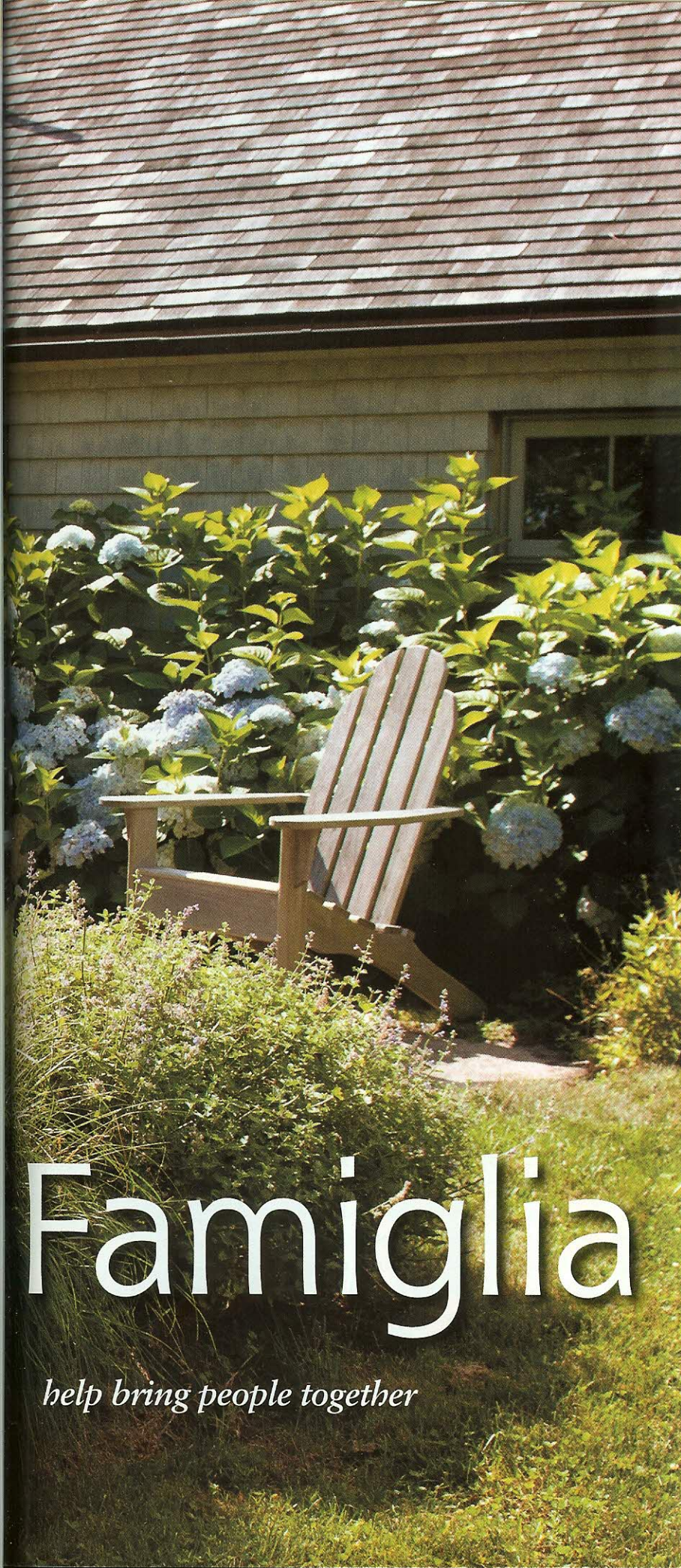




La Piazza della

The gardens and landscaping of an expansive Yarmouth property



BY DEBRA LAWLESS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
VIRGINIA SUTHERLAND

In Italy, the piazza is where everyone goes to gossip with friends, sip espresso, dine, and flirt. Everyone is welcome.

The idea of the Italian piazza inspired this Yarmouth homeowner as he carved out a compound for his growing family on a hillside of oak, cedar and locust trees overlooking the beautiful waters of Lewis Bay.

“Having multiple places to retreat to for intimacy—and others to congregate in—works incredibly well, allowing the sense of family to thrive,” he says.

The compound, with its wood-shingled buildings of clean, almost stark design, grew gradually over the period of a decade or more, as did the family itself. Today the family consists of sixteen people in three generations—eight adults and eight children in four separate households. The businessman and his wife, a sculptor, use the property year-round, commuting from their Boston home for long weekends in the off-season. In the summer their grown children and grandchildren join them.

The family houses, guest houses, art studios, barn, and piazza are all located on a private four-acre parcel—and it is the gorgeous landscape that glues them together.

One of several gathering places for the family, this fieldstone patio is surrounded by hydrangeas, fountain grass, amsonia, and catmint.

Famiglia

help bring people together



(Above) Climbing roses and Virginia creeper scramble up the wall of the tower house. (Right) A garden against a narrow wall features tall perennials such as false sunflower, lilies and Joe Pye weed on the central deck.

For the homeowner's longtime collaborator, landscape designer Mary LeBlanc, the challenge lies in continuously adapting the gardens and natural areas to meet the needs of the evolving family, in which the youngest generation ranges from toddlers to teens. The nibbling habits of bunnies and the salty wind off Lewis Bay bring their own demands.

