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3 levels of SEASIDE GARDENING

To most of the **landlocked** world, those who garden by the sea are the lucky ones. What other view comes close to that ridged infinity of blue or lends **plants** along its edge such shifting, moody drama? A twisted seaside tree is a living portrait of the wind. Common beach grass holds the salty **ocean** in its hair. And the light—shot with mist and charged with reflected silver—gives even subtle **foliage** and flower color a clarity that makes you blink and look twice. Then there's the

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTORIA PEARSON TEXT BY SUSAN HEEGER



This garden in eastern Long Island designed by Elizabeth Lear relies on American beach grass (*Ammophila breviligulata*), seaside goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*), and beach rose (*Rosa rugosa*), plants that can take the high winds and salt spray that blow from water to shore.





1: BEACHFRONT exposure

The climatic belt closest to the water is inhospitable to large woody plants. In general, grasses, ground covers, and smaller woody types are the best choices. All woody plants should be avoided in areas subject to occasional flooding and strong winds laden with salt spray. ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Elizabeth Lear's combination of Montauk daisy (*Nippopanthemum nipponicum*) and dusty miller (*Artemisia stelleriana*) thrives along the sand in eastern Long Island. To flank a stone stairway to the beach near Santa Barbara, California,

landscape designer Eric Nagelmann mixed California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*), various lavenders, and *Geranium incanum* with the succulent *Aeonium arboreum* 'Atropurpureum' and the South African rush *Chondropetalum tectorum*. A close-up highlights Lear's dramatic contrast of brassy goldenrod with sleek beach grass. Nagelmann mingles bushy Australian rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*) with trailing ice plant (*Lampranthus spectabilis*) and spiky sea lyme grass (*Leymus arenarius*).

mildness of the climate, due in part to offshore currents that warm the air in fall and make it possible to grow a range of tender plants unheard of farther inland.

Yet as beachside gardeners know, the same wind that sculpts trees can shred leaves, snap trunks and branches, and tear out shrubs by the roots. Unimpeded by land mass, mature hedges, or stout buildings, it can decimate a garden fast and even carry off dunes that aren't fenced in or anchored by sturdy plants. And when the wind itself isn't causing havoc, the salt spray steps in, robbing leaves of moisture as roots struggle for a toehold in the dry, sandy soil.

In general, the closer a garden is to beach and open water, the harsher life is for its plants, while a landscape tucked into a bluff or set behind raised dunes has a gentler time of it. On these pages, we have grouped gardens according to three levels, or belts, of exposure to



the sea, by which ecologists characterize coastal environments.

So grueling is beach life for many plants—especially those with shallow roots, wide leaves, brittle trunks and thirsty ways—that it’s a wonder how much greenery actually thrives along the coast. But here, as anywhere, a gardener’s success in coaxing things to grow depends on his or her understanding of the setting and which plants will do well in it. For clues, “Look to nature,” says Southampton, New York, landscape designer Elizabeth Lear, who has created a number of seaside gardens in eastern Long Island. Experience has taught her to use large groupings of natives such as American beach grass, beach plum, bayberry, and seaside goldenrod instead of more exotic and fussier perennials. Not only are these native species naturally tolerant of salt, wind, drought, and sand, but their tenacious roots help stabilize

dunes and keep them from eroding. They are also visually suited to the seaside setting, Lear says, because their low, mounding forms and subtle tones harmonize with the beauty of the ocean.

But besides drawing on local flora, Daniel J. Foley, author of the 1965 classic *Gardening by the Sea* (Chilton Books), advises gardeners to tour neighbors’ plots to see which plants work. Usually among the most successful are natives from other compatible coastal regions, such as the Mediterranean, South Africa, and New Zealand. Some of the best include Asian rugosa roses, New Zealand hebes, and European sea thrift. Often, these plants have visible features that show their adaptations to their environment, for example, the tiny leaves fuzzed with salt-trapping hairs on a Mediterranean santolina, or the narrow leaves of an Australian coastal wattle. South African aloe’s wax-coated succulent leaves

defend it against salt and drying winds. Though too tender for eastern gardens, it is ideal for coastal southern California.

In areas of winter freezes, hardy perennials can often be augmented by annuals such as portulaca, sweet alyssum, dwarf marigolds, and lobelia. With regular dead-heading, these extend the flowering season into fall. Similarly, planting in containers allows gardeners in the most demanding climates to decorate summer gardens with tender exotics that can be moved indoors for the winter.

