

# Set in stone

On an island off the coast of Maine, Caleb Davis has worked with nature to create a low-input garden

WORDS KENDRA WILSON PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS

## IN BRIEF

**What** Farmhouse garden, close to the Atlantic Ocean and backing on to Acadia National Park.  
**Where** Bar Harbor, Maine.

**Size** Half an acre.

**Soil** Heavy clay with free-draining loam added to some beds.

**Climate** Coastal, with very hot and dry summers. Other seasons are wet, with long periods of deep frost and heavy snow in winter.

**Hardiness zone** USDA 5b.

In this coastal garden, landscape designer Caleb Davis has broken up a large lawn with a series of perennial beds, using a planting palette that ties in with the colour of the house.

**W**hatever you call the dominant European planting style of the past 20 years – New Perennial, prairie or low-input, high-impact – there is no getting away from the fact that many of the key plants in this approach are American. In high summer, a northern-hemisphere bed may well feature a mix of grasses and hard workers, such as rudbeckia and sanguisorba, and with good reason. But to an American observer there is almost always something vital missing from this kind of landscape: big rocks. In New England, there are boulders galore, and low walls of smooth, irregular fieldstone criss-crossing the countryside, giving a tangible sense of a region steeped, waist high, in its agrarian past. With American wildflowers self-seeding along white picket fences, hopes of finding adventurous native planting are too often dashed. It is encouraging therefore to find a landscape gardener such as Caleb Davis, whose considered approach to plants and stones is inseparable from the demands of his very particular locality.

Mount Desert Island is reached by a bridge from the coast of Maine, with more than half of its 108 square miles given over to National parkland. Other areas are carved into private estates, originally claimed in the 19th century by the nation's

most wealthy, having taken the hint from more artistic rusticators who painted and wrote about the northern wilderness. Here's the rub: summers are short in Maine. Just as the island is stirred into three months of frantic tourism, so its plants must seize the day and live life to the full while they can. American perennials may seem to take a while to get going in a European summer but they are perfectly calibrated for a place where spring can take place in one week.

At this family farmhouse, Caleb's clients live here all year round, which naturally affects the property's appearance. The half-acre lawn at the back was reconfigured and planted in 2018, while the whole garden has developed over 12 years. "There has been an appreciation of a slow pace with a lot of patience in the whole process," says Caleb. "There are so many benefits that come from a slower approach." This leisurely attitude would be less likely if the family skipped the freezing winters, when Maine is blanketed in snow for at least a third of the year.

Instead, the view from the house, towards fallow fields drifting in the direction of the trees and mountains of Acadia National Park, retains some structure in winter. Simple post and rail fences trace the garden's boundary, while walls, steps and furniture make full use of the fieldstones and blockier granite pieces found on the property. Dry stacking them, without the aid of mortar, ▷

To continue turn to page 84

There is a coarseness  
to the planting that  
reflects the character of  
the broader landscape  
of the region

"I'm drawn to the blues and purples," says Caleb. "Plants in that spectrum work well here." In this area, looking out to the Acadia National Park, a mix of *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune' and *Amsonia hubrichtii* run across several beds, while *Echinops ritro* and *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Skyracer' add height. Shots of yellow come from *Rudbeckia laciniata*.



**Top** In the foreground, tall seedheads of *Thalictrum rochebruneanum* 'Lavender Mist' interact with the shapes of distant trees, while cushions of warm-pink *Hylotelephium* 'Herbstfreude' bring the planting back down to earth. This area has an easy relationship with the nearby fields.

**Below** Light shines through the planting in this open, south-facing garden, illuminating foliage as well as the jewel-like flower colours of *Echinacea purpurea* and *Monarda fistulosa*. Green candelabras of budding *Agastache nepetoides* are a strong feature, with *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune'.



**Top** Crushed local stone covers the firepit area, and the retaining wall behind is made from a mix of stone and granite found on the property. "I use minimal stone and wood elements to create a framework," says Caleb. "They are a reference point in which people can relax and not be overwhelmed by the chaos."

**Below** The pinkish-purple flowers of *Thalictrum rochebruneanum* 'Lavender Mist' partially veil the view, with *Monarda fistulosa* and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' catching the light. Caleb's clients wanted to work with the historical aspect of the farm in a low-input way.



▷ creates an irregular formality. “Stone is thought of as static, but it’s surprisingly dynamic in how it responds to weather,” says Caleb. “Seeing the way rain, snow and frost interact with the stone is a beautiful part of our winter landscape.” Stone walls also provide a sense of security and enclosure in summer. The firepit area, further away from the house, is carpeted in crushed rock and is held in the protective arm of a 1.5m retaining wall. “Dry-stacked stone provides the kind of frame that people need so much.”

Although the property is 60m from the ocean, it is on a quiet side of the island, with prevailing winds blowing from the interior. This is not the place for individualist plants in need of staking but real communities, interacting in a shared endeavour of “vertical layering”. They nurture each other, moving with the elements. Airy *Thalictrum rochebrunianum* ‘Lavender Mist’ reaches its full potential between sturdy candelabras of the giant yellow hyssop *Agastache nepetoides*, edged with *Agastache* ‘Blue Fortune’, while *Monarda fistulosa* is as untroubled by wind and cold as the ever-reliable grass *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’.

“There is a coarseness to the planting, especially apparent as it goes into decay,” says Caleb. “That in my mind, reflects the place and the character of the broader landscape of the region.” Flowering seeds of wild carrot, yarrow, daisies and goldenrod blow in from the fields, while competitive garden plants are deliberately taken on a trip over the fence. These include *Rudbeckia*

*laciniata*, *Coreopsis tripteris*, *Filipendula rubra* ‘Venusta’ and *Eupatorium maculatum* ‘Gateway’. Some of the most useful blow-ins are non-native, such as *Valeriana officinalis*, blurring the lines between garden and field.

“I am constantly experimenting with what is possible here,” says Caleb. He uses ideas from permaculture farming, such as chop-and-drop when moving robust garden plants into the fields. In clearing spaces for them, neighbouring weeds are cut at the base and left on the ground as a mulch. “It’s a way of nudging back wild species,” he says.

Caleb best describes his own approach: “It’s less about the finished product and more about the growing – of plants, communities of organisms, and ourselves.” He favours restraint in hard landscaping as well, even when resources are available. “I think that if we put a little more energy into reimagining the lens through which we see the garden, a lot of resources might be conserved in the process of garden-making, with the same amount of reward and enjoyment.” □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Caleb’s work at [davisstoneandgarden.com](https://davisstoneandgarden.com)

Granite slabs, dry stacked to make a staircase in the recess of a weathered ledge, are surrounded by *Hylotelephium* ‘Herbstfreude’, *Rudbeckia laciniata* (competitive enough to be planted out into the surrounding fields), *Rudbeckia fulgida* ‘Little Goldstar’ and the switch grass *Panicum virgatum* ‘Shenandoah’.

Seeing the way rain,  
snow and frost interact  
with the stone is a  
beautiful part of our  
winter landscape

