

September 2020



Fall Projects  
& Plants

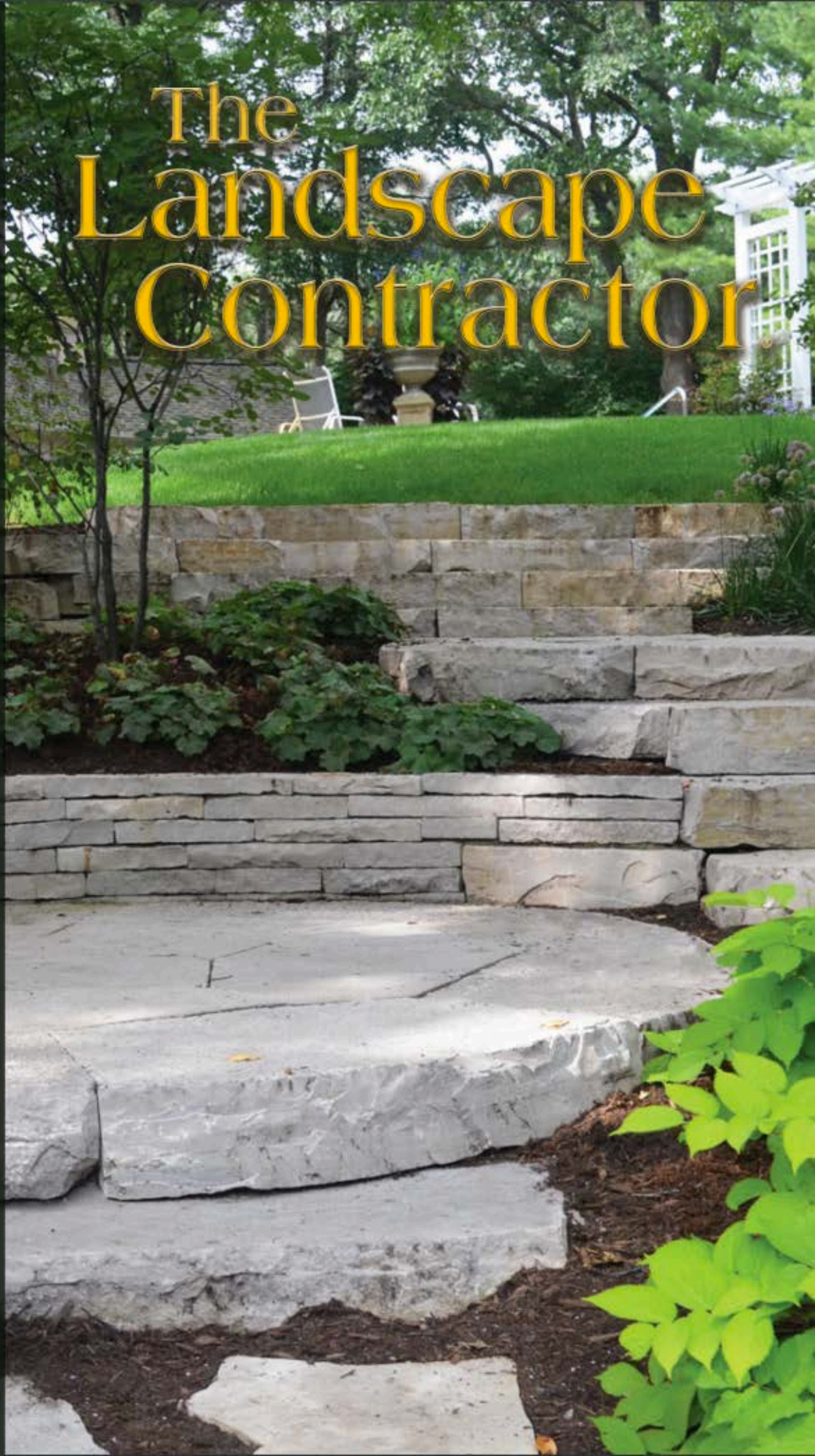


*Paths & Walkways*



*Trellises & Panels*

# The Landscape Contractor



# *Paths and Walkways:*

by Heather Prince

**Be they utilitarian or** filled with mystery, paths take us on a journey through our myriad landscapes every day. As designers and contractors, we have the opportunity to create a journey from here to there and perhaps make it more meaningful by our materials and plant choices.

