

BY JACK HYLAND
AND LARRY WENTE

A house and its garden are one

A gardener
and an architect
collaborate
to create a
house that
blurs the
lines between
indoors and out



Our house in the picturesque town of Sharon, Conn., was wonderful—a center-hall colonial with white clapboards and green shutters, surrounded by beautiful gardens. A seemingly small quibble: The house and

gardens always seemed separate. The few exterior doors and smallish windows shut us off from the outdoors when we were inside.

Still, it was an idyllic existence until one afternoon when we saw an unobtrusive “for sale” sign on a gigantic cornfield at the top





INSIDE AND OUTSIDE MERGE The sunporch has interchangeable glass and screen walls, making the room usable in all seasons.

An earth-friendly house



TO CATCH A SUMMER BREEZE

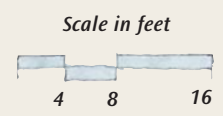
We sited our house on a north-south axis and built it long and narrow to maximize cross breezes from the prevailing winds. Even on the warmest days, the house remains comfortable.

Building green involves proper site planning, water and energy efficiency, and the wise use of materials and resources. Keeping these concepts in mind, we built a comfortable house that sits lightly on the land.

Both house and gardens are designed on a 4-foot-square grid. Because most American building materials come in 4-foot increments, our design reduced construction waste.

We have radiant heating in all the floors and in the stone wall at the front of the house. Installation costs more, but in the long run we save money because heat is delivered evenly rather than rising quickly to the ceiling, enabling us to set the thermostat 2° to 4°F lower than usual.

Another energy-conserving aspect of our house is the newly installed solar panels. During the week, when we are not using the house, the extra power that is generated is fed into the power grid through an inverter. This literally makes the electric meter run backward, so we anticipate that the cost of our electric power will be close to zero.





SCREENING THE SUN Fixed to the large expanse of living room windows, the sun screen is both decorative and practical. In mid-August, when the sun is most intense and high in the sky, it cuts off the strongest rays and keeps the living room cool. In winter, when the sun is lower on the horizon, it allows rays to spread throughout the living room.

of a large hill. To the east, at the foot of the hill, is Indian Lake, the signature landmark of the area. To the west, on the crest of the next hill, is a large red barn with three distinctive silos, and beyond are hills that seem to go on forever.

On a hot August day, we hauled a stepladder to the site, pushed aside rows of 7-foot-high corn, and stood high on the ladder to see what the views would be. Spectacular. By the end of October, the house in Sharon was sold and the cornfield was ours. We were on to the task of designing a house and gardens that connected to each other.

Beginning the design process

We thought about the design ingredients that mattered to us. Though we loved our old colonial, we wanted the new house to be contemporary in its form and materials. At the same time, since our property is part of a historic farm district, we decided to use barnlike shapes to make our house fit with its surroundings. Larry wanted a cluster of buildings because it reminded him of his grandparents' farm in Illinois and because this kind of grouping creates an inviting, intimate space.



DIFFUSED LIGHT FROM ABOVE The roof of Larry's home office (and of several out-buildings) is made of Kalwall, a translucent, highly insulated building panel. The bright but diffused light that comes through the roof reduces the need for electric lighting.



NATURAL IRRIGATION Runoff from the front-door overhang is conducted into two large planters, minimizing the need for watering. Rainwater from the roofs of the house and garage is stored in underground cisterns for irrigating the gardens.



You can enjoy views of the gardens
and surrounding landscape from any

TIMBER FRAME AT THE CORE Exposed post-and-lintel framing defines the perimeter of the dining room. The beamed wood ceiling adds visual weight and warmth to this bright, open room. From the front door (above), you can see through the foyer and dining room to the hills beyond.



spot in the house.

We also wanted our house and property to be sensitive to its environment. Professionally, Larry is LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified, meaning he's an architect qualified in "green," sustainable architecture, and both of us were determined to conserve energy, water, and materials so that our land will be there for our children and their children.

One of our biggest requirements was that the house and gardens be fully integrated. The solution was to design a house where you could enjoy views of the gardens and the surrounding landscape from any spot in the house, effectively blurring the lines between indoors and out. Using Jack's favorite gardens—those at Villa Lante in Bagnaia, Italy—as our inspiration, we planned for the gardens to circle the house and flow out into the meadows.

Interior rooms with exterior views

With all these ideas in mind, Larry designed the house as a long, narrow box to allow each interior room to have more than one external view, for natural light, and for capturing summer breezes. Onto this simple box he added a silolike stair tower and a living room that has two full walls of glass and a curving roof that flares upward to frame the view of a barn and silos on the next ridge.

