

New Canaan Darien + ROWAYTON HOME ISSUE

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REAL ESTATE
WHAT'S MY
HOUSE WORTH?

GARDEN BLISS
A CHIC
OUTDOOR
SPACE

DESIGNER
JULIE NIGHTINGALE

HITS REFRESH

IN A DAZZLING DARIEN HOME



A parterre features
rustic tuteurs for
clematis to climb.

MASTER WORK

*A dedicated gardener creates a lush
and varied landscape to surround
her family's Darien home*

BY JUDY OSTROW
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STACY BASS

LEFT: Large vintage urns planted with heuchera, coleus and alocasia flank the main entrance to the house.
RIGHT: This rose variety, called “Don Juan,” gracefully climbs the timber-framed porte cochere.



The rock garden features shade-loving perennials, such as creeping phlox, hellebore, sedum and astilbe.


When Katie Keith went house hunting more than a decade ago, she and her husband sought out the Tokeneke section of Darien on the advice of friends. As she appraised the available properties, a secluded two-acre parcel with mixed topography caught her attention. Unlike many buyers who prefer a level piece of land, as a gardener she wanted some variety in her environment. This lot had natural slopes and curves that appealed to her sensibilities.

To design a new house, Katie enlisted Scott Raissis, who at the time worked for Greenwich architect Jim Thompson. Armed with her files of clippings and pictures of homes she admired, she conveyed her appreciation for an architectural tradition that includes the work of John Calvin Stevens, an innovator in the Shingle style who practiced in New England in the early 1900s. “Scott understood what we wanted, and we hit it off right away,” recalls Katie. “He got it right on the first drawing.”

Raissis, who now has his own firm in Darien, repositioned the original plan for the Keiths’ house at Katie’s request. “We did not want to disturb or remove some beautiful rock outcroppings,” says Katie, who was already thinking of possible plantings.

Once the purchase was made and drawings were in progress, Katie and her family took up residence in a quirky and much-remodeled older house on the property that was slated for demolition; they then rented a nearby house while their new one went up. From this vantage, Katie made herself available for the daily decisions involved in home building, and also got a sense of her property and its fine points, gradually developing a plan to make use of the property’s diverse terrain. “I wanted the home’s interiors and exteriors to connect with each other; my ideas included lots of texture and tone-on-tone, some manicured features and some free-form ones. And I wanted an all-season landscape, one that would maintain interest throughout the year.”

She carefully considered the approach to the house, off a narrow



THIS PAGE: Clematis "Jackmanii" adds color to the landscape. OPPOSITE: Varieties of flowering plants and shrubs were used in the areas close to the house. Many, like the Korean lilac tree at right, add fragrance when in bloom.

"Walking around my yard, appreciating the plants, is one of life's simple pleasures, something that I will always love."



and quiet road. Her thoughtfulness produced one of the highlights of the front elevation's plan: the curving gravel driveway, lined by carefully tended plantings of evergreens and perennials.

"I love the stone driveway," says Katie, who enjoys the crunch of the pebbles when she or an arriving guest turns into the property. Equally appealing is the timber-framed porte cochere—a feature of many Shingle-style designs that provides a sheltered entry to the house. "A crew from upstate New York put it together in the traditional way, joining the posts and beams with pegs," says Katie. This rustic structure hosts twining, climbing roses that bloom in the summer, lending color and fragrance to a welcoming architectural detail.

The evergreens and shrubs that line the driveway get special treatment to maintain their tailored appearance. For a number of years, Katie enlisted a gardener with masterful pruning skills to keep them in shape.

"There was no one like Vincenzo," she says of the gardener. When he retired, Katie herself took over the first prune of the boxwoods

in the spring. For many years she has also employed Mike Olivieri and his firm, Michael and Sons Nurseries, to install shrubs and trees and care for the landscape. Olivieri studied with Michael Dirr, a University of Georgia horticulturist and an expert on woody plants, and he brings this expertise to his work on the property. All of the deciduous trees and bushes were chosen and are maintained for a pleasing visual structure of trunks and branches that show gracefully through the leafless winter months.

"Not too long after I got started with the design of the landscape, I realized that I wanted to know more than I did. So I started taking courses," says Katie, who studied in the Master Gardening program at the University of Connecticut for several years, achieving Master Gardener in 2010 and advanced certification two years later.

Because of her initial decision to maintain the property's natural features, Katie has been able to create enough variety in her landscape so that the dimensions of the parcel appear much larger than the actual acreage. At the sides and rear of the landscape, woodland areas

LEFT: An overhead view of the landscape reveals the property's gently sloping topography. Green features include a massed planting of viburnum and roses at the corner of the patio. RIGHT: Coleus varieties fill vintage planters.



provided locations for the installation of some beautiful trees as part of the property's boundary; and the preserved outcroppings have become an ideal setting for a rock garden.

The slope of the land also makes the large views dynamic, and creates an opportunity for formal terraces close to the house, a great sweep of lawn below, and a pool area that has the feel and tranquility of a private pond. A deeply shaded area has become a woodland garden; the sunny patio plantings include viburnum and roses. One rock formation soaks up enough of the sun's heat so that even crape myrtle, generally grown in more southern climates, has a perfect spot to thrive.

Hardscape details create harmony with the home's Shingle-style form, blending elegance with a bit of graceful rusticity that honors the country location. Case in point is the pergola, formed of sinuous locust posts and beams, which shelters one end of the pool area. Katie found its creator after admiring a holiday display of handmade rustic stick furniture in Hermès' window in New York. This led her to the

artist, Charlie Baker, who designed and built this unique structure.

Other decorative features dot the landscape. A metal armillary, the focal point of a formal parterre, is flanked by rustic tuteurs woven with clematis vines. A wire orb is positioned gracefully on a stretch of lawn. For the man-made ornaments, Katie mentions some favorite sources—Old Farm Nursery in Sharon, R.T. Facts in Kent. Other creative sources of inspiration included shows, such as Bunny Williams' Trade Secrets, an annual plant and garden antique sale that the designer spearheads for a women's charity in Litchfield County.

After a number of years putting together the landscape, Katie has embarked on a new project—a family property in Nantucket, where she is again starting a garden from scratch. While she's excited about the new project, she's quick to say she still treasures her Tokeneke property for the enjoyment it has provided for her, her family and their friends.

"Walking around my yard with a glass of wine, appreciating the plants, is one of life's simple pleasures that I will always love." 