

at home BOOKS

GARDENS

AT FIRST LIGHT

STACY BASS

words by JUDY OSTROW

THE EDIBLE GARDEN

When the oldest of her children was about to begin kindergarten, Phoebe Cole-Smith moved her family from New York City to a small town in Connecticut. Not quite ready for a typical house on a suburban cul de sac, she found a wooded property along an unpaved road. The vintage dwelling that went with it had possibilities, as did the land. Phoebe visualized a garden that would enhance the setting and enable her to produce home-grown food for her family.

Both her family and the garden grew up around the house, its large, welcoming kitchen an indication of the importance given to the preparation of good, fresh food. To an old perennial garden already on the property, Phoebe added annuals, plus beds for herbs and vegetables. She also built a chicken coop; the hens gave her eggs and plenty of organic fertilizer. She made friends among the farmers at the local outdoor market, who gave her advice about growing things. When her children entered high school, Phoebe enrolled in cooking school. In a stroke of synchronization, part of her training was an internship at the now-renowned Blue Hill at Stone Barns restaurant in Tarrytown, New York, a pioneer in the farm-to-table movement. When she finished her training, Phoebe began using her garden produce to cater meals and parties. Eventually, a business was born. Today, her menus are unique as they feature her organically grown vegetables, such as red-and-white 'French Breakfast' radishes and purple-veined 'Red Giant' mustard leaves.

Everything about the Cole-Smith garden is just a bit off the beaten path, and delightfully so. To get there, you travel from a four-lane highway to an asphalt country road and finally to the unpaved lane that leads to Dirt Road Farm—the name

Phoebe gave to both her land and then her growing business.

The summer gardens are filled with flowers that thrive in the southern New England climate: coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), a veritable blanket of nasturtiums (*Tropaeolum*), and dozens more. The faint hum of bees—Phoebe keeps hives for pollination and honey—and the gentle clucking of chickens mingle with birdsong and leaves rustling in the breeze. A deep patio outside the kitchen is sized for gathering robust harvests and serving big feasts. An enormous vine that twists its way around a sheltering pergola makes concord grapes as well as shade. The flower gardens, a crazy quilt of annuals and perennials, decorate the spaces around the food plots and provide the raw materials for bouquets that grace the tables at events catered by Phoebe. At Dirt Road Farm, everything is productive, in a most joyful concert of taste, aroma and color.

Even the stand of sugar maples that covers three of the property's five-and-a-half acres has its job to do. Five winters ago, Phoebe gifted her husband, Mike, with a kit that included three buckets and three taps. Today, they have 150 taps and an evaporator that can process 300 gallons of sap in eight hours. She says maple syrup production is labor-intensive, requiring a warmly dressed crew of about 40 family and friends, but the reward is sublime syrup to accompany her pancakes.

Phoebe's expansion plans continue. There's a small plot of fruit trees on her land; they're still too young for fruit-bearing, but like the heirloom seeds she collects, sows and grows for her menus, the fruit will soon be full of flavor. An old shed will be transformed to a petite commercial kitchen, where she'll produce more of the food she's become known for. Her garden is a fine case of inspiration meeting opportunity, and Phoebe is quick to say it's great to do what one loves.

Of the two dozen chickens that occupy the Cole-Smith coop and enclosure, Gertrude, a pure white French Marans hen, is one of the original group of fifteen chicks that the homeowners picked up at Burr Farm in Hampton, Connecticut, in 2011. They're not sure if she's the alpha hen—the one at the top of the pecking order—but her pristine appearance signifies she's in the first tier of the free-ranging flock.

