



# perfect fit

A landscape developed in tandem with a new home results  
in a property with **REFINED** and **QUIET GRACE**

*INTERVIEW WITH JAMES DOYLE & HEATHER HARRIS,  
JAMES DOYLE DESIGN ASSOCIATES  
PHOTOGRAPHER ALLEGRA ANDERSON*

**this spread:** Placing the house closer to the front of the property—and a busy road—was a tight maneuver accomplished by layers of screening: large evergreens, understory trees and flowering shrubs.



**above:** A composition of carefully clipped hedge and expanses of lawn perfectly outline the motor court and accent the home's classic profile.  
**opposite page:** The tranquil setting is punctuated by containers of boxwood that define the front entry.

**This project is beautiful and serene. How did it begin?**

**James Doyle:** We created this landscape for a client of mine from many years ago, one who has also become a family friend. The couple bought a property located quite close to town. They planned to remove the existing house, so this project was a new build, and they asked us to work with the architect for the house to develop the landscape. In my experience, there can be added pressure in working for a client who has become a friend, so I passed the primary responsibility for this project on to Heather. This client is very thoughtful about details, and we both knew there would be a great deal of interaction as the job progressed.

**What did the client have in mind?** JD: The client hired James Schettino Architects to build the house, the pool and pool house, and an added gym building on the property. The client wanted us to coordinate a program with the architect for outdoor entertaining, for flat usable

space, for a swimming pool and for practical needs, like a front motor court and additional parking near the garage.

**When did you join the project, and how did you get started?**

JD: We joined the project at the very beginning, while the previous house was still there. Once it was demolished, it became apparent that there was a lot of water on the property, so that became an added layer of preliminary work. In order to develop the landscape, the first thing we needed was a civil engineer to improve the drainage. That's not the sexy side of landscape architecture, but this kind of challenge means that there is quite a bit more coordination required among all of the professionals.

**Heather Harris:** The client was extremely patient with that process of figuring out what to do with the water. We had some minor changes to make to the grading at the back of the property, but it all worked out.





“The  
**INDOOR/OUTDOOR**  
 balance comes together  
 in many places  
 in the **DESIGN.**”

—JAMES DOYLE

**The house seems to sit with a comfortable amount of land around it. How large is the property?** HH: It's slightly more than an acre, but it's a smaller property, and it's on a main road. The client didn't want to hear any road noise or see headlights at night, but working with the client and the architect, we were able to push the placement of the new house forward, which aligns it with neighboring properties and balances what is a large house with its surroundings, so that it doesn't appear out of scale. With the house located closer to the road, screening for privacy and quiet became even more important.

**What were the screening elements?** HH: We were lucky. We inherited some 80-foot spruce trees that were already there. Then we developed an understory, incorporating some smaller hemlock and spruce. As a transition to the pedestrian areas, we installed additional plantings: a few varieties of hydrangea and rhododendron to give the entry to the property a welcoming feel.

JD: The client wanted a formal entry, and it was a matter of feet and inches when we were siting the house. You'll notice that the front motor court goes right up to a new retaining wall, with the greenery behind it acting as a buffer.

**Once you had settled on the placement of the house, how did you proceed?**

HH: The client had a lot of say during our development of the landscape design.



**above:** Sandstone paving alternates with gravel beds to form the hardscape elements of the outdoor living space. Evergreen mounds line the path, and evergreen hedge creates perimeters. **right:** Space for cooking and dining is placed next to the kitchen, with shading provided by umbrella canopies over table seating. **opposite page:** A lounging area features a freestanding fieldstone fireplace as its focal point.



Every few days, we would send sketches and get input. They wanted us to use our creativity, but they already were sure of the elements they required.

JD: There were a lot of practical needs here. Our challenge was to give the client outdoor entertaining spaces close to the house and make them accessible. The dining area needed to be near the kitchen, but also to have shade. There were many facets of the program to balance.

**What were your concerns about the arrangement of all of these components?** HH: All of the windows at the back of the house would overlook the working part of the landscape: the entertaining space, dining area, lounging space. We didn't want to make these elements seem like one giant terrace.

**How did you meet this challenge?** HH: You can see the organizing element when you walk up to the entry from the motor court. As you walk in the front door, the main hallway aligns perfectly with the pool house; this is the main axis of the landscape and the center of the house. When you exit the house to the back from the hallway, the landscape unfolds to the left and right and concludes at the pool house in the rearmost part of the property.

**This long view from the front door to the pool house is a great feature. But looking toward the house from the pool area, there is no rigid symmetry left to right. How did you accomplish that?**

HH: Because there is a long wing on one side of the back of the house, ending in a stone-clad garage, the fact that the axis runs through the center of the house is disguised by the home's design. Opposite the rear wing of the house is a long perennial bed and a row of sheared trees, with lawn and tall evergreens beyond them for a softer border on that side.

**What are the elements you used to create the different spaces that the clients wanted close to the house, but not have everything look like, as you said, one giant terrace?** HH: The relationship of hardscape and softscape off of the back of the house took a great deal of thought. We broke up the terraces into a quadrant, while integrating evergreen plant material and gravel. There are spaces for all of the functions that the client wanted to fulfill at the back of the house. There's a dining area, a barbecue, the fireplace and lounging space, and then the pool and the pool house. But the design integrates carefully placed greenery and color within the hardscape; it's not just end-to-end stone paving. Our goal was for the clients to see a lovely view when they look out of their rear windows, upstairs or downstairs. Woody shrubs align the space and provide color



**above:** The perennial plantings contain a mix of flowering varieties to provide color throughout the growing season.  
**below:** Softscape that includes a handsome row of sheared lindens creates the border on one side of the quadrant that Harris and Doyle designed.  
**opposite page:** Even the perennial bed, with its colorful display, is well delineated, preserving the careful geometry of the quadrant design.



