

# Setting Down Roots on a

# SLIPPERY SLOPE

text and photography by Karen Bussolini



**Everything is harder to do on a steep hill.** Soil erodes, buckets roll downhill, materials and tools have to be schlepped up and down. A full wheelbarrow needs a zigzag path and a place to park where it won't tip over. Footing is iffy. You have to pay attention all the time.

But there are rewards. Gardens ascending behind my two-story house are visible from every room, giving me year-round pleasure.

I didn't start with anything as useful as a clean slate or a clear design. The gardens developed organically; I didn't have a clue about what I was getting into when

Karen Bussolini (*inset, below*) learned a lot from the steep slope behind her Connecticut home. Once the basics were in place, she let much of this low-maintenance perennial garden evolve into a natural attraction that can be enjoyed year-round.

I first stood looking up at a deer-infested mountainside of rocks, invasive multiflora roses, Japanese honeysuckle, and bittersweet, with a perennial in one hand and a shovel in the other.

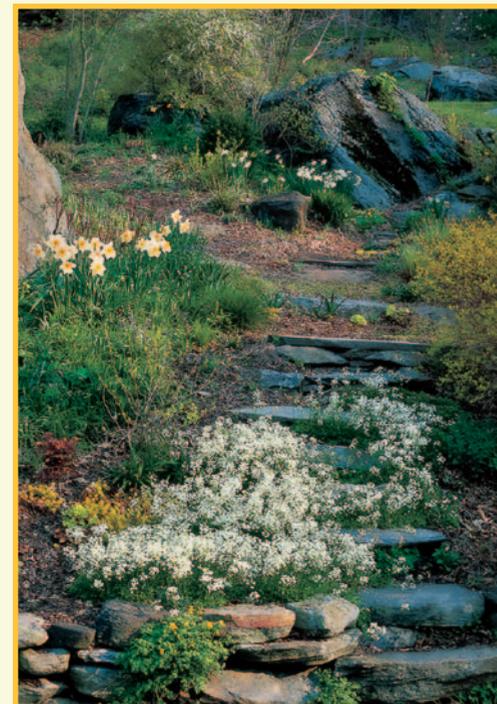
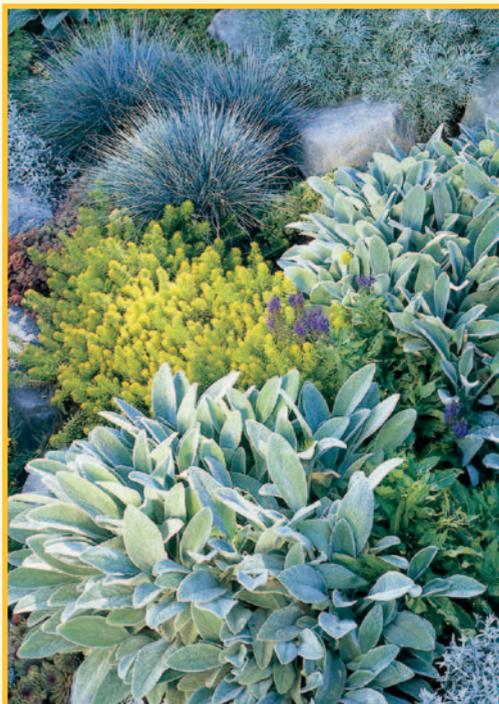
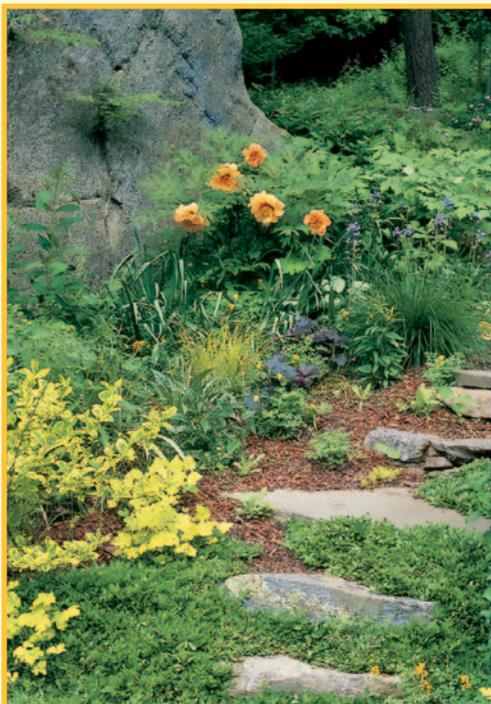
I've learned much to ease the way—and unlearned quite a bit of what I knew about gardening as well.