"Two or three times a year we get together and walk through," LeBlanc says. "We talk about editing and adding."

LeBlanc, who in 1987 was certified as a master gardener in Massachusetts and then went on to earn a graduate certificate in landscape design at Radcliffe College, has worked in the field since 1990. She appreciates this particular client: "He had a strong concept that never wavered, so you always know where you're going," she says.

In the beginning, the sloping land was simply covered with trees. When LeBlanc first looked at the site, the owners had purchased the first parcel of land and had moved an old tower onto it to make into their own personal residence. The guest houses with wooden decks and an art studio soon surrounded the important central deck, or piazza, where the family and guests gathered. "To get there, everybody had to go outside from their bedrooms and go through the equivalent of a central square in a town," the homeowner recalls.

LeBlanc treaded lightly. "The owners wanted a low maintenance, organic landscape in keeping with the aesthetic of the place," LeBlanc says. They wanted an understated landscape that required no pesticides and little to no fertilization, and they wanted





(Above) One of several entrances, a fieldstone path winds through a grove of young locust trees that were transplanted from the property after the sassafras failed. (Right) White lilies, pale yellow daylilies, and purple Russian sage predominate the gardens. (Opposite Page) A dahlia planted by the owner provides a rare spot of hot color.





to use natural materials for paths and patios. What they didn't want: an artificial water feature or anything that looked hyper-cultivated or suburban.

"The whole idea is to keep things pretty natural looking," the homeowner says.

To nestle the buildings into nature, LeBlanc introduced a Virginia creeper that scales the tower house. A trumpet vine with orange flowers cascades over the tall shingled wall at the driveway. Elsewhere, plants are trained to climb trellises. The wooded areas are dotted with blue hydrangeas, pink Astilbe, and ferns. A rich, summery green dominates the color spectrum.

"We wanted to enhance the natural landscape, not take away from it," LeBlanc says.

After about a decade, the owners' children were marrying and starting families of their own. At this point the owners embarked on the second major phase of their compound by buying the neighboring property and erecting a barn with another tower and main house. Here LeBlanc planted drifts of Russian sage, pale daylilies, liriop, blue mist shrub, and buddleia, which attracts butterflies. "Again, we spent hours walking the site and looking from every vantage point," LeBlanc says.

LeBlanc thinks in terms of textures, patterns and repeating themes such as the grove of young locusts along the front walk. Because the lot has steep

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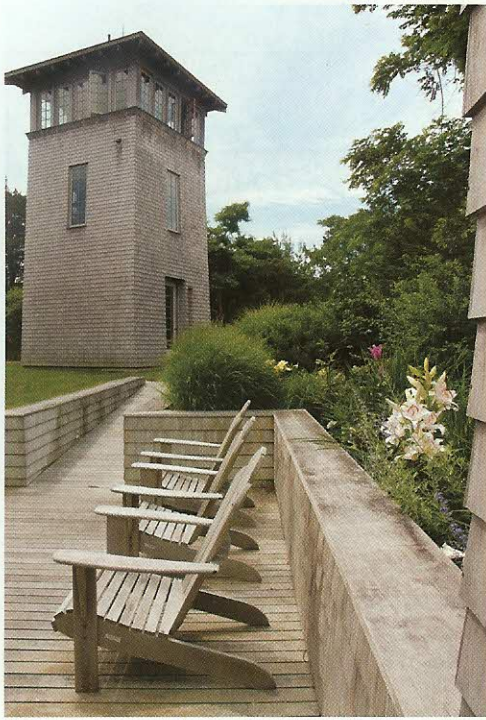


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Lilies, grasses, late hydrangea, and lilacs flank the ramped entrance to the main house. (Below) A hammock is strung between locusts overlooking the cove.

grade changes, LeBlanc set stone slabs and boulders into some spots and planted the slope with ground covers to fix it in place.

One challenge lay in finding that perfect natural stone to enhance the lines of the buildings. Serendipitously, another client contacted LeBlanc saying she was unhappy with the stone that had been selected for her new house. “The minute I saw her large slabs of stone, I knew they were right for this project.”

In the spirit of the Italian piazza, LeBlanc created an outdoor place for family members and their guests to gather close to the new buildings. For this LeBlanc designed a fieldstone patio planted with thyme and surrounded by hydrangeas, roses, grasses, and catmint.

Four acres offer enough scope to create a landscape of contrasts, of mystery and openness, shadow and light. It’s a simple place, too. “Adirondack chairs nestled in a natural depression in a locust grove are all we needed to create a perfect lookout,” LeBlanc says.

Walk along the narrow meandering paths through the locust trees, pass by a solitary birdhouse hanging from a branch, and “you really feel the natural world around you,” LeBlanc says. “It’s very peaceful, very calming.”

Down by the bay a hammock stretched between two trees offers a place to relax in the dappled shade on a lazy summer afternoon, just listening to the lapping of the water against the dock. And at the end of that perfect summer day, one can head to the piazza for cocktails, dinner, and laughter. 🍃

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