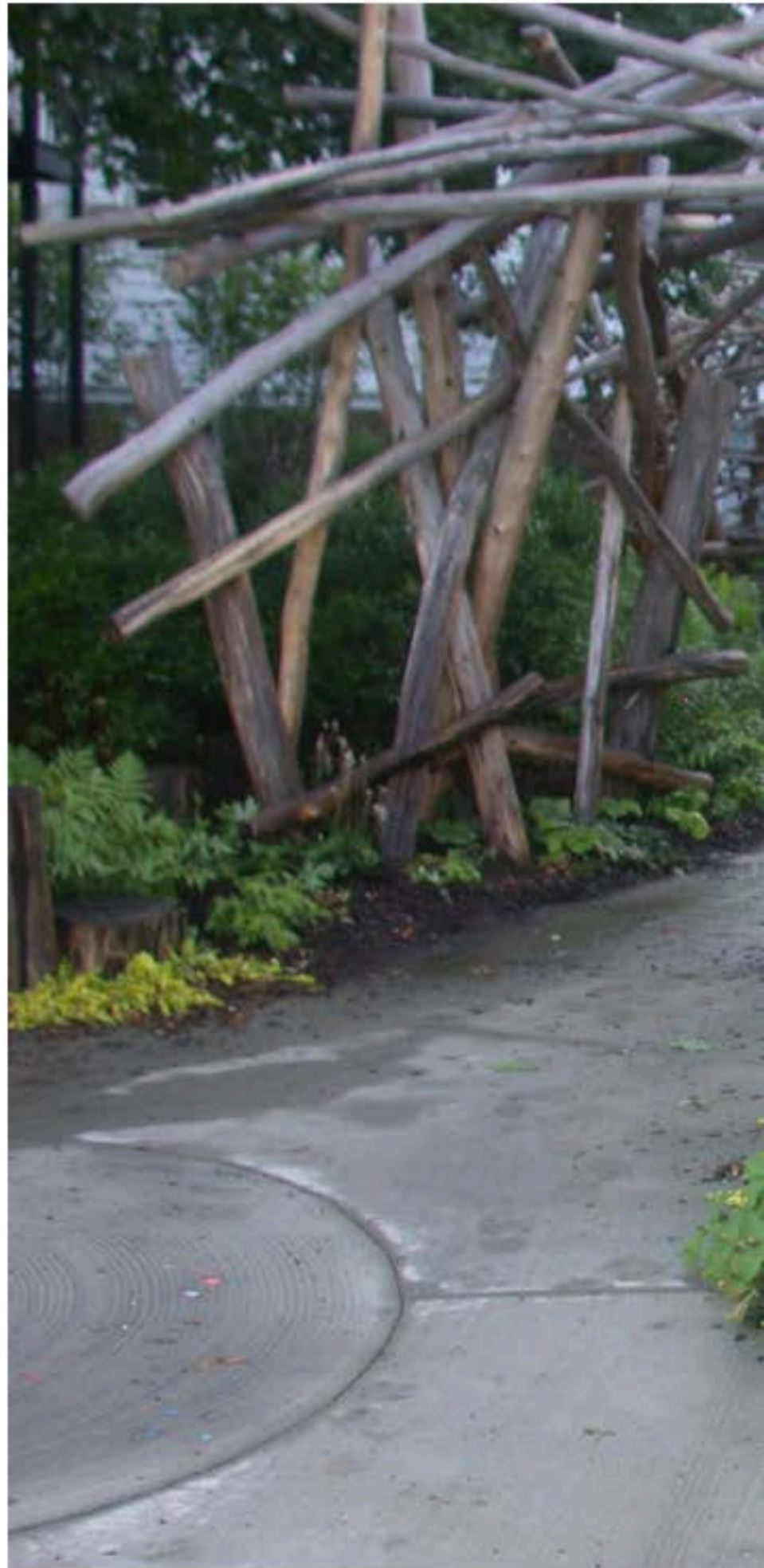
We talked with Julie Moir Messervy, renowned landscape designer of a long list of dynamic public and private projects as well as author of nine books. The owner of Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio, a landscape architecture and design firm in Vermont, she is also the founder and president of Home Outside, which offers online landscape design services as well as apps homeowners and contractors can use to design properties.