“Changing the grade for the pool area provides for a nice **TRANSITIONAL SPACE** between it and the other hardscape areas.”

—JAMES DOYLE



**this spread:** Changing the grade between the outdoor living spaces close to the house and the pool area visually expands the distance between these elements. The low clipped hedge of Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata*) accentuates this optical illusion.



**this spread:** A limited neutral palette for hardscape and furnishings—most designed by Matthew Willinger of James Doyle Design Associates—enhances the calm and tranquility of the landscape. Backdrops of color, such as a generous planting of classic “Nikko Blue” hydrangea behind the pool’s lounging deck, create artful accents in the outdoor seasons.



in four seasons. Perennial space, directly off the back of the house, allows the client to add plant material and color in a carefully defined area. And then, the row of sheared linden trees creates a wonderful backdrop.

JD: There are also subtle variations in the hardscape. The choice of stone was very important. Instead of bluestone, we used a quartz sandstone from India, which is light in color and not as warm underfoot as bluestone. With all of the hardscape, we used different finishes on the stone for different areas to give it further dimension. Changing the grade for the pool area provides for a nice transitional space between it and the other hardscape areas.

**So, the property is not large, but the design seems to enlarge it. How did you achieve that?** HH: One of our main goals was the use of open space, to help disguise the smaller lot. For example, the pool is close to the house, though the open lawn, with its low hedges, makes the distance between the pool and the house feel larger than it actually is. Another strategy we used to help make the property seem larger was to play with plant material in different sizes, as well as with changes in contour.

**Can you share a bit about the plant varieties you used for this project?**

HH: Our palette was fairly simple: multiple cultivars of hydrangea, rhododendron, abelia, spiraea, syringa and viburnum. There were many taxus already planted by the previous owner for screening at the property’s perimeters. We filled in several spaces that needed more screening with additional taxus plantings.

**Since you were working in collaboration with the architect, the builder, the client and the other professionals involved, what do you think this team effort brought to the project?**

HH: The connections between the interiors and the exterior of the house were very important, and the architect and builder worked with us to create this linkage. The long axis from the front entry that visually connects the main structure with the landscape, all the way to the pool house, is just one example. The placement of the openings at the rear of the house works together with the hardscape and softscape, and this strengthens the connections between these elements and the house. It was a wonderful experience to work as a team to make this happen.



**this spread.** Stone surfaces throughout the landscape are crafted of quartz sandstone from India. Its appearance varies in different parts of the landscape based on the finishing technique applied to the stone.

“Our goal was for the clients to see a **LOVELY VIEW** when they look out of their rear windows, **UPSTAIRS OR DOWNSTAIRS.**”

—HEATHER HARRIS



JD: This indoor/outdoor balance comes together in many places in the design. One example is the herbaceous border, placed on center with the client's study.

**How long did it take from initial discussions to the finishing details?**

HH: It was about two years from beginning to end; we completed our work in December 2019. We're always the last ones to leave a project like this, and we want to make sure that our clients feel that the end result was worth enduring a long and sometimes complicated process.

**How is the client enjoying their new property?** HH: They love it. It's one of those properties that, when I stop by and pull into the motor court, just feels good and comfortable, like it's been there for much longer than a year and a half.

JD: The timing of this project was interesting, because not long after we finished, everyone, including our client, experienced the lockdown



**this spread:** Steel-and-glass doors placed at the rear of the home's center hall reveal the axis between the house and the pool house at the far end of the property, with the landscape unfolding on either side. The pool house's covered terrace marks the endpoint of this pivotal design element.



caused by the pandemic. Because of these extraordinary circumstances, the household ended up spending much more time in their new home and landscape than they ever expected. More of the family moved home during that period, and everyone used the outdoor spaces. The trying months of 2020 made them love these spaces even more.

HH: They're even planning for more outdoor furniture.

—INTERVIEW BY JUDY OSTROW

**Resources:**

Landscape architect: James Doyle Design Associates, Greenwich; 203-869-2900; [jdda.com](http://jdda.com)

Outdoor furniture: Designed by Matthew Willinger of James Doyle Design Associates,

Greenwich; 203-869-2900; [jdda.com](http://jdda.com)

Architect: James Schettino Architects, New Canaan; 203-966-5552; [schettinoarchitects.com](http://schettinoarchitects.com)

General contractor/builder: Lee Schettino Construction, New Canaan and Bridgeport; 203-972-9144; [lsccompany.com](http://lsccompany.com)

Engineer and surveyor: Sound View Engineers & Land Surveyors, Greenwich; 203-532-1300; [soundviewengineers.com](http://soundviewengineers.com)

Pool: Signature Pools, Norwalk; 203-297-9749; [signaturepoolsinc.com](http://signaturepoolsinc.com)

Mason: Sandoval's Landscaping & Masonry; 203-969-7991; [sandovalslm.com](http://sandovalslm.com)

Landscaper: Passerelli Landscapes, Greenwich; 203-532-0452; [ronlandscapes.com](http://ronlandscapes.com)

Perennial garden maintenance and planter designer: DAB Design, North Salem, NY; 914-548-4419; [dianebigore.com](http://dianebigore.com)