

BETTER BY DESIGN

SET IN STONE

PLANTS AND STONES ARE EQUAL PARTNERS IN THIS CANADIAN GARDEN, WHERE BEAUTY IS MEASURED BY THE TON.

Pat Weldon kneels to groom a patch of summer-blooming heather next to a five-ton boulder—the largest in her front-yard rock garden.

BY DOUG HALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN TESSLER PRODUCED BY CHRIS CAMPBELL



Pat Weldon's heart was set on gardening when she and her husband, Mike Wolkowicz, moved from Toronto to Victoria, British Columbia. Mike wanted a project he could play a part in too. Their new property, with all its apparent obstacles to establishing a garden, gave them just the sort of challenge they were after.

"We had moved to Victoria to retire, so I was dying to get my fingers into the soil," Pat says. "But the look of what we were faced with on this narrow-pie-shaped lot was less than inspiring. We didn't have any idea as to how we could transform the space."

Three years and many tons of stone later, their home is framed by a rock garden that appears to have been crafted by nature. A tranquil space for outdoor living has been carved into the narrow backyard. Pat and Mike credit Twyla Rusnak and Illarion Gallant, a husband-and-wife garden design team, for guiding them through the landscape transformation. "It was definitely not a do-it-yourself project," Pat says.

Even though Pat and Mike were not the home's first owners, they were faced with an unadorned landscape consisting of a lawn over compacted subsoil. "The developers took out every last ounce of topsoil," Pat says. "So we were sitting right on a layer of shale and clay over bedrock. The first summer we were here we practically had to take a

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Japanese holly, hebe, ceanothus, Hinoki false cypress, and *Viburnum davidii* are among the evergreen shrubs that make a four-season contribution to Pat and Mike's front landscape (top). Orange-red helianthemums and purple aubrieta (above) grow in a carefree, tumbling manner that softens the stones.



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pickax to plant bulbs.” Realizing that such miserable growing conditions would be a continual source of frustration, they followed Rusnak’s advice and took the drastic step of removing the top 18 inches of subsoil and replacing it with good topsoil. The rocks were brought in at the same time and placed with heavy equipment to emulate a natural stone outcropping. Their placement helps to stabilize the slope and create planting pockets.

When landscaping with stones, bigger is nearly always better. “Initially I was concerned that they wouldn’t be large enough,” Pat says. “So I went to the quarry with Illarion and he pointed out his selections, including a five-ton boulder, and I said, ‘Okay, we’re on the same page.’” >> on 000



Stones are ever-present in Pat and Mike’s garden, even in the side yard (top), where slabs of Pennsylvania bluestone form a pathway that meanders between planting beds and connects the front yard with the back. Just three years ago, the side yard was nothing more than bare dirt (above).



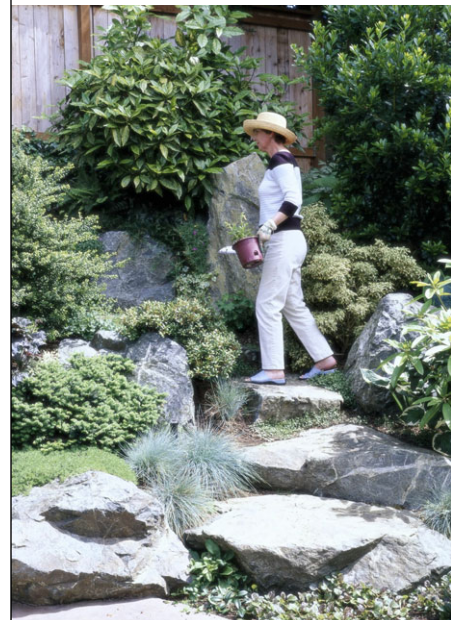
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To imitate nature, stones of all sizes were trucked in, but it's the enormous boulders that get the most attention.

The plantings include dwarf conifers and other low shrubs, ground covers that creep and billow, and perennials for flower color. Tufts of wooly thyme spring from gaps between stepping-stones. Not a bit of bare soil—or lawn—is evident.

Before the landscape makeover, a tall evergreen hedge gave Pat and Mike's backyard a gloomy aspect, even on sunny days. Rusnak removed the hedge and redesigned the space for outdoor living. "Two patios were constructed," Rusnak says, "one to connect with the French doors leading to the family room and kitchen, and the other to the master bedroom." To relieve the narrow boxiness of the 16x60-foot backyard, Rusnak added planting pockets with curved edges and a water feature that bows out >> on 000

Mike designed and built the open-lattice fence and gate (above) at the entrance to the backyard. Above the patio, stones terrace the slope stairstep-fashion (right), giving Pat access to the planting beds.





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of the hillside. A planting bed separates the two patios and offers a green view from indoors.

The patios are of stamped concrete tinted a sandy beige. “We used extra colors in the trowelling stage to give some highlights and depth of color to the surface,” Rusnak says. “The stamps we used give the look of slabs of slate.”

Mike’s most visible contributions to the landscape are the cedar fences and gates, built for privacy and to keep deer out. Deer continue to nip at the unprotected plants in the front yard, but Pat is gradually replacing them with plants the deer won’t touch, such as dwarf iris, heather, Hinoki false cypress, and coreopsis ‘Moonbeam.’

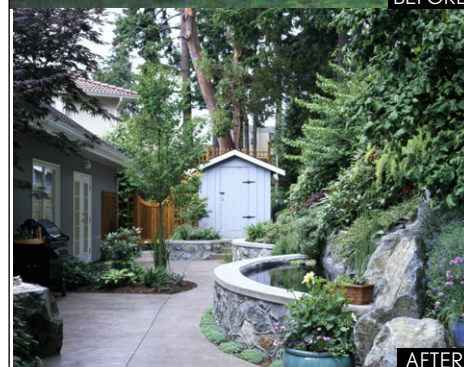
Pat and Mike have chronicled their garden’s development in a photo album. “It was all definitely a challenge,” Pat says as she reviews the garden’s rocky start. “We still have plans for improvement. A garden is never done. But we are having a ball.” 🏡

RESOURCES >> 000

The edge of a raised pond (*above*) doubles as extra seating in the backyard garden. A tool shed (*right, before and after*) is one of the few elements left unchanged during the makeover. Hillside plantings and a small cascade of water replace the overgrown hedge.



BEFORE



AFTER