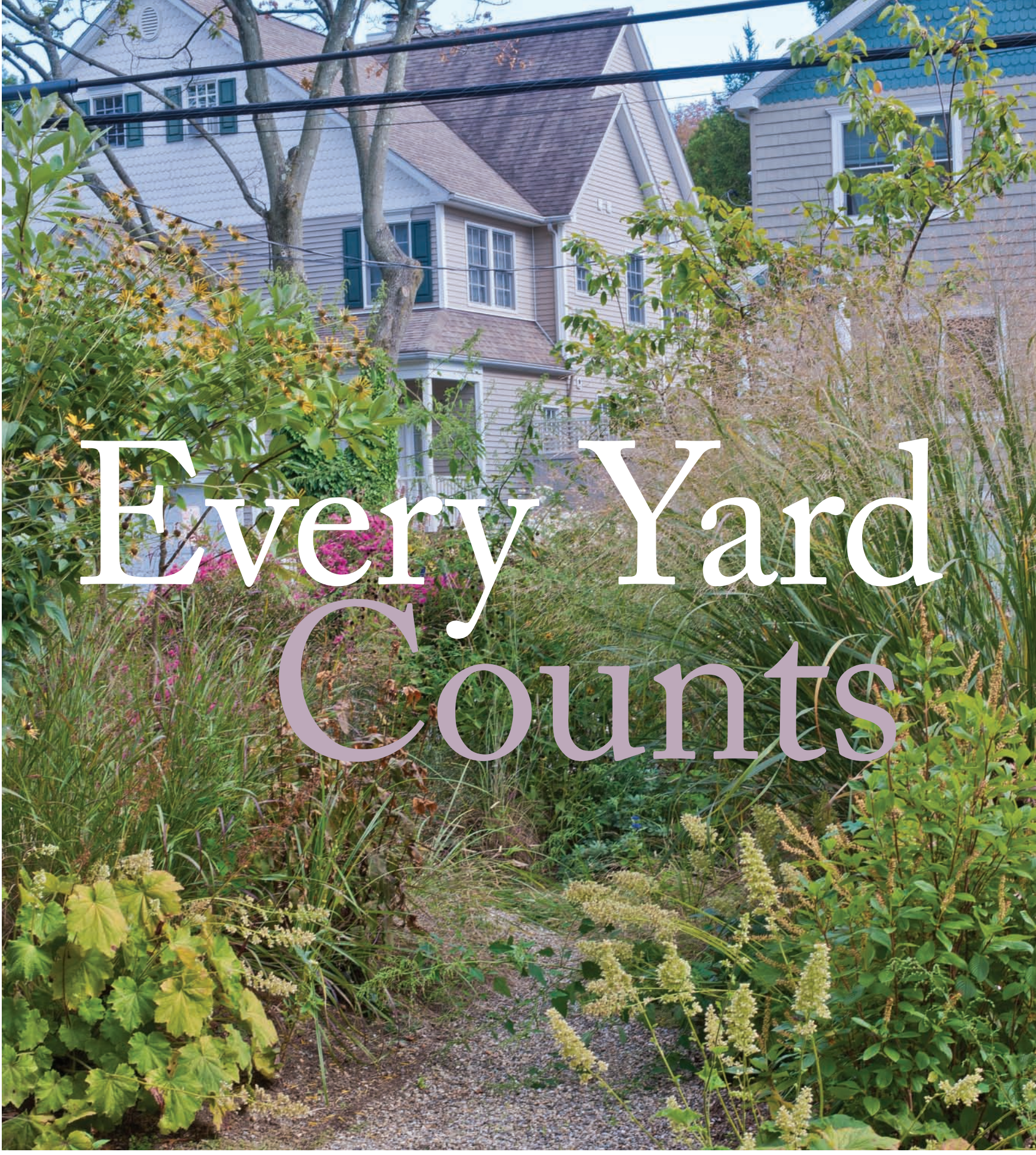


Every Yard Counts

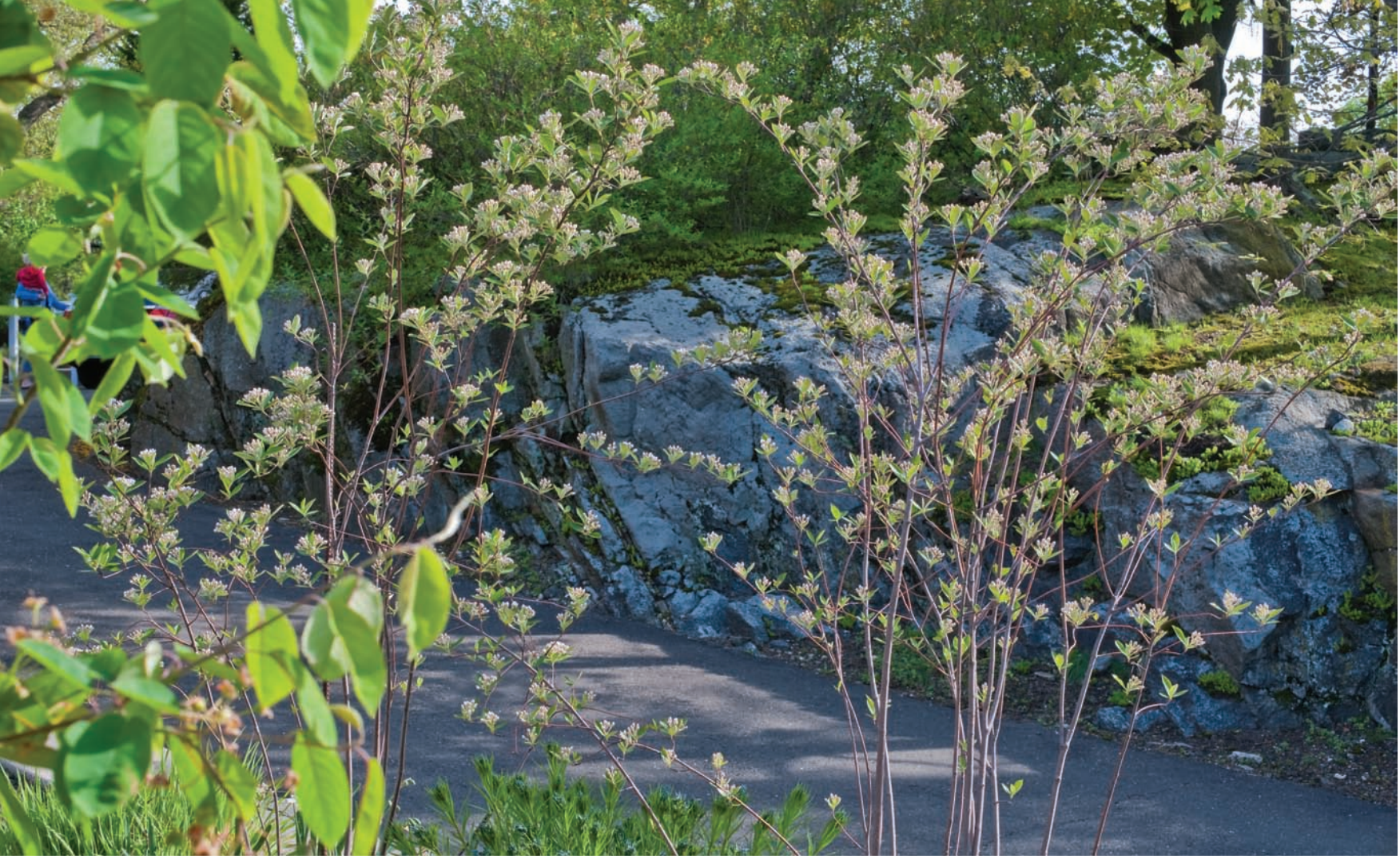
OPPOSITE One year after planting, shadblow trees (*Amelanchier* **x *grandiflora* 'Autumn Brilliance')** and switchgrass (***Panicum virgatum***) planted on a low berm create an intimate space and partially conceal houses across the street. A variety of showy composites (black-eyed Susans, asters, boltonias) make for a long season of bloom and feed insects and birds with both nectar and seeds. HERE Early fall-blooming *Heuchera villosa* 'Autumn Bride' is a magnet for native bees.

How one yard changed the block – and how yours can too

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KAREN BUSSOLINI**

TWO YEARS AGO I WAS ASKED to create a garden in a pleasant upscale neighborhood that was – unfortunately – like so many others. This one happened to be in coastal southern Connecticut, just a short commute to New York City, but it could have been anywhere.

