "unimproved"? "Successful landscaping starts with understanding the site, its soil conditions, prevailing winds and microclimates," says LeBlanc. Once equipped with this information, LeBlanc then determines the client's requirements. "Clients' needs are unique. I approach every project with an open mind. There's no set formula." She asks about favorite colors and plants. Generally, she says, the colors in the outdoor landscape mirror the colors inside the house. "I've literally matched fabrics to colors in the garden," she says. "Then we think about the seasons. Some parts of the yard may need to look great twelve months a year, others six months a year. What is nice about the summer residences (like Seaside) is they only have to look good three months a year." Sometimes she must diplomatically dissuade clients from choosing a Japanese maple or rhododendrons, for example. Some plants just won't grow in a seaside location.

When she is satisfied that she understands the site as well as the client's needs and budget, LeBlanc retreats to her airy second-floor home office to create a plan. Her drafting table faces a Palladian window overlooking her backyard perennial and vegetable gardens. Here she researches plant information in the books lining her office shelves and sketches possible plans. "I work with plant combinations," she says. "I think about textures. Color is only a small portion of a good design because plants only bloom for two or three weeks." When she develops a plan that she believes is appropriate to the site, she presents it to the client for approval. The next step is selecting a reliable contractor, one who she knows will implement the plan well and on time.



# Seaside Planters

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**R**eliable choices for seaside plantings, LeBlanc says, include zonal geraniums, dusty miller, Swan River daisy, dracena, portulaca, salvia, trailing vinca, and alyssum. Gray foliage plants do very well by the ocean and always look great with pinks, whites, blues, and purples, LeBlanc's favorite colors for seaside plantings. Terrific new performers include scaevola "Blue Wonder," with its blueish/purple star-like flowers. It mixes well with pink or white flowers and with gray foliage, like that of the *Helichrysum petilatum* (licorice plant). *Helichrysum* also comes in a chartreuse foliage which looks spectacular with purple ipomoea, sweet potato vine, and dark purple varieties of coleus or begonias. Teri Navickas introduced LeBlanc to dipladenia, a very neat and full grower with glossy foliage and pink flowers, and to tropical man-deville vine, an excellent central feature in a large container if given lattice to trail upon. Both perform well in seaside conditions. Ornamental grasses, such as fountain grass, especially the tender purple fountain grass, bring the marsh and dune grass textures of nature into a patio or pool area container.

A highly detailed combination of colors and textures complements the intricate patterns of the reproduction urn (left). The central dracena gives height and is surrounded by dipladenia, "Blue Moon" lobelia, and "Elatior Louise" begonia. Mary LeBlanc works with Teri Navickas of Horticultural Services on container plantings. After LeBlanc and the homeowner discuss desired concepts and colors, Navickas is given free rein to create designs and continues to care for the planters throughout the season.

TERRY POMMETT





## WINDSWEPT SEASCAPES

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LeBlanc tries to work closely with architects when she is designing for a newly constructed house. At Seaside, architect Vladimir Janovsky appreciates LeBlanc's design philosophy. "We have mutual respect for each other's work," he says. "We see things very similarly. The building, the architecture, is part of the whole environment. Landscaping isn't just for improvements or to hide some problems with the building." Janovsky likes LeBlanc's work so much, he is consulting with her on the landscaping for his private residence in Lincoln. "I personally like working with her because she's a mature professional," he says. "She's responsible."

Although LeBlanc believes in using native plants as much as possible, they alone will not provide Seaside clients with that sought-after look. She solves this problem by blending native plants such as beach plum and bayberry with non-native plants such as privet and hydrangea. Leading up to the homes are driveways of native crushed stone and walkways paved with seashells. Slopes are covered with low-growing, acid-loving bearberry. Day lilies embellish the front of one house, while inkberry bushes grace the side of another. A privet hedge screens a side lot. A climbing white hydrangea, echoing the house's trim color, can be found growing along the sheltered side of a house. "I like good geometry around a house," says LeBlanc. "I think the best landscapes have what we call 'good bones.' There's some structure in the outdoor space that relates in scale and proportion to the house."

