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OF VINE STREET

PLANTS — AND PEOPLE
— BLOSSOM
AT **SUMMERHILL**
LANDSCAPES

An aerial photograph of a forest. The trees are mostly green, but there are several large, vibrant yellow flowering trees in the lower half of the image. In the upper left, there are several pink flowering trees. The ground is a mix of green grass and brown soil. The title 'foundations for the future' is overlaid on the image in a large, white, sans-serif font. 'foundations' is in a larger font size than 'for the future', which is in italics.

foundations *for the future*

DECLAN BLACKMORE OF SUMMERHILL
LANDSCAPES CREATES FERTILE
GROUND FOR PLANTS — AND PEOPLE

by Lana Bortolot



A stand-out aspect of Summerhill Landscapes layers of expertise and assets is the 250 acres of tree, shrub and hedge farms across the East End, which grow up to 150 species.

When he won a coveted spot in an internship program to work abroad 37 years ago, Declan Blackmore, a horticulture student at Kildalton Agricultural College in Kilkenny, Ireland, was following in the steps of many before him.

“I was a very lucky guy that day and I had no idea what was ahead of me,” he recalls. But in order to chart his course, he first had to know where he was going.

“I had heard of Southampton in England but was not familiar with Long Island; I had to check a map to see where this place was,” he says, adding with a gentle laugh that he did, indeed, think he was heading to the U.K.

The internship had staying power. And although he returned to Ireland after it was completed over the course of eight months, Blackmore found his way back to the East End the next year — no map required this time.

In the 32 years since he established the Sag Harbor-based Summerhill Landscapes, Blackmore has been on complex projects throughout the South and North forks, working with top home and landscape architects and designers, contractors, soil scientists and everyone in between who has a stake in the ground — literally.

“We have to understand engineering, the science, the construction, criteria and the decisions — it’s the major league of landscape,” he says.

It’s a long way from his childhood on a sheep farm in south Ireland, where he grew produce to sell by the side of the road. All things green — and entrepreneurial — he says, is “pretty much in my DNA.”

Recalling that upbringing, Blackmore says, “I’m a farmer. I’m not a designer but I align myself with the best. Ninety-five percent of our business is working with world-renowned architects, and I set a bar that we can deliver and help them build their visions... but I know my lane and my lane is I’m a contractor.”

Some clients might not agree, such as Melissa Reavis, a partner at Hollander Design, which has collaborated with Summerhill for more than 20 years.

“They have an aesthetic sense and keep that in mind over design development, the large picture and through the smaller details,” Reavis says. “They have a sense of craftsmanship that is evident throughout the entire project.”

She praises Blackmore’s willingness to take on new challenges, citing a past project to create a tunnel made of living willows that required a trip to a specialty producer in Ohio.

“I think most people would have walked away, but they were willing to go [on site], learn about the product and bring the producer to the farm, where they installed the wisps to experiment.” Having such vision on complex projects, Reavis says, “allows [Blackmore] to anticipate the challenges ahead of time.”

a company that grows its own

Blackmore has cultivated a level of expertise throughout his company by recruiting directly from horticulture schools around the world. Like him, many came to Summerhill on an internship from places such as Ireland, Germany, the Benelux countries, Brazil, Japan and South America. Also like him, many stayed on, becoming senior management. Having a shared goal of excellence, while also bringing a diversity of views and experiences, Blackmore says, makes Summerhill a stronger company.

Eddie Corcoran is one such intern. He arrived green 20 years ago but Blackmore observed how sharp and creative he was; he’s now a partner. Corcoran says the internship program is “definitely a big



part of our foundation” and that Summerhill is distinguished for both its wealth of horticulturally trained staff and the way it has promoted from within and helped professionalize the industry.

Brendan O’Dwyer, who hails from the same Irish school as Blackmore, arrived for his internship in 1997. He returned to Ireland for a year before finding his way back to Summerhill, where he’s now a partner.

O’Dwyer calls Summerhill “an educational internship in the horticultural sense, and it’s a life experience too.” He helped formalize the internship program and manages it today, in addition to sourcing material from across the country and his responsibilities on the company’s tree farms.