The other form attached to our long, narrow box is a screened-in porch off the kitchen. With screens extending from floor to ceiling on three sides, this room really captures the feeling of being in the garden (photo, p. 39). At one end of the room is a fireplace that doubles as an indoor grill, allowing us to "cook out" year-round. In the winter, glass panes replace the screens so that the room remains comfortable in the winter as well as in the summer.

The first floor also houses the kitchen and dining room (photo left), which are at the center but open to the other rooms. Tucked away on the side is Larry's home office and a full bath. Up the stair tower to the second floor are three bedrooms and three baths.

At the top of the stair tower is a tiny room that serves as a fourth bedroom, although it is just big enough for a twin bed. It's a great little hideaway to watch storms rolling in across the hills.

Leaving the house from the stair tower, there is a grass path that connects the house with the swimming pool. This path was designed as a cool carpet of grass for hot



Gardens with a casual formality

Our new house has seven doors, each leading to a different garden. After a long week in the city, I disappear outdoors, simply enjoying the exhaustion that comes with tending the cosmos, rudbeckias, tall verbenas, and other plants. The gardens are laid out with a certain formality and order—rectangular beds and straight paths with square flagstone steps—but we chose grasses and wildflowers, which are always blowing in the breeze, to give them an informal quality. A primary goal in designing our house was to make the inside and the outside parts of the same experience.

—Jack Hyland



Simple design details add character and interest



Double the view

A mirrored medicine cabinet reflects—and doubles—the view out the second-floor window. The same molding is used around each to lend consistency and repeat the look of the corner windows in other rooms.

Sometimes a window, sometimes a television

The plasma television is buried in a living room wall and hidden by a sliding panel that moves to one side over a similar-size window, which is covered when someone is watching the television.



Adjusting water temperature

In each bathroom, the shower head and faucets were placed on opposite walls—a simple and inexpensive detail that allows you to adjust the water temperature while avoiding a blast of scalding hot or icy cold water.

Natural materials in to the land and give it a

summer days when the stone patio would burn your feet before you got back to the house.

Choosing finishes and furnishings

Using natural materials like stone, metal, wood, and glass—in finishes and furnishings—was important to us: They tie the house to the land and give it a handcrafted quality. Whenever possible, we used local materials.

We found the limestone for the massive wall that makes up the front of the house at a nearby quarry. The wall is 3 feet thick, tapering upward at 1 inch per foot, providing an anchor for the wood house and tying it to the site visually. To offset the solidity of the wall, there is a glass-roof skylight between the stone wall and the wood frame of the house, creating a corridor filled with sunlight during the day and starlight by night.


The center of our house—encompassing the dining room downstairs and the master bathroom and balcony upstairs—is framed with large beams of Douglas fir, many reclaimed from old buildings and held together by wooden pegs. We had fun with this aspect of the house. Over the Fourth of July weekend, we had a “barn raising” to get these thick beams into place. We left this timber frame at the heart of the house exposed. It recalls the simple New England farmhouse expanded and absorbed by additions over the years.

We chose dark-gray standing-seam steel for most of the roofing. The metal roof is far better than asphalt shingles at withstanding the strong winds that whip across the hill in the winter. While it costs more to install, its durability more than makes up for the cost in the long run.

Waiting for the weekend

We live in New York City for most of the week, but from the minute we get on the train for the two-hour ride to our rural retreat, the weekend begins. As we pass the Smith farm, halfway up our hill, and see the barnlike silhouette of our house on the horizon, a sense of calm descends, and our weekday world becomes just a memory.


Whether a wind is howling across the fields, or snow is drifting down silently in late-afternoon light, or wild-



finishes and furnishings tie the house
handcrafted quality.

FOR A CONTINUOUS VIEW, the master bedroom windows converge in a corner. A window near the ceiling lets in more light and exhausts hot air on warm summer days.

flowers are swaying in the fields surrounding the house, the immediate world outside is a part of every room inside.

Monday always comes too soon. But then Friday is only four days away. 

Jack Hyland is an investment banker, photographer, and avid gardener. Architect and designer Larry Wente is a partner with Gertler Wente Kerbeykian Architects in New York City.

See Resources on page 94.



TILE IN A 4-FOOT GRID The 4-foot-square grid that runs throughout the house is evident in the tile on the master bathroom floor. Just outside is a balcony that can be accessed from the master bedroom or bath.