In nearly every yard, stormwater raced through downspouts and across clipped lawns, non-porous driveways and sidewalks out to the street's storm sewers on its way to nearby Long Island Sound. Rain or shine, automatic irrigation systems periodically drenched lawns and sidewalks with treated drinking water.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Multi-stemmed spring-blooming **chokeberries** underplanted with **blue star** (*Amsonia hubrichtii*) in a narrow bed along the front walk screens the driveway. • Each to its own niche: **Summersweet** (*Clethra alnifolia*) benefits from rainwater directed under the path from a downspout, ***Heuchera villosa*** likes the shade of taller grasses or shrubs, trees root into deeper soil in front berm. • Drifts of **boltonias** ('Snowbank' and extra-tall 'Pink Beauty') grow through leggy **chokeberries** and **shadblows**, while **fragrant sumac** (*Rhus aromatica* 'Grow-low') spills over the retaining wall. BELOW Native bees feed on a magenta fall-blooming **New England aster** (*Symphotrichum novae-angliae* 'Alma Potschke').

Except for a few joggers and dog-walkers, people rarely appeared – other than an army of workmen with their massive mowers, gas-powered trimmers and backpack sprayers. After soil was compacted by the mowing and doused with chemical fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides and fungicides, loud gas-powered blowers finished the job. Rather than compost them in place, workers carted leaves and lawn clippings "away," then piled on trucked-in wood-chip mulch.

Today, neighbors stop to appreciate my client Sarah's redesigned yard – which we hope is doing its part to make a positive environmental impact.

Sustainable landscaping is at once intensely local and universal. Changing the norm of vast lawns and wasteful and polluting management practices in millions of yards across the country would have a huge beneficial effect on the environment.

Homeowners can follow many of the same practices Sarah and I used to achieve a more sustainable garden wherever they are, if they choose locally adapted plants appropriate to their site. I share here how I transformed Sarah's yard, as a guide that can be used elsewhere, in the belief that we can change the world – one yard at a time.

Like most of her neighbors, Sarah spent many hours a day commuting to an office job in New York City. She wanted to spend the little time she had at home enjoying her yard, but there was little to enjoy. What then passed for lawn was a 21-by-30-foot sun-baked rectangle of patchy crabgrass and clover contained by a low retaining wall and struggling to survive in concrete-hard soil. It sloped uncomfortably toward the street, and the view was of windows of houses across the street. Exactly once a week, on Saturday, she walked down the front walk to the mailbox rather than collecting mail from the car.

The way to a sustainable garden

THE BEFORE AND AFTER PICTURES ABOVE, taken three months apart, might look like there was a team of us working on Sarah's yard, but all it took was my two hands, two feet, a shovel, rake and a couple of helpers for heavy soil prep and tree planting.

Soil Using existing native soil is best. But we had compacted, sterile dirt and needed soil to build berms, so we bought a humus/loam mix from a reputable local composting operation. Stripping off all existing sod (composting it on-site) and turning in 4 inches of new soil broke up compaction, made an interface with existing soil and gave me a blank slate upon which to draw.

Design I did a quick sketch over a scaled plot plan, but the real designing came from drawing with my feet. This works especially well with a small space. Just walk around – where does it feel comfortable to walk? Where do you want to linger? How do you get from here to there? Are there views you'd like to see or not see? I drove stakes in the ground to position trees, flags for shrubs, double-checking from indoors. I scuffed my feet in the soil to outline berms and draw a comfortably curved path wide enough for two people to stroll side-by-side from the front door around to the far side yard.

Construction Sculpting the berm was hands-on (and feet-on). We wheelbarrowed soil in, mounded it along the perimeter and raked it out to establish hills and hollows. Letting soil (and plants) spill onto the unattractive retaining wall softened its visual impact. The gravel path was locally sourced native stone with a few irregular bluestones laid in to direct the eye and break up the "runway" look of the front sidewalk. We dug down 4 inches and tossed soil onto the berms, added 2 inches of stone dust and stomped it down, then added 2 inches of 3/8-inch driveway stone, creating a semi-permeable walkable surface with a satisfying crunch. When we were done, the front walk was the only place water could leave the property.

Plants To maximize both diversity and cohesiveness, I used many plants of a few species and a few plants of many others. In a small space, every plant counts. I chose reliable, locally grown Eastern natives plus a few insect-attracting herbs, all with exceptional wildlife value over a long season of interest. This is a monarch butterfly migration route, so we included many fall-blooming asters (*Symphyotrichum spp*.) for nectar to fuel their journey.

