

**THE PATH  
WELL-TRAVELED**

For the walkways in the herb garden, Dickey uses gravel, a material she loves for its afford- ability and porosity. Plus, "a little less lawn is a good thing," she says. While she allows plants to spill onto the path, she does re- main in what she calls "the grab" plants—those with a tendency to spread and over whom a bed. To prevent chaos, she is careful to thin out over- frey—a perennial herb with clusters of blue or pink