Paths and walkways play a particularly important role in Messervy's work. "As I wrote in *Home Outside*, a path moves you from one area of your property to another and creating a sense of flow makes the transitions feel seamless and harmonious. A path is a physical journey from Point A to Point B—yet it also takes you on a mind journey, as you glimpse what's ahead or pause to take in a view or focal point," commented Messervy.

When approaching an existing site, including ways to move through the space can be a part of the site analysis. "It's helpful to start by mapping the desire lines — the routes people naturally take around the property: between the driveway and side door, for example, or from the back door to the dining terrace," observed Messervy. "Look for the worn paths through the grass that show where people tend to travel. Sometimes the shortest distance between two points is the ideal place for a path, but you'll often want to add interest to the journey or create some breathing room with a longer, curving path." By detailing the ways people already use the property, it can set walkways or reinforce elements to change foot traffic.

As you set out to design paths, there are many elements to consider. Client needs and wants come first, of course, but there are some things to remember as you sketch out your ideas. Is more than one person using the path? Should it feel enclosed or open? Are folks with special needs using the path? Are garden machines like mowers or snowblowers going to be employed? "For residential paths, try pushing a wheelbarrow down the path—if it's easy to navigate, then the path is wide enough, and the curves will feel gracious rather than abrupt," commented Messervy. This is also important if people will be traveling along it together instead of single file. She also added,

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# Creating a Journey



*This small school garden has a beaver theme, with a concrete path mimicking a stream running through a meadow and ending at a beaver lodge structure for gatherings and outdoor classes. Design by JMMDS. Beaver lodge and tunnel by wood artist Mark Ragonese. Photo courtesy of JMMDS.*

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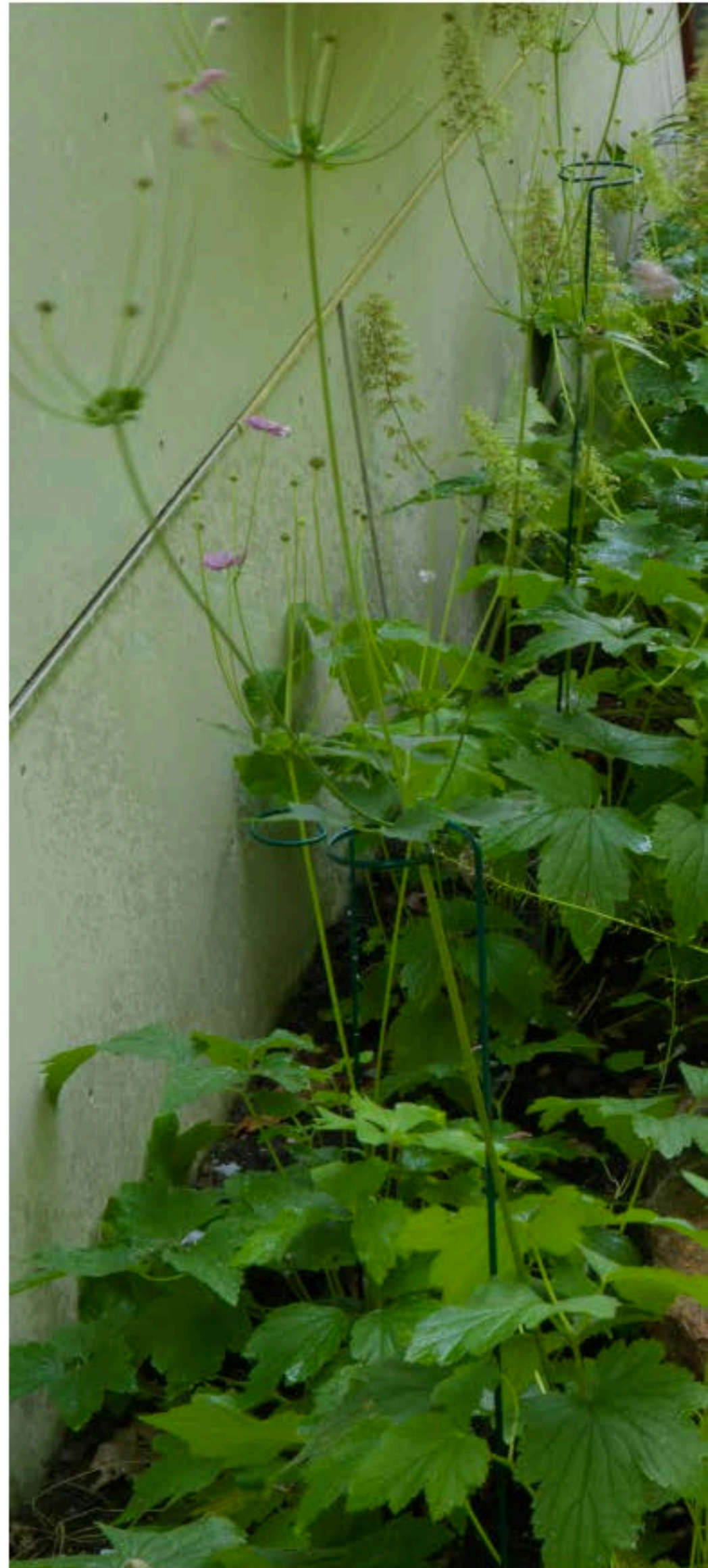
“Consider the views all along the path, and design intermittent highlights that lead one farther along.” This is an opportunity to create surprises or mini destinations along the way to break up or enliven the journey. “Create thresholds, using plants, walls, and structures, or even the material of the path itself, as I did with the concrete eddy at the Toronto Music Garden,” she suggested. Thresholds not only mark transitions from one place to another, they also provide an opportunity to pause, enjoy a moment, or reorient yourself on the journey. They can also be a place to gather, rest, or relax into the space.

