

THE MAGAZINE *of* SPLENDID HOMES *and* GARDENS • MAY/JUNE 2016

DESIGN

NEW ENGLAND

OUT OF THE HOUSE

ALFRESCO
LIVING FROM
CAPE COD TO
THE GREEN
MOUNTAINS





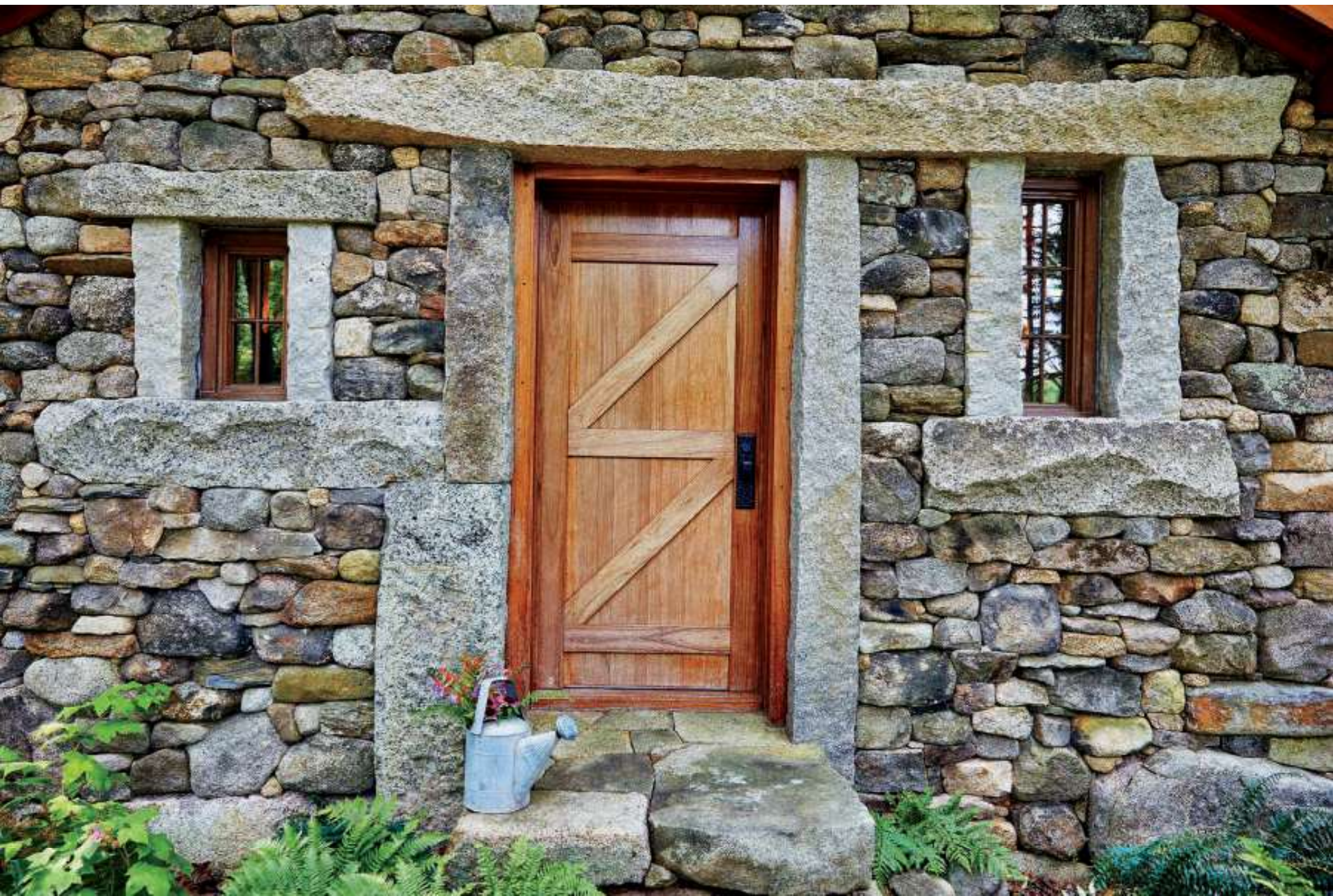
a stone's throw

IN A HOBBIT HOUSE OF A COTTAGE ON A WOODED RHODE ISLAND LOT,
MAGMA DESIGN GROUP HAS CREATED A COZY RETREAT FOR ALL SEASONS

WRITTEN BY MEAGHAN O'NEILL • PHOTOGRAPHED BY KELLY DAVIDSON



A GOSHEN STONE path (FACING PAGE) leads to the stone cottage that Magma Design Group created for a client in East Greenwich, Rhode Island. The stone was quarried in Massachusetts and most of the surrounding plantings are native. Inside the cottage (THIS PAGE), tongue-and-groove pine walls and mahogany trim set a warm scene.



From the rustic granite steps that lead to the stone cottage in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, there is no hint of the suburban cul-de-sac that is just a few dozen yards away. The view ahead is a forest of cedar trees that dip into a shallow valley cut through by a stream. The wee structure, with its granite beams and a sturdy mahogany door, seems fit for a Hobbit. But this is no fantasy.

It is the real-life creation of Neil and Samantha Best, the husband-and-wife team behind Magma Design Group in Rehoboth, Massachusetts. Built atop a single wall left from an existing fieldstone foundation — presumably an outbuilding on what was once a farm — the 20-by-20-foot folly is sited to capture the south-facing views and the light of the 6-acre property.

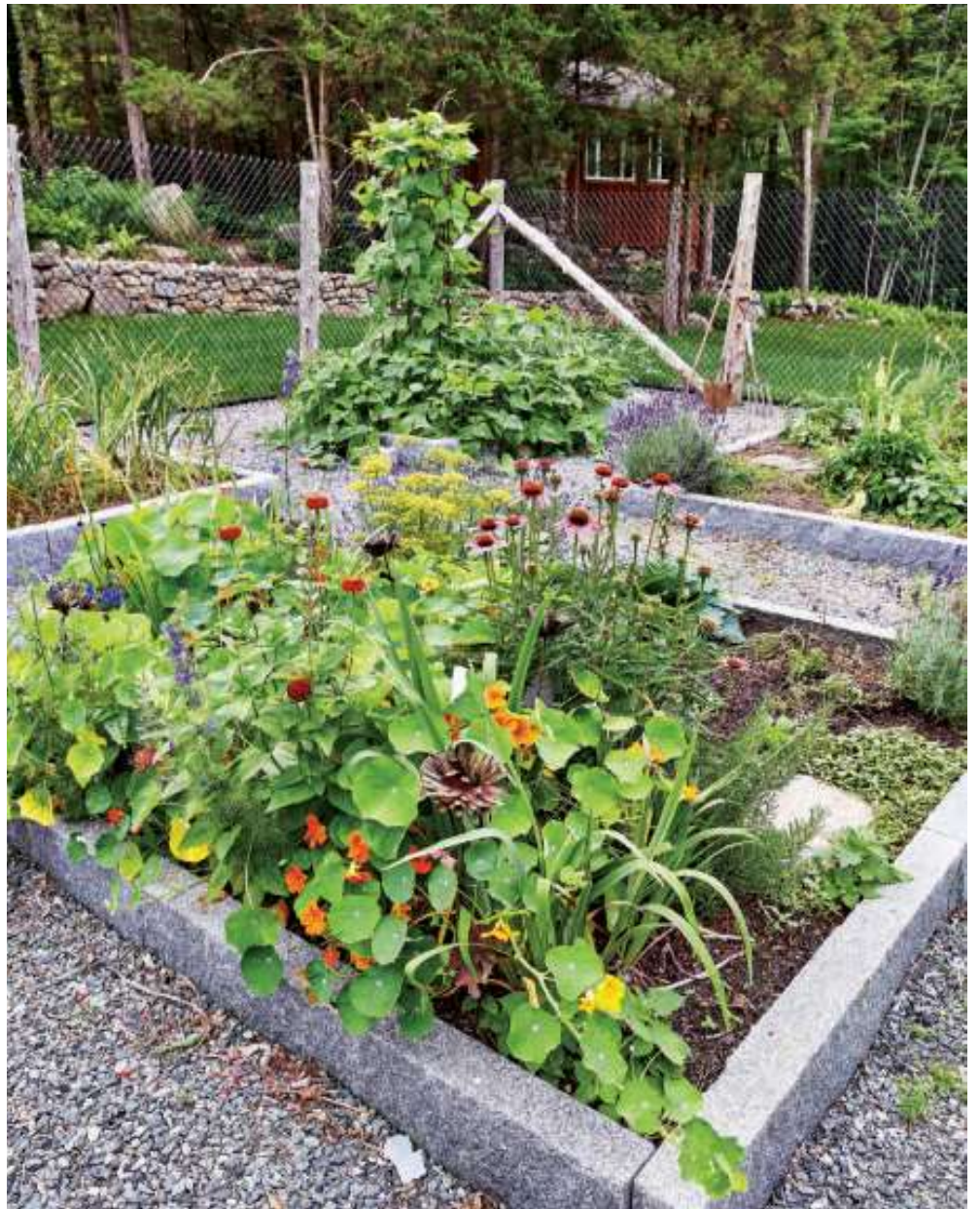
TO CREATE THE cottage's sinuous facade (ABOVE), Neil Best used fieldstones found on the property and reclaimed granite pillars sourced from a farm in Tiverton, Rhode Island. The mahogany door was crafted by Aaron Murray of Springfield, Massachusetts. The client decorated the reading room (FACING PAGE, TOP) with her own Mission-style furniture and other favorite pieces. The cottage was sited on the lone wall of an existing stone foundation (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM), and its sides are clad in stained pine board-and-batten.

The tiny retreat, which the owner uses for reading, relaxation, and gardening chores, looks as though it's always been there. Built largely from fieldstones found on the property, in a way, it has.

When the designers presented the owner with the initial concept, she immediately fell for it. "But then I had to go find these stones that would make it work," says Neil, a landscape architect, of the undulating, organic facade that sprang from his imagination. Luckily, "amazing materials were coming up from the ground right here," says Samantha, a certified horticulturist who was charged with moving boulders on the property so that necessary machinery could get to the site and, later, skillfully placing them back with a mindfully natural aesthetic.

Construction began in the fall and was completed the following spring, with a very snowy winter in between, leaving the Bests to get to know the property intimately in all seasons. Neil wore microspikes over his work boots to steady his footing as he built the structure by hand throughout the treacherous weather. Invisible underpinnings such as the new 42-inch-deep concrete foundation, insulation, and waterproof flashing belie the structure's timeless appearance. Neil, who has a background in carpentry, painstakingly fitted the rounded stones together without cutting or carving a single one. The three roughly 11-foot pillars that became the facade's lintels framing the





entry are made from a pink granite unique to Rhode Island, and were found at a farm in nearby Tiverton. (A fourth was uncovered on the property and turned into a lamppost.) And while Neil shaped them using a traditional feather-and-wedge technique, all cuts and splits were made on the back of the pillars so that they are out of sight.

“I wanted to give it a little movement,” says Neil, who describes the configuration as similar to a Japanese torii gate. With a mantra of “Celebrate the stone,” Neil finds his muse in the materials, allowing the shape of the rocks themselves to guide the composition. All the while, he is carefully keeping the “integrity of the face of each” intact. This traditional stone-on-stone engineering is structurally sound, but to ensure the cottage will be as timeless as it looks, Neil added mortar to the back of the wall.

The sides and back of the two-story structure, which is built into a slope, are clad in stained pine board-and-batten. Pine also lines the interior walls and ceiling, accentuating the cabin-like feel. Perched

BUILT INTO THE sloping landscape, the cottage has a walkout basement (TOP LEFT), which the owner uses for storing garden tools and supplies. Granite planting beds (ABOVE RIGHT) are used to grow vegetables and flowers. Rustic pieces (ABOVE LEFT) give the interior laid-back appeal. The stone facade blends into the landscape (FACING PAGE, TOP), while a welcoming stepping-stone path (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM) wends its way through native plantings.

above the valley, the 400-square-foot top floor offers the sensation of being in a treehouse, with picture windows providing excellent views to the changing seasons and wildlife below. (Turkeys, deer, and raccoons are regular visitors, as is a snapping turtle that comes to lay her eggs each spring.) Below, a walkout storage room and potting area, accessible only by an exterior door, is well used by the owner, an avid gardener.

To the east of the cottage, Samantha created a wildflower meadow with native grasses, blueberries, and magnolias. Beyond it, a large kitchen garden was revamped with granite-framed raised beds.

“We design for plant communities,” says Samantha, whose plan for the larger property integrated several native species such as mountain laurel, foam flower, and Christmas fern among existing plants. “We think about layers above and below the soil and creating environments that support both soil and plants.” The cottage also pleasantly complements the property’s main house, a post-and-beam Acorn structure. Mission-style furnishings and favorite books make the space personal. And although the shed has electricity and a pellet stove, no television or Internet is allowed.

“We try to create retreats in people’s lives,” says Samantha, “whether it’s a patio or a shed, where they can disconnect from the technological distractions of life and get in touch with nature in their backyard.” Here, the Bests have literally carved that guiding philosophy in stone. ■



DESIGN DECISION *Stems and Stones*

The East Greenwich, Rhode Island, property had a rustic, woody quality that the homeowner adores. Samantha Best's goal was to enhance — and not disturb — that natural beauty. Working with what was already growing among the cedar trees, she primarily added native, shade-loving plants.

To create balance, ecologically and aesthetically, she chose ground covers (yellow star, foam flower); shrubs (Calycanthus, Leucothoe, mountain laurel); ferns (maidenhair, Christmas); and blooms (columbine) that would not only grow well in the predominant conditions, but also improve the soil itself.

A few nonnative, noninvasive plantings were added, including lupine, grown from seeds that were a gift to the client from her sister.

The result is a landscape that appears as if it evolved without human intervention alongside the Goshen stone path, boulders, and cottage. This is the ultimate intention of Magma Design Group's husband-and-wife team, who have developed a presentation for garden clubs and industry groups that they call "Stems and Stones: A Love Story," which describes how plants and stonework come together to create beautiful ecosystems.

Call it a case of art imitating life.