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Leaving no stone unturned

From pebbles to boulders, landscaping designs incorporate lasting elements

By Susan Harrison Wolffis

By day, Chris Smith is a stone mason, an artist who works with what nature has wrought. He builds walls, by hand, out of field stone, old as the ages. He creates walkways and terraces, steps and stairs, stone gates. He even puts up bridges crafted of stone, designed for sturdy access, destined for posterity.

And when his labor is done, when his day ends as chief mason and owner of Christopher L. Smith Masonry in Brewster, he tends toward the philosophical and talks about “the testimony to the endurance of stone.”

“Stone lasts forever,” Smith says. “It’s not going anywhere.”

Working every day with rocks and stones left behind by the glaciers that created Cape Cod and New England thousands of years ago does something to a person, Smith says.

It makes one look beyond the immediate and take stock.

“When you find a weathered stone, you know it’s been around longer, a lot longer, than you have,” Smith says. “You’re lucky enough, blessed enough, to have it for a little piece of its journey, and, you know, it’s not over. It’s not over yet.”

This artificial water feature matches the type and color of imported stone with that of naturally occurring rocks and boulders on the site.

Photo courtesy of Joyce K. Williams Landscape Design of Chatham







Smith's job has evoked in him a marked reverence for the land, its rocks and stones, and history.

But it also adds the future into the equation.

"When you see stonework, or you look at a project like a wall, whatever, you know it's going to last beyond our lifetime," Smith says. "It will be there when my kids have kids ... and my grandkids have kids. That's how powerful it is."

There's "just something" about stonework – whether it's as functional as a retaining wall or outdoor fire pit or as wondrously aesthetic as a winding garden walk or waterfall – that grabs hold of a homeowner's sensibilities, says Paul Miskovsky, owner of Miskovsky Landscaping in Falmouth.

"It's like there's a soul connection," he says. "It's almost primal in nature."

Maybe that's why, for the last decade,

Cape Cod homeowners – both summer residents and year-round inhabitants – have increasingly turned to field stone, blue stone and other works of nature to enhance their landscaping and outdoor living areas.

"Stone brings us back to our roots," says Anthony Baroni, owner of Stonewood Products, which has locations in Harwich, Mashpee and Boston. "It really is natural ... and that's what people like."

And they like it every which way, even in what some might consider unnatural settings, such as outdoor kitchens constructed out of stone – one of today's most popular trends. There are no walls in these new configurations set in people's backyards, and the "roofs" are created by pergolas made of stone and wood.

"Outdoor kitchens are a great way to extend your house and add 'living' space, if

Spiral stone stairs create an elegant passageway and fill a tight spot on a steep slope.

Below, a stone bench is built into the curve of the lower wall shown above. Photos courtesy of Joyce K. Williams Landscape Design



Rock-solid planning

If you are considering adding some stonework to your landscape — a retaining wall perhaps, a waterfall or even an outdoor kitchen — local landscapers, masons and horticultural specialists have a few tips to get you started:

◆ “Consult a professional and come up with a design on paper first,” says Robert Maffei, owner of Maffei Landscape Contractors in Mashpee. Because stonework is expensive, it’s important to consider all the details of location and installation before laying down stone. Investing a few hundred dollars in the design process “can save several thousands in the install process,” says Maffei.

◆ Be sure to consider the scale of what you’re interested in building and the appropriateness to the site, cautions Joyce K. Williams, owner of Joyce K. Williams Landscape Design in Chatham. In other words, make sure that stone wall or waterfall, the outdoor kitchen or walkway you want isn’t too big for the area in which it will be built.

“Scale matters,” Williams says.

◆ Always, always, always check out local building regulations, as well as Massachusetts’ Wetlands Protection Act and Rivers Protection Act, before starting a project. It is absolutely crucial, Williams says, to be aware of restrictions, special permits and regulations. What you want to build or add to your property might not always be allowed.

◆ As usual with renovations or additions, be realistic and clear about what you can afford to spend.

According to Williams, “Budget always plays a big part of it.” Stonework can be expensive, she says, but don’t give up if you can’t afford your original idea.

“Contractors can usually design their products around a budget,” says Maffei, so set a budget limit right at the start.

“If it’s not in your budget to do a stone enclosure, go for some rocks and a trellis that has a stone base, or do things with individual stones or groups of stones,” adds Williams. “There’s always a way.”

– Susan Harrison Wolffis

you will, but outside,” Baroni says. “Adding on to your house can be costly. This is a more cost-effective way of expanding ...”

But there’s more at play here.

“Look, we live (on) the Cape,” Baroni says. “We have to enjoy the three months of good weather we have – four, if we’re lucky. Why not enjoy being outdoors?”

Add a stone fireplace to the outdoor kitchen and entertaining area, he says, “and you can go into October and still be outdoors. That’s very, very popular these days.”

Baroni and his family added an outdoor kitchen to their personal landscape last year.

“It gets us outside,” he says. “It’s better than sitting inside all the time.”

