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By joining two properties, Potomac, Maryland, homeowners realized their dream for a fabulous escape.



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Rock-faced columns support the mahogany ceiling of the dining terrace.

POTOMAC PLAYGROUND

A seasoned design team creates a getaway at home for a family with a passion for the great outdoors

BY LINDA HALES | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KENNETH M. WYNER

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In the afternoon sun, the rustic stone pavilions glow like two pots of honey flecked with cinnamon. Set beside a swimming pool and against a backdrop of evergreens, the warm hues of rough rock suggest a fantasy from Tuscany (her dream), or a mountain retreat in the American West (his ideal). The genius of this Potomac landscape is that the timeless materials and iconic forms free the imagination to choose whichever dreamscape suits the mood.

And dreamscape it is, now that two properties have been joined into one seamless family playground with a boulder-strewn spa and waterfall thundering toward a Zen-like fishpond in the lower quadrant of the annexed lot.

The owners—an attorney, his wife and their two sons—waited six years to acquire the property next door, a corner site that has more than doubled their half acre. The project took three years and required a skilled design team to manipulate the land and replace the neighbors' vintage rambler, tennis court and kidney-shaped swimming pool with features for an active family and their friends. Anne Decker of Rill & Decker Architects called on landscape architect Lila Fendrick to tame the site, now supported by a large stone retaining wall.

"The initial idea was a pool and gardens," the wife says. "The plans got a little more sophisticated on the way."

The wish list expanded to include a guesthouse, a mahogany-roofed dining terrace, an outdoor grilling area with pebble mosaic floor, an art studio, a spa bath, a three-car garage, a custom-made English greenhouse, a smoking circle for cigar aficionados and plenty of native habitat to attract wild creatures. The owners' house also needed remodeling to create an opening to the new garden. By the time the design team was done, vegetable, herb and flower gardens, perennial borders and a canopy of hydrangeas had been planted, along with a personal woodland at each chaise longue, where "Forest Pansy" redbud trees align in cast stone urns.

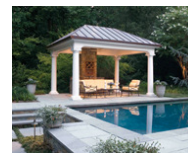
Decker established a classical axis between the house and pool complex to create an illusion of depth, and Fendrick adjusted the topography to get the right sight lines from the house, which sits more than five feet below the terrace. "You want to feel like you are entering another world," says Decker.



Designer Skip Sroka furnished the interiors in a neutral palette to complement the natural surroundings.



Anne Decker utilized mahogany and stone in the guesthouse to blur the lines between indoors and out.



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An intricate mosaic of hand-laid pebbles surrounds the grill.



The working side of the garden is defined by the presence of an imported English greenhouse.



The poolside pavilion houses a spa bath and art studio.



The spa and waterfall descend to a fishpond fed by a separate water source.

Stone became the defining feature of the architecture, interior design and landscape. Instinctively inspired by the family's Sun Valley vacation home, the wife rejected the idea of building with the cool hues of regional bluestone. She searched all the way to Utah to find the warmer Mountain Valley quartzite/sandstone for the three-inch-thick pool deck, spa and parts of the terrace. Decker designed the pavilions and stone columns with a split Western Maryland stone veneer. Fendrick used local Carderock in a grand lawn-and-boulder staircase that ascends from the house.

The 42-by-18-foot pool is the heart of the generous garden. Near the diving board, the lawn is strewn with boulders, as if giants had emptied their pockets of pebbles. "It's every kid's dream to have a pool," says the elder son, a teenager, who is as passionate about harvesting star fruit as he is about counting the "hundreds" of hummingbirds attracted by native trees and vines.

Accessible but not visible from the pool are the spa and waterfall. The water feature is a six-stage event in which water cascades over a submerged stone bench, massaging the shoulders of those bold enough to sit there. The torrents then tumble around a tiled spa and swirl into a lower rock pool. An immense stone slab bridges the water at that point, disguising a wall that separates the calm fishpond from the roiling waters.

Decker chose to divide shelter elements between two matching pavilions, rather than to saddle the garden with a monumental structure. The 24-by-44-foot guest pavilion, which is faced with stone outside and in, has a 12-foot mahogany ceiling and nine-foot-tall mahogany-framed French doors opening to the dining terrace.

Interior designer Skip Sroka of Sroka Design, who decorated the owners' Potomac house and Sun Valley retreat, was called on to design the pavilion interiors. In the guesthouse, Sroka combined custom and designer furnishings and created leather pocket doors hung with barn-door hardware to hide a large screen TV used on game days. Donghia chairs and lighting by Holly Hunt are joined by an acrylic table by artist Eric Brand of Los Angeles; its top mimics the rings of a tree stump. Sroka kept the palette neutral. "You can only have one diva singing in the room at one time," says Sroka. "It's the architecture."

However quiet the ecru upholstery, a Japanese maple outside the window makes a bold statement with coppery red fall foliage. It is one of a series of discoveries to be savored on a stroll through Fendrick's landscape. Big, open, dramatic spaces alternate with small, secret places, such as a seating alcove sheltered by a canopy of "Tardiva" Hydrangeas. A clearing intended for a fire pit is framed by four Yellowwood trees and encircled by American Boxwoods. The greenhouse will nurture Meyer lemon and orange trees through winter. An herb enclave complements the outdoor grilling area, where hummingbird vines twine around classical garden pyramids. Elsewhere, native and non-native grasses are threaded between clumps of Summersweet, Inkberry, Winterberry, Sourwood and Itzas, with hardy Geraniums at the front of the border and tall white Persicarias at the rear.

"The goal was to create a very textured palette with a range of materials," Fendrick says. She was also concerned about "how you move through the space."

Fendrick left room for the owners to add plantings over time, filling spots among the native blueberries, ornamental grasses, Sweetbay Magnolias and Dogwoods. The site benefited from existing pines and hollies, but rapid-growing non-native species such as Green Giant arborvitae and Cryptomeria were added to increase privacy quickly.

A row of Lacebark Elms marks the "threshold" of the new landscape and the borderline of the original property. Fendrick explains that the idea was to "create an opening in a green wall of plants through which one would enter to get to the enchanted play space." Viburnums, Laurels, Boxwoods and Chamaecyparis were planted under the elms to create a lush gateway.

"The trees will close in on the old house," says Decker. "You won't know you're in a suburban environment anymore."

Linda Hales, former design critic at The Washington Post, writes about architecture and design. Kenneth M. Wyner is a photographer based in Takoma Park, Maryland.

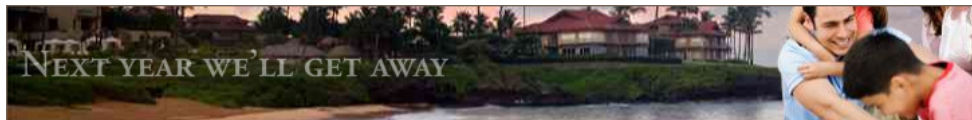
ARCHITECTURE: Anne Decker, AIA, partner in charge, and Richard Rossi, designer, Rill & Decker Architects, Bethesda, Maryland. LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE: Lila Fendrick, Lila Fendrick Landscape Architecture & Garden Design, Chevy Chase, Maryland. INTERIOR DESIGN: Skip Sroka, ASID, and Brian VanFleet, Sroka Design, Bethesda, Maryland. CONTRACTOR: Sandy Spring Builders, Bethesda, Maryland.

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