## WHERE TO BEGIN?

**Deer taught me to follow contours across the slope rather than work straight up and down.** Their trails became my grass paths. I wanted a wild, natural garden and figured that, since plants were already growing there (mostly tough, rhizomatous grasses and deep-rooted weeds topped by woody invasives), I'd just amend the soil and replace them with politer plants.

Mowing grass paths was foolhardy. Even mown, they were hard to navigate when the grass was wet. Just as daunting, the descent was often faster than planned. Structures for access and secure footing—steps, terraces, and retaining walls—were needed. These would also make it seem more like a garden and less like a hiking trail. My initial effort involved skimpy stone steps and low retaining walls. I called it “a garden for mountain goats.”

Until plants have matured, cover all of the bare ground with mulch to help suppress weeds. Plant low-growing grasses and perennials densely. As they grow, they will fill in around rocks, help to hold the soil in place, and retain water.



The best investment I made, 15 years into it, was hiring professionals to replace the angled grass paths with a wide, level, stone path—almost a mini-terrace. They removed everything I had planted, built supports with rocks rolled downhill and crushed stone hauled uphill, laid a meandering mix of irregular bluestone and fieldstones, regraded, and replanted. With level places, I realized that I could sit down on a chair instead of a rock. I loved having places for people and places where only plants would be. With good footing and no grass to creep into beds, maintenance became 1,000 percent easier. The stone path knit together all of the little beds clustered around large rocks into one big satisfying garden.

## STEP-BY-STEP SOLUTIONS

■ **Disturb the ground as little as possible.** Forget double-digging: Just smother weeds by laying down layers of newspaper, cardboard, wood chips, straw, or other organic matter. Let it sit a few months and plant right into it.

■ **Remove loose rocks and incorporate the rest into your design.** If rocks look too randomly scattered, “plant” a few more until it looks right. If your shovel hits buried rocks, plant whatever will grow over or around them. Probe

the soil with a piece of steel rebar to locate deeper pockets of soil. Never buy a tree until you've dug a hole for it first.

■ **Work with what is already there as much as possible** and use what nature planted. The last glacier deposited a house-size boulder that split into pieces, giving me a sheltered garden room and a dramatic trail of fragments spilling downhill, which I echo with drifts of plants.

(continued)

Break up steps with paths or stepping-stones for wheelbarrow access and to help keep rainwater from running down the hill.

## landscape design

Oak saplings from acorns planted by a squirrel are now a grove in a place too steep for me to have considered. Tenacious spicebushes and ferns require no care. If you have ledges with mosses, lowbush blueberries, or colonies of sedges, or, in the West, salal, treasure these survivors and plant more.

■ **Keep water from running straight downhill.** Incorporate dips and bumps so that it can soak in. Avoid long runs of steps, which can become waterfalls. Use ramps, diagonals, and contours instead. Stagger plants. Build soil dams to catch water below new plantings or buttress them temporarily with flat stones, boards, or logs until plants are established.

■ **Cover all bare ground.** Coarse wood chip mulch holds soil in place and suppresses weeds until plants fill in. Finer mulch might work well once plants are established.

■ **Choose low-care, deer-resistant, drought-tolerant perennial plants** with year-round presence that want to grow in the conditions you have. There is no room for prima donnas or fussy arrangements on a slope.

■ **Plant in layers** and choose regionally adapted, ground-covering plants of various heights that . . .

**form colonies**—Canada mayflower; ferns, grasses, and sedges ('Beatlemania', 'Ice Dance'); "no mow" grass mixes

**form mats**—creeping sedums, dianthus, foamflower, lambs' ears, native Allegheny spurge, thyme

**have fibrous roots**—Christmas ferns

**self-layer or sucker, especially thicket-forming shrubs**—'Nikko' slender deutzia, 'Gro-Low' fragrant sumac, 'Henry's Garnet' Virginia sweetspire

**self-sow**—feverfew, penstemons, species bulbs such as snowdrops and scilla

**spread by stolons**—creeping phlox, red osier dogwood

**wedge their roots into small spaces**—agaves, yuccas

■ See what survives and repeat your successes.



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**Karen Bussolini** is a garden photographer, writer, lecturer, and eco-friendly garden coach whose roots are deeply sunk into a mountain-side in South Kent, Connecticut.