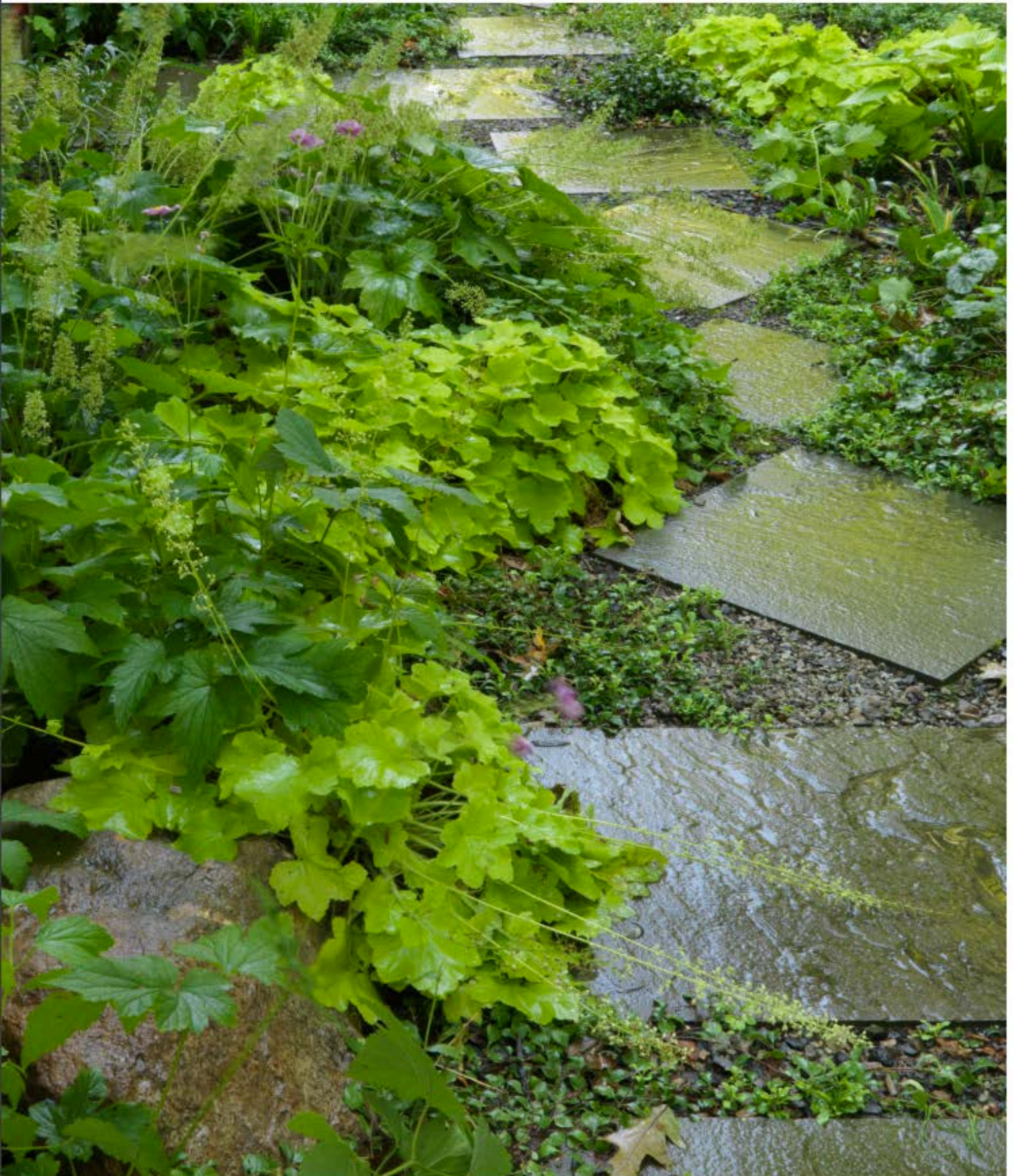
What happens at night? “Light the path with in-ground light fixtures set among groundcover plants along the way,” recommended Messervy. Lighting not only adds safety, but charm, elegance, or a personal touch to the path. No one likes to stumble around in the dark and a thoughtfully lit path invites you along the journey without tripping or getting lost.