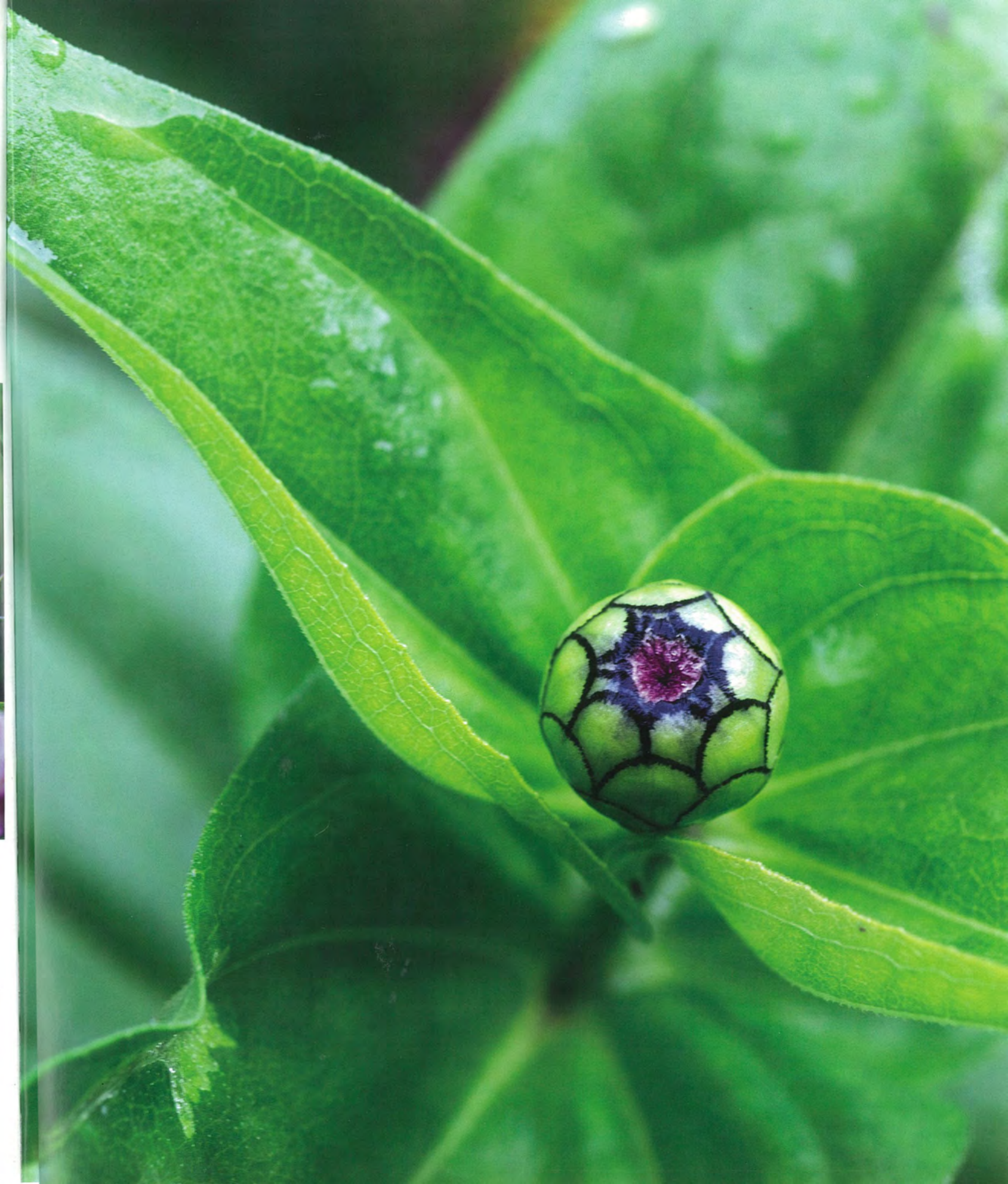


LEFT: The enormous white-flowering shrub at the back of this large bed that's used for cutting is *Hydrangea paniculata*, one of a pair gifted to the homeowner many years ago for Mother's Day; she's unsure of the variety, though guesses it's 'Unique.' BELOW: In addition to the flourishing *Echinacea augustifolia*, *Rudbeckia hirta* (black-eyed Susan) happily spreads out.





The perennial gardens offer masses of flowers for wildlife and Phoebe's vases. Growing up around the armillary are stalks of plume poppies (*Macleaya cordata*), a rhizome-spreading plant that bees love.



ABOVE: From left to right are three of Phoebe's favorites, *Zinnia elegans* 'Benary's Giant,' *Helianthus annuus* 'Van Gogh,' which is an heirloom sunflower with a shiny green center, and another heirloom, *Lilium martagon* 'Black Beauty.'
OPPOSITE: Zinnias are enchanting in every stage of bloom, as this multilayered bud reveals.

THIS PAGE: Some of the day's harvest includes 'Tavera' French green beans, 'Calypso' pickling cukes, 'Guardsman Choggia' beets, tricolor carrots 'Circus, Circus,' and Blue African basil, all organically grown. **OPPOSITE:** A Concord grape vine hugs the pergola, nasturtiums twine in the foreground and Meyer lemon plants sprout from patio containers.





THIS PAGE: Two forms of natural pest control are chickens and the marigolds planted in the vegetable garden to deter unwanted insects. The large orange-flowered variety seen inside the enclosure is *Tagetes erecta* 'Giant Orange.'
OPPOSITE: Breakfast is a locavore's delight as all ingredients hail from this garden and others nearby. The lemonade in the Mason jar dispenser is flavored with Blue African basil.





THIS PAGE: An early heirloom dahlia, 'Old Gold.' **OPPOSITE:** The homeowners made these supports for winter squash, and have since improved their design for added strength.





OPPOSITE: Dahlia plants in pre-bloom stage are staked to get the maximum show of color and shape from late summer until the first hard frost. The owner overwinters the dahlia tubers and has about 50 different varieties. **THIS PAGE:** Another view of the cutting garden reveals *Verbena bonariensis*, *Zinnia 'Envy'*, and *Nicotiana langsdorfii*, along with *Rudbeckia* and *Cosmos*.

Local craftsman William Rowe built the Adirondack-style enclosure several years ago; he learned this construction method building furniture and fences in that part of upstate New York. The wire mesh portion doesn't extend deep in the soil but does deter large critters.