Along the face of a thirty-foot bluff at Seaside, beach grass, daisies, and yarrow grow. Looking very much like they were placed there by nature, these plants were painstakingly installed by workers standing on long ladders. Where the back yards meet this bluff, LeBlanc blends her designs with these plantings. Most backyards at Seaside include a pool, and LeBlanc likes to create a natural look for these areas by placing boulders among the plantings and bringing seagrass and sweet-smelling beach roses into the pool enclosure to create a seamless effect. At one house, LeBlanc lined a pool and hot tub to mimic the look of a natural body of water. In a corner of the

pool, she installed a small waterfall that seems to pop out of the natural landscape. In the yard where the old windmill stood is a standard rectangular pool. Here, LeBlanc made liberal use of a white beach rose, Sir Thomas Lipton. In the backyard of a home where the owners eschewed a pool, LeBlanc worked a lawn around existing pitch pines.

Contrary to popular belief, LeBlanc says, lawns are relatively easy to maintain. "Everyone thinks that lawn is the big maintenance issue. In a young landscape, a lot more time is devoted to weeding, watering, and pruning. Landscapes are not instant. It takes three to five years for the plants to mesh." She tends to think lawn is overused, though, especially on the Cape. And while her own home has a lawn for her kids to play on, it recedes gracefully into natural surroundings. "I'm very happy to design without lawn," LeBlanc says, although she believes a lawn works well in commercial spaces where it can give the eye a rest from the pavement. She points to Mashpee Commons and North Market Street where she made liberal use of trees, grass, and shrubs.

Douglas Storrs, vice president of planning and development of Mashpee Commons, is impressed with LeBlanc's work. He has been working with her for eight years. "Mary has done all of the landscaping on Mashpee Commons and North Market Street. She understands landscape design, plant material, and appropriateness of plant material in certain areas," Storrs says. "On the personal side, Mary is just a very enjoyable person to work with. We're a very demanding client. She's quick to offer her ideas, but she's very open to listening to our input. She has a good working relationship with the various contractors we use, which is very important. It's a fairly rare combination when you find a good designer who works well with contractors."

By contrast, LeBlanc views herself as a taskmaster when it comes to contractors. "I know my reputation is that I'm really tough when it comes to contractors," she says. Do they begin to sweat when they see her black Volvo pull into view?



*Seaside Gardening*  
WINDSWEPT SEASCAPES

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A bluestone walk winds past a perennial garden and low fieldstone wall. Delicate gooseneck light fixtures decorate by day and illuminate by night. Shasta daisies, snapdragons, asters, lavender, catmint, and gaura (wind flower) are all good choices for seaside gardens.

"Not exactly," chuckles Ed Rutherford, landscape supervisor for Francisco Tavares Inc., an East Falmouth-based landscaping company that LeBlanc has used extensively including at Seaside. "She's a taskmaster in the sense that she represents her clients well," Rutherford says. "She knows exactly what she wants. I find her very easy to work with." Coming from Rutherford, that's quite

a compliment. He is a landscaping grand master with as many years' worth of experience in the business as LeBlanc can claim on her birthday cake. "She's very knowledgeable in her work and practical in the application," Rutherford says. "I think very highly of Mary, and I enjoy working with her. She's at the top of the list of people I've worked with."

LeBlanc is a creative landscaper who is willing to try something new. But creativity implies risk, and for LeBlanc, not all of her choices have been successful. At Seaside, she has "tried every so-called salt-tolerant tree in the book," she says. "We try to get it right the first time, but there is always a percentage of plants in a garden that won't survive." Not at all deterred by nature's contrari-

ety, LeBlanc believes her best work is yet to come. "There's a maturity that goes along with developing your taste," she says. "My professors at Radcliffe used to say landscape designers don't peak until their 50s."

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*Laurie Kaiser is a Yarmouthport-based freelance writer who lives in a Colonial Revival home she is renovating.*



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