A constant problem near the ocean is the nutrient-poor soil, which, to support life and give plant roots something to grip, must be enriched with organic matter such as compost, humus, and topsoil. Low-lying seaside lots prone to periodic flooding by salt tides will need to be flushed with fresh water. A dose of ground dolomitic limestone (between twenty and fifty pounds for each one



2: SHELTERED coastal plain

Farther from the surf and protected by natural screens or man-made structures, this climatic belt allows for a wider selection of plants, including larger woody ones.

LEFT: Designer Jane E. Lappin drew from a varied palette of plants for a garden in Sagaponack, New York, where dunes and the owner's house shield the garden from the ocean. ABOVE LEFT: On the same property, a horse stands on a path that is bordered by Russian olive (*Eleagnus angustifolia*) underplanted with smaller woody shrubs—*Spirea* 'Snowmound,' S. 'Little Princess,' and S. 'Golden Flame'—

and a mixed ground cover of *Potentilla* 'Abbottswood,' lady's mantle, and *Teucrium*. Lappin also blended in the soft colors of English lavender, sedum, and astilbe.

ABOVE RIGHT: In a sheltered area in East Hampton, Lisa Stamm of the design firm the Homestead created exuberant beds that include dianthus, tree lilac, sedum, and foxglove. OPPOSITE: Elsewhere in the same garden, she trained 'New Dawn' roses over an arbor surrounded by 'Sarah Bernhardt' peonies, Siberian iris, allium, and foxgloves. In the central bed, alyssum encircles a 'Fairy' rose.



3: OVERLOOKING the ocean

Although it will never be flooded, a location high above the water still suffers from salt spray and harsh wind that can be so hot and dry it produces conditions remarkably similar to those in a desert. THIS PAGE: For a California aerie, landscape architect Lisa Gimmy mixed *Echium fastuosum*, *Ceanothus griseus horizontalis* 'Yankee Point,' assorted aloes, and creeping thyme, all of which adapt well to dry,

windy conditions. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: Above the rosettes of the hybrid X *Graptoveria*, Gimmy has placed contrasting *Agave attenuata*, snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*), and more aloes. New Zealand Christmas tree (*Metrosideros excelsa*) overhangs pink melaleuca (*Melaleuca excelsa resophila*); while nearby, long blades of New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) add sculptural accents.





thousand square feet) can reduce the soil's salt content, too. Just as critical are annual feedings of a balanced, preferably organic, slow-release fertilizer, since nutrients wash away from sand rapidly. Mulching with compost, wood chips, or salt hay not only helps hold moisture and minerals but also protects plants from heaving during winter months. Still, in the toughest spots, before winter arrives, new shrubs and trees benefit from having their trunks wrapped and staked and their branches bundled in burlap. It's also wise to shore up dunes by planting coastal natives and putting up a snow fence, the weathered stake barrier so characteristic of beaches in the Northeast.

Of course, whatever measures you take, nature will weigh in with a heavy hand, stunting even appropriate, carefully chosen plants and blowing them into drifts. To protect those that can't

take the beating, Lear suggests, plant them in places sheltered by the house or other structures, in the "front" yard, for instance, away from the water. This is also a good way to separate more formally designed areas from naturalistic seaside scenes. "Right by the ocean," she says, "you want to capitalize on that feeling of standing on a ship's prow with just an edge of enclosure."

In places such as bluff tops, taller, more assertive planting may be necessary to keep the blue infinity from seeming threatening. Says Lisa Gimmy, a landscape architect in Santa Monica, California, "Any garden should be comfortable and inviting." In Corona del Mar she created one on a lot that dropped off precipitously below an ocean-view terrace. To compensate, she planted tall native echiums near the bluff's edge. "Not only do they hold the slope," she says, "but they keep it from visually falling

away, so you don't feel you're going to plunge into the water." And like other large dense natives she planted nearby (lemonade berry and ceanothus), they have a graphic impact en masse that is not lost against the panorama.

In smaller areas, along stairs and seating spots, are groupings of succulents Gimmy chose for their toughness, sculptural forms, and rich "coral-reef" colors, which echo the hues of sea life in the tidal pools below. She laid walks and terraces in a quartzite stone reminiscent of the rocky cliffs and arranged borders around a lawn to mimic the line of coastal coves. She did *not* cut down trees—metrosideros, melaleuca, and eucalyptus—that framed the view. "I like to look through something at the ocean, to shape the picture so I don't sense boundaries," she says. That is, after all, the luxury of seaside gardening: to work the soil against the backdrop of the infinite.

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