About 75% of Summerhill’s 200 employees work in the field as horticulturists, arborists and designers. They are trained in all things flora and fauna but also in landscaping lighting, irrigation systems and designing custom maintenance plans. Summerhill pros are on site to assist with hardscape prospects and pathways, driveways and the occasional installation of sculptures or architectural features. Driveway entrance gates? Yes, sometimes. Rooftop gardens? Yes, definitely.

Blackmore says he spends 95% of his time in the field with teams or on one of the three tree farms he has established. The farms, situated on more than 250 acres in East Hampton, Southampton and Riverhead, grow up to 150 species — mainly trees, but also shrubs and hedges. The sites, where architects and their clients can shop al fresco, provide homegrown plant material for largescale projects or homeowners with smaller properties.

“They can walk through the farms like a department store, hug the trees and tag them to be transported to their property,” Blackmore says.

It’s an extension of the business that adds a unique dimension to Summerhill, as the farms also serve as a laboratory and testing



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANTHONY CRISAFULLI



Blackmore's collaborations with builders, architects and landscape architects can be seen in a multitude of projects across the Hamptons and East End. Above right, Blackmore and his wife, Ann, in the Sag Harbor-based offices.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANTHONY CHRISAFULLI (TOP RIGHT) DOUG YOUNG





Blackmore often collaborates on stunning projects with well-known landscape architects, like this one with Hollander Design.



PHOTOGRAPHY: NEIL LANDING

ground for various species. Exposed to the Hamptons elements, the trees become climatized in their growing environments, increasing the likelihood of transplant and transfer success.

“Because our farm is so close to the ocean, that product handles the exposure and the salt so it’s more acclimated to its new site than if we were bringing in a plant from South Jersey,” Blackmore explains.

The farms are also used to experiment with species and their ability to adapt to climate change. The entire team constantly researches and tests to see what the future might hold. The results, they’re discovering, can be surprising.

“Trees growing in Georgia and South Carolina, I would never have taken a chance on bringing up here 15 or 20 years ago, but now we’re experimenting with them and some of them are actually working,” Blackmore says. They’re also testing out old olive trees from California.

“We don’t have data yet on it,” he says, “but we are constantly pushing the envelope and aligning ourselves with what’s going on with global warming.”

inspiration from near and afar

Blackmore returns to Europe frequently to attend trade shows and visit growers at the source, an influence that he notes shows up in Summerhill’s work.

“There is a little bit of a European flare in my company,” he says. He credits the generosity of the growers he meets, who he says openly share their information. Since importing/exporting plant material is prohibited, neither party presents competition to the other, instead cultivating knowledge and the sharing of it.

“They are so passionate and well-educated on what they do and we can learn a lot about how to do things there,” Blackmore says, adding that, with Europe’s long history of gardens, “they have a couple of years on us.”

Closer to home, Blackmore says the diversity of local expertise “keeps us on our heels.”

“I could be on a very natural native landscape and tomorrow I could be on a formal English or European-style landscape and that’s what makes the job so rewarding,” he says. “It’s like not wearing the same suit every day, but having a variety that makes it more fun.”

paying it forward

While Summerhill’s breadth and quality of work is impressive and, among its peers, renowned — perhaps even more so in a demanding, competitive region such as the Hamptons — you won’t find Blackmore banging his own drum. In his mind, he’s never too far from that farm in Kilkenny and the opportunities, relationships and hard work that formed the building blocks of Summerhill. It’s why he puts the extra effort into the internship program, affording opportunities similar to the ones that gave him his start as a young man.

Blackmore’s wife, Ann, says her husband’s ability to live the American Dream is the reason he’s so invested in paying things forward.

“He started with a dream and a truck and is a great success story, and he wants to help in whatever ways he can,” Ann says, citing the Blackmore Family Foundation Scholarship they established in 2018 for East End public high school students wishing to study horticulture or landscape architecture. The annual award of \$5,000 is based on GPA and a demonstrated interest in the field.

Declan says he hopes the scholarship, like the internships, help inspire the next generation.

“My vision is about telling a story and maybe inspiring other people to go after and push them-selves to the edge and not be afraid to take a leap of faith,” he says. “Anything is possible.” 🍷