



# STICKS & STONES

SALVAGED MATERIALS FIND A NEW HOME

IN A CHARMING VERMONT GARDEN.

By Therese Ciesinski ~ Photography by Matthew Benson



Alan Benoit is standing on his patio, describing how he and his wife, Nancy, laid the stone for its wall, when two chipmunks pop their heads out from their den in the wall's recesses. Checking for predators, they ignore the man, darting around his feet and onto the nut-covered tree stump where the Benois leave food for wildlife. One chipmunk gets there first, snags a nut, then casually doubles back to stash it in the wall.

For the Benois, these chipmunks, and the birds, insects, and occasional visiting moose, are welcome cohabitants on their land. The couple has spent the past 12 years intimately studying the property and the creatures on it. Alan is an architect by vocation, a naturalist and horticulturist by avocation. He and Nancy designed their organic gardens to feed both themselves and wildlife by using the principles of permaculture, which considers a property an agricultural ecosystem: All its parts are interdependent, meant to be fully utilized for food-growing, and managed as sustainably as possible.

So the chipmunks have their cache, and the Benois have one, too. Under tarps in the back yard sit wood boards and brick, slate tiles and stone—materials the couple locates for free, carts away, and saves, often for years, until they find a use for them. From ditches and roadsides, teardowns and renovations, the couple intercepts the landfill-bound, rescues the Dumpster-destined, liberates the ignored and discarded. These materials have been recycled into a studio and a barn, one shed, pathways and stairs, a patio and a fireplace. All built, you could say, for peanuts.

And built by their own labor. “We do the work ourselves. Everything is at a human scale,” Alan says. Because all the components of the property are in proportion and relate to each other, the house and gardens feel comfortable and welcoming. No one element overwhelms. There is harmony.

Harmony was what the Benois were looking for when they came to Manchester Center, a small town in Vermont’s Green Mountains, from Rhode Island in 2001. They wanted a slower, more deliberate way of life that embraced nature and allowed them to develop their talents and follow their passions. Alan started his own architecture firm, Sustainable Design, which builds affordable, energy-efficient houses and designs landscapes to complement them. Nancy is a graphic designer and shoemaker. Always interested in cooking, she found that her enthusiasm increased as the gardens matured and the harvest became more abundant and varied. “Now, if we plant something, I want to get food from it,” she says.

Most of the gardens, including a tiny orchard and a vegetable garden, are sited in front of the house to take advantage of the sun, but also to leave the wooded back yard for wildlife. The vegetable garden includes onions, peas, squash, and lettuce, but food grows everywhere, including the length of the gravel driveway. Twenty ‘Brandywine’ tomato plants—their favorite for flavor and therefore the only tomato the Benois grow—separate their property from the neighbors, flanked by asparagus, grapes, and raspberries. Nancy cooks from the

**Clockwise from top left:** Nancy and Alan Benoit. • An arbor draped in roses and clematis signals the entrance to the garden. • The cottage garden. • Stone steps from the kitchen to the patio. **Below:** Part of the couple’s stash of bricks and lumber.







## Site Plan

- |                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Parking pad   | 7. Prairie shed   |
| 2. Vegetable bed | 8. Nut trees      |
| 3. House         | 9. Cottage garden |
| 4. Patio         | 10. Orchard       |
| 5. Patio garden  | 11. Shoe studio   |
| 6. Barn          | 12. Vegetable bed |



garden every day, saying, “I can, dry, and freeze what we don’t eat fresh. Nothing tastes as good as peaches in February.”

In order to have a patio right outside the kitchen door, the Benois sacrificed a garage for a gravel parking pad. A home-made arbor covered in ‘New Dawn’ roses and virgin’s bower (*Clematis virginiana*) signals the entrance to the garden. Beyond it, set in a clipped lawn, stands a mini orchard of five dwarf trees: ‘Reliance’ peach, ‘Honeycrisp’ apple, ‘Bosc’ pear, ‘Mount Royal’ plum, and ‘Bali’ cherry. Dotted around the property are nut trees: chestnuts, butternuts, and 20 hazelbert bushes, a cross between a hazelnut and a filbert.