Material choices are key to creating the atmosphere and reinforcing the aesthetics of your design. From stone to ceramic to mulch to concrete, the choices are limitless. Think about your clients’ personalities and if there are elements from their lives that are important to include like grandchildren’s footprints or beach stones from a memorable trip. Concrete offers myriad solutions, but Messervy gravitates to “Crushed stone, natural flat stepping stones, steel edging, granite edging.” As materials choices expand, sustainability can be an important consideration for clients. “Clover seed (for mowable paths), reclaimed granite, iron, blackened steel, local fieldstone and gravel, solar-powered marine-grade wall lights,” she commented, are all favorites for more sustainable options. Think about practicality on the job site as well. You may love the look of slabs of natural stone, but will the budget and timeline allow? “Large, thick slabs of heavy natural cleft stone are difficult to move and can be tricky to shape to fit with the adjacent stone,” observed Messervy and may limit how much you can include in your project.

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*R: Square bluestone pavers set on the angle give a lively rhythm to this sideyard path; the geometric shapes are softened by ruffy, billowy foliage. Design by JMMDS. Photo by Susan Teare.*





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As you attempt to narrow your materials choices, what are your aesthetic goals? Do you want to warm up the space for entertaining? Cool down the experience for peace and serenity? For warming, “Try natural wood; self-weathering steel; clusters of potted plants in corners, on stairs, and along paths; vines on structures; warm-hued flowers; heavily textured stone; and brick,” suggested Messervy. To calm things down, “I like white paint; dark gray-black painted walls/fencing; smooth stone or tile; stuccoed vertical surfaces; blue-gray gravel; white, blue, purple blossoms; dark green foliage; galvanized steel; recirculating water; shade cloth; and wide-canopy deciduous trees for shade.”

Be creative and have fun! “One really fun project that we created was a design for Shore Country Day School in Beverly, Massachusetts,” recalled Messervy. “The school’s mascot was the beaver, so we made the path like a stream that meandered through a beaver meadow, winding up at a beaver lodge that served as an outdoor classroom.” Sometimes a challenging space can be one of the most magical. “A really interesting residential property we designed had a narrow, shady side yard that required a path to the kitchen door and a deck beyond. We used square cut bluestone pavers set on the diagonal like diamonds, interspersed with rectangles that served as thresholds or pausing places. The angular pavers were softened with lush plantings of billowy groundcover plants. It turned a utilitarian space into a beautiful, contemplative experience where people love to pause and look about them.”

No matter the project, paths and walkways give you an opportunity to create a journey and tell a story. A detailed site analysis and client communication can offer ways to stretch your creativity and utilize the many sustainable materials choices available to elevate the project and delight the property owner. 🌿

*R: In the Prelude section at the beginning of the Toronto Music Garden, a public garden inspired by Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1, circular eddies are etched into the path, while groups of boulders line the banks like island shores. Design by JMMDS. Photo by Adrian Holmes.*



