A perilous slope left this Chappaqua property virtually inaccessible before a savvy landscape designer turned dysfunctional into dramatic.

Most people see a slope and assume that it’s downhill all the way. But not Jan Johnsen. She sees slopes as totally upbeat.

The fact that grass steps are Jan Johnsen’s signature is telling. It says something about a landscape architect who strives to soften every element of a garden—cushioning access to the upwardly mobile aspects of a landscape. But the fact that Johnsen focuses on steps also implies that she’s dedicated to bringing every space in a yard into the dialogue. Show Johnsen a property with a breakneck hill that would give Jack and Jill the jitters, and she’ll see a way to utilize every square foot of space without worrying about taking a tumble. That’s exactly what she’s been doing for 18 years, working for a family in Chappaqua who came to her with the hill from hell. Not only did she transform it into herbaceous heaven, but she harnessed the uppermost areas to turn them into viewing platforms and utilized all the acreage in between.

Usable space was at a premium when the homeowners purchased their steep slope in Chappaqua 20 years ago. With a young family and a husband who is all about the outdoors the moment he gets home from the office, the owners originally asked for little more than an upper terrace where the kids could congregate without taking the fast lane into the pond 45 feet below. The dream team of Jan Johnsen and her husband, Rafael Algarin (co-principals of Johnsen Landscapes & Pools, johnsenlandscapes.com), went to work smoothing some land and building the sort of terrace that would pull family members of all ages out of doors. But that was just the first step in the uphill battle to utilize a property that “originally had no flat ground—none,” according to Johnsen.

Did I say battle? Johnsen thinks of the slope as a blessing. Not only did it give her plenty of opportunity to unleash her complete arsenal of stair solutions, but it allowed her to craft a series of event-like venues throughout the two-and-a-half-acre property, which now seems vastly larger thanks to savvy utilization of space.

“We went looking for usable space,” the homeowner, who prefers to remain anonymous, says. And they found it. When Johnsen was finished, there wasn’t a square foot that failed to fulfill its goal of bringing the family and nature together.

The solution is pure genius. Johnsen’s remedy entails a series of curvaceous tiers running around the landscape—forming a buttress to hold the soil firm above but harnessing the uppermost areas to turn them into viewing platforms and utilized all the acreage in between.

Harnessing the property’s view of a neighboring pond below, seating areas serve as observation decks focusing on the water feature at the land’s lowest elevation.

Realizing that the pond was the scene stealer, Johnsen worked it from all angles, framing the water in various shrubs, trees, perennial borders, and walls depending upon which lookout point you happen to settle into. But views are generally appreciated with maturity, shall we say. The kids aren’t necessarily prone to lounge around partaking of the ambiance. No problem. Knowing that children need lawns for activities, Johnsen gave them ample flat greensward on which to run and play. Because her goal was to encourage interaction with nature (another-
er hallmark that runs as a recurring theme throughout Johnsen’s design work), she added a series of rooms that lure the kids into exploration, starting with a convention-busting spiral and circular vegetable garden. (Johnson asked herself at the onset, “Why do vegetable gardens have to be straight rows?” Her answer was to follow nature’s lead and planted in circles.) The result was an alcove dedicated to rainbow stripes of lettuce, eggplants, peas, snap beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, and all things savory. From there, the garden continues to deliver a series of happenings: winding paths lead comfortably from one area to the next, while lookout landings with their restive enclaves allow you to catch your breath. Along the way, the landscape features a fort, a horseshoe court, and even a sledding hill—all still on the property. One of the highlights was a rope swing from a tree that allowed the kids to glide over the spiral vegetable garden (“My daughter lived on that swing,” the homeowner says), but unfortunately, the tree that supported the high-flying activity fell as a victim to last year’s freak October snowstorm.

Of course, it’s not only about the kids. Johnson served up plenty of secluded spots for meditative moments, including a Japanese garden with a double, re-circulating waterfall cascade emptying dramatically into a mutual pond. As with all the features, the waterfalls have were placed with an ulterior motive. They deliver any storm run-off into a pond and basin that can handle potential drainage issues with finesse. At the heel of the property, a rain garden filled with ornamental grasses, irises, and other moisture-loving plants tackles further excess water before it flows into the pond. It’s all part of the initiative to utilize the resources at hand in an ecologically conscientious manner.

So it’s not only about fun and games. Environmental awareness is a biggie in this landscape. In that spirit, Johnson took a felled tree, cut it into sliced rounds and laid them underfoot as a platform with tree stump “chairs.” She harnessed native shrubs and trees such as witch-hazel and fothergilla to use as screening or “green walls.” When she needed to cover ground, she avoided paving if possible and steered toward ferns, Vinca, and Pachysandra rather than hardscape. She followed all the tenets of ecological land management, but masked them cunningly in destinations that would delight her client and their kids.

The culmination of all those years of planning and planting together is a place that beckons the entire family into the backyard. On one level, this Chappaqua property is thrilling to behold and filled with botanical diversity. But it also has activities built in. Multi-faceted, monumental, and moving—this collaboration between designer and client celebrates the Great Outdoors with all its ups and downs.

Tovah Martin is the author of *The New Terrarium* among other garden books. An accredited organic land care professional, she lectures throughout the region (her schedule can be found at tovahmartin.com and she blogs at plantswise.com).