The front garden, surrounded by ‘The Fairy’ and rugosa roses, is accented by sculptures Alan carved from white marble, southern Vermont’s most bountiful crop. While a few annuals occupy pots, the ornamental plants are all perennials. “They look more real,” Alan says. Some are natives, such as river birch (*Betula nigra*) and bugbane (*Actaea racemosa*); some are edibles like herbs and rhubarb; others are pass-along plants from family: peonies from Nancy’s father, and the large climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala petiolaris*) that grew in their former garden. A year before the move, Alan cut the vine back and root-pruned it. The next year, they dug it up and carried it north. It survived the move and then some: The stem is now bigger than a fist.

Alan practices what he calls “Darwinian landscaping.” “If it cannot survive in this yard, I never plant it again. I don’t force something to grow where it doesn’t want to grow.” He has bent the rule for a hedge of native cranberrybush viburnum (*V. trilobum*) struggling through a viburnum beetle infestation. “I’ve used insecticidal soap, hand-picking, and finally cutting the hedge back to the ground in the hopes of outwitting the beetles’ life cycle. If that doesn’t work, I will have to find something else to plant.”

The patio is a three-season spot where the Benois eat, lounge, cultivate the adjacent native plants, and watch wildlife and the weather. The fireplace and hardwood-burning grill are built of bricks; the rest of the patio with slate and stone, all reclaimed. “On any day where it gets to be 40 degrees or so, we’re out here bundled up, with a fire going, drinking mugs

**Clockwise from top left:** The fireplace is hand made. • A ‘New Dawn’ rose. • Reused barn hardware. • Alan sculpts in white marble. • Both barn and patio are built from reclaimed materials. **Below:** Salvaged bricks stacked to make a barbecue.







of soup and watching what’s happening in the garden,” Nancy says. The plot is anchored by shrubs, including witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), fern leaf buckthorn (*Rhamnus frangula* ‘Asplenifolia’), and elderberries (*Sambucus*), and underplanted with native wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), bugbane (*Actaea racemosa*), and barrenwort (*Epimedium*), many deliberately chosen to feed insects, birds, and yes, chipmunks.

The cottage’s storybook charm belies its relative youth. Built by a brick mason in 1951, the solid structure bears few hallmarks of the atomic age, except for the basement bomb shelter that Nancy now uses as a root cellar and pantry for the vegetables and fruits she cans.

The Benoits live small, quite contentedly. The house is 900 square feet, and like the gardens, the interior is built with recycled and repurposed materials. The coziness doesn’t crowd because the outbuildings serve as extra rooms. Nancy makes hand-crafted, one-of-a-kind shoes, and her business, Sole of Vermont, is housed in a studio the two built in 2008. Its passive solar design uses the winter sun for heat, and on cables on the side of the porch grow Dutchman’s pipe (*Aristolochia macrophylla*), a native that acts as a screen to block the summer sun. The reused gutters and downspouts channel water to a tank the Benoits use to irrigate the adjacent vegetable garden and to take a dip in when the weather gets hot.

The barn looks as though it has sat on its spot for decades, but it was built on site in 2004 from recycled wood in an old-fashioned barn raising with friends. The slate shingles are on their third roof. With the interior just completed, the barn will host dinner parties and workshops on food preservation, permaculture, and garden design.

The Benoits bring their passion for gardening and sustainability into their community. To demonstrate that peaches can yield well in Vermont—one year, their single tree produced 80 pints canned, in addition to what they used fresh and gave away—they worked with a local group to sell and plant more than 350 fruit trees in the Manchester area. They collaborated with town officials, members of the community, and the local farmers’ market to create a meeting place for the town in what was a neglected local park.

The couple’s to-do list is ambitious. Eventually, the boards from a neighbor’s dismantled garage, stored in the building they call the prairie shed, will become a three-season porch, and the shed will be turned into Alan’s long-awaited office. Finding materials is never a problem. “The supply line’s there,” Alan says. “It’s just a matter of interrupting the flow to the Dumpster.” He smiles and adds, “What I can never find enough of is time.” •

For more information, see Find It Here on page 88.

**Clockwise from top left:** Nancy crafts one-of-a-kind shoes.

• Shoe forms in various sizes.

• Dutchman’s pipe shades the studio’s porch in summer.

• The stock tank has a mesh screen so any creatures that fall in can climb out. • ‘Stella de Oro’ daylilies line the path to the studio. **Below:** Nancy cools off in the stock tank.