Niches In nature, plants grow in community, each species finding its own niche. We created diverse niches by varying topography and planting in layers. Deep moisture-retentive soil on berms supports trees, which create shade. The street side is full-sun and dry, and downspouts pool water by the roots of moisture-loving plants (*Magnolia virginiana*, bee balm and *Clethra alnifolia*). Gravel mixed with soil at path edges supports plants that prefer gravelly, poor soil (yuccas, butterflyweed).

Maintenance An initial light layer of mulch conserved moisture, stemmed erosion and discouraged weeds until the plants fill in. Plant debris, except for weed seeds and rhizomes, is retained, to mulch and return nutrients to the soil. All plants need watering at first, but once they're established they're on their own (except for trees in a prolonged drought). Spring and fall tidying and occasional judicious snipping keep it looking nice.

We deadhead most perennials to encourage them to produce additional blooms (for nectar and beauty) but stop deadheading in late summer, leaving seedheads to provide seeds for birds throughout the winter and encourage self-sowing. Weed seeds do drift in, but as time goes on, we will only have to weed a bit and edit (with a light hand) as this plant community becomes increasingly self-maintaining but ever full of surprises.

Native shrubs make a show in early spring, becoming a green background until fall foliage turns to a blaze of color. As the summer progresses, warm-season grasses and flowering perennials grow taller and take the spotlight, then offer a subtle palette of color throughout the winter, after which they are cut to the ground. In the rest of the neighborhood a lot of effort goes toward keeping everything the same, but we embrace change and can't wait to see what happens next.

For our first meeting, I invited her to a presentation I was giving on native plants at the local Audubon Center. Talking it over by the nature center's sunny parking lot afterward, we watched birds flit in and out of dense native bayberry thickets and butterflies flutter by. We listened to a pleasant symphony of birdsong and swishing wind-blown grasses. There was more sensory pleasure and sense of place in this parking lot than in Sarah's entire neighborhood. She realized then that she wanted flowers and birds and a connection with nature, a yard that was a sanctuary, not a sterile showplace.

I suggested wrapping a low soil berm around the yard's perimeter to catch stormwater, allowing it to infiltrate and remain available to plants. On top, a grove of small multi-stemmed native trees and shrubs would create shade, privacy and a sense of enclosure. Thinning out lower branches would allow underplanting with drifts of drought-tolerant native grasses and showy flowering perennials. Embraced by the berm, a loosely semi-circular gravel walk would invite strolling on a firm, level surface. Anybody could do this anywhere, with regionally appropriate plants.

The first night after I set trees and shrubs in place, fireflies appeared, then birds came. I got an excited phone call a few weeks later. "There's a butterfly on my butterflyweed!" The little girl next door soon inhabited the garden, immersing herself in imaginative play. She delights in the many kinds of butterflies and has taken to carefully selecting just one each of every flower and presenting the bouquet to the owner, who is always charmed. Sarah loves how the garden engages all the senses. "I walk outside all the time now just to enjoy it and see what's going on, not just to get the paper," she says. "I love to hear the crunch of gravel underfoot, and the undulating path is so mysterious … the way it curves around the house makes it feel like I could go on endlessly."

She wakes to birds chirping, savors the lemony fragrance of sweetbay magnolia blossoms drifting in the air and the ever-changing flower colors. She is fascinated by the activity of the bees and hovering insects. On her way to the mailbox every day she stops to pat the irresistible white pine 'soft touch.' Joggers and dog-walkers now stop to chat and look. The rattiest yard on the block has become a local landmark, a meeting place buzzing with life. It is now a welcoming habitat for people as well as wildlife. I hope that it also quietly inspires others to create beautiful, life-supporting landscapes in their own yards. ❁

Garden photographer, writer and speaker Karen Bussolini (www.karenbussolini.com) is also an eco-friendly garden coach and a NOFA (Northeast Organic Farmers Association)-Accredited Organic Land Care Professional.

ABOVE A combination that will look good for many months: **Aronia berries** color up early and hang on to brighten winter days until birds eat them on their return migration in spring. **Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)** produces small seeds eaten by many birds. Thinning to keep shrubs leggy and open allows for dense planting that discourages weeds.