

# THE HOME ISSUE

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MARCH 2014

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# Classic update





THE GARDENS  
AT WILLOWGATE  
ECHO TIMES PAST,  
WHILE ENCOURAGING  
CONTEMPORARY  
ENJOYMENT.

BY **JEANNE O'BRIEN COFFEY**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **STACY BASS**





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**The landscape at Willowgate in Manchester-by-the-Sea** looks like it's been there for centuries—and some of it has. A handful of plantings date back to the 1880s, when the home was built by the James family as a summer escape for their daughter Alice, sister of novelist Henry James.

“The property [has] a serious history, but also has a really beautiful aesthetic,” says Gregory Lombardi, president of Gregory Lombardi Designs, the Cambridge-based landscape architecture firm brought in to rework the estate for the current homeowners. Lombardi says the owners wanted to preserve some of the historic plantings and the classic New England seaside style, while adding their own creative, contemporary flair.

“The owners really envisioned this romantic ideal of a summer house, where they can have people walking around the property or playing sports—a flow where there are different experiences,” says Lombardi. “You can be at the beach, you can be on the rocky coast, or playing on the lawn.”

Even beyond the water, the 3.7-acre property is crafted to offer a series of different experiences—tied together by common themes.



### **Great Escape**

Willowgate estate gardens feature mature trees and shrubs, old-fashioned hydrangeas, classic boxwood, a mix of sun- and shade-loving perennials, and architectural elements.







“The design has all these little jewels of spaces that make you want to walk the property,” says Vanessa Tropeano, field director at Parterre Garden Services, a sister company to Gregory Lombardi Designs that cares for the Willowgate estate.

One of the homeowner’s favorite gardens is just such a spot. The plantings around the path leading to the guest cottage are much less formal than the rest of the landscape, and include a tangle of seven-foot-tall Miscanthus grass and colorful Joe Pye weed, feathery shade-loving astilbes and gooseneck loosestrife, as well as ferns, hydrangeas, and a variety of hostas. The homeowner particularly likes its more informal quality, which feels overgrown and wild, but is actually carefully orchestrated.

“It feels wild because it is so densely planted,” says Matthew Georgehagan, field manager at Parterre. Myriad leaf shapes and sizes provide the garden with a lot of texture, lending it jungle-like appeal, though it doesn’t look messy.

With water on three sides, the property affords spectacular views—and huge headaches for landscape designers. Massachusetts has stringent guidelines for what can and cannot be done within 100 yards of a wetland, and most of Willowgate’s acreage falls in that footprint. Therefore, most of the work at the property was subject to hearings and approvals at both the town and state levels.

To ensure the work met the requirements enforced by the state and local ordinances, Lombardi hired a wetlands biologist to advise the homeowners on the technical aspects of appropriate plants and grading.



#### **Green Environs**

A medley of dense perennials, including sedums, hostas, astilbes, and loosestrife, together with deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs create intrigue in the garden.







“Many things you can’t see wind up impacting what you can do,” Lombardi says, adding that his team works hard to make sure the relationship between homeowners and regulators is one of cooperation. One of the biggest projects Lombardi undertook at Willowgate required a lot of negotiation—and is likely to go unnoticed by the casual observer.

“[The property owners] had this romantic vision of a great lawn that invites kids, dogs, and ball playing,” Lombardi says, but when they acquired the prop-

erty, the lawn was marred by a septic hill topped with a mound of stones. “It looked like someone had buried a whale there,” the homeowner recalls.

Lombardi’s team methodically worked through regulatory hurdles to replace the septic system and re-grade the lawn, and transferred some of the property’s wetlands over to protected status in exchange. “[Septic] is one of the things that absolutely has a manifestation in physical design, but people don’t think about it,” Lombardi says. “Now, you look at it and



**Home Vista**

Gregory Lombardi Designs and Parterre Garden Services team together to ensure the landscape and the environment harmonize.













#### Contemplative Corner

Sprays of lavender, creeping thyme, oregano, and sedums enhance a flagstone patio area.

say, "Wow, it's a green lawn."

Designing something that works for the landscape, the homeowner, and the environment takes a special touch, Lombardi says. "You have to be an intimacy junkie," he says, adding, "You have to like getting close to people."

Lombardi says designers also have to recognize how long the homeowners plan to stay on the property and plan accordingly. "If it's their 'forever house,' we can develop a master plan that will unfold over time," he says, adding that

instant gratification, in the form of fully grown trees and shrubs can add exponentially to the price tag.

The family at Willowgate is looking forward to seeing things unfold. "There are plantings that I know will be in their prime in 30 or 40 years, and hopefully I'll be around to see that," the homeowner says. "We really hope this is the place we're going to be for the rest of our lives, and that our kids get to enjoy it, and someday our grandkids as well." [lombardidesign.com](http://lombardidesign.com) 