Although Baroni imports rock and

stone from all over the world, he says good old field stone – the kind Cape Cod farmers once thought of as a hindrance to easy plowing – has enduring appeal.

“Everybody wants something that looks old,” Baroni says. “You know, natural.”

Smith and Miskovsky use New England field stone “harvested” from Connecticut, often from abandoned walls on farms no longer worked, to create new walls and other stonework. Connecticut stone is similar in shape (round), texture and color to that found on the Cape, unlike stone from Pennsylvania, which Miskovsky has used and describes as “flat wafers of stone.”

“It doesn’t belong,” he says.

When he can, Smith “dry lays” the stone, meaning no mortar is used. He builds the wall,

fitting each stone, finding each one its proper and artistic place in the overall creation.

“You can really get lost in the rhythm,” he says. “You can get lost in the art of it.”

Miskovsky does the same, often adding “interesting touches” to whatever he’s building, such as two stone grinding wheels to a wall on his own property.

Stonework is not inexpensive, he says, whether used to structure a patio, a wall or waterfall, or to expand living space outdoors.

“There was a time when all people wanted was a concrete patio, and they were fine with it,” Miskovsky says. “Now, they want stone.”

Comparing the artistry – and emotion – created by concrete to that of stone is like “apples versus oranges,” Miskovsky says. “You just don’t have the same connection to concrete,” he says.

But give him a project in stone where



Paul Miskovsky, owner of Miskovsky Landscaping, works on a dry stone wall in Falmouth.

Cape Cod Media Group photo

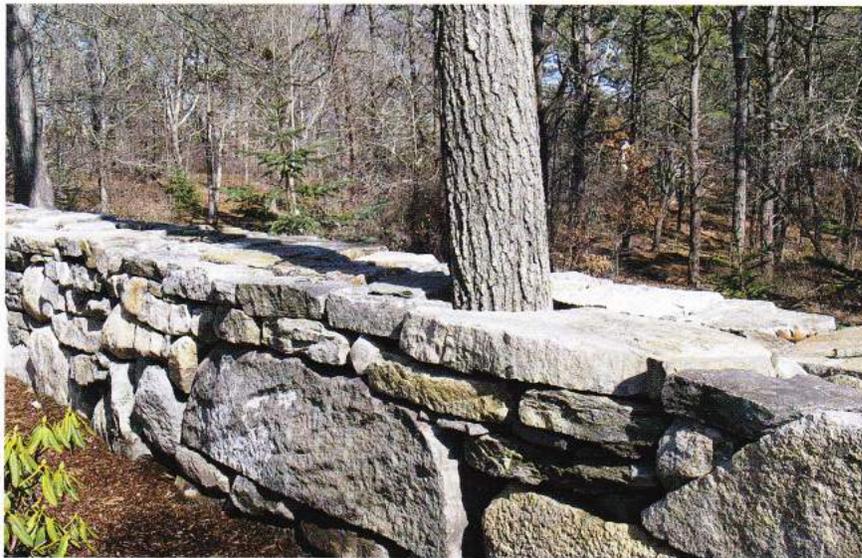


“we’re dealing with what Mother Nature gave us,” he says, like field stone, limestone, reclaimed granite, bluestone, travertine pavers. “And it’s a wide-open palette.”

Joyce K. Williams of Joyce K. Williams Landscape Design in Chatham says the use of stone “brings design to a whole new level.”

“As people’s tastes become more refined, as they’re more well-traveled, more affluent and exposed to higher things, more and more stone has been put into use,” Williams says.

But this goes beyond the latest landscape styles and decorating trends.



Grinding wheels are placed in a dry stone wall in Falmouth designed and made by Paul Miskovsky Landscaping of Falmouth.

Cape Cod Media Group photo

A dry-stacked, aged granite boulder wall accommodates existing trees, helping it to blend seamlessly into the landscape.

Photo courtesy of Joyce K. Williams Landscape Design of Chatham

A handcrafted bluestone gate weighing more than 300 pounds swings on hand-forged hinges that open with a gentle push of just one finger.

Joyce K. Williams Landscape Design





Pencil-line granite treads provide a foothold on sloping ground and follow the natural contours of the site. Mowing around these stairs is much easier than around standard concrete steps. Photo courtesy of Joyce K Williams Landscape Design

A cobblestone track driveway from Maffei Landscape Contractors in Mashpee combines placement of stone and turf in an unusual pattern. Photo courtesy of Robert Maffei





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“Stones are in our DNA to a certain extent,” Williams says. “From the beginning of time, rocks have given us shelter. They’ve been our tools. They’ve given us protection, places to wash clothes, the means to pound grain.”

There is a “special connection,” Williams says, repeating a phrase used by everyone interviewed who works with stone. That bond comes from living on a peninsula with its shorelines of stones, shells and sand.

“Everything shifts in our soil on Cape Cod,” Williams says. “Stone and rock provides a sense of security ... a sense of place.”

That same emotion can be transferred to one’s residence, whether it’s a summer cottage, a second home or a year-round dwelling.

“There is an inherent beauty and strength to stone,” Williams says. “It connects us to the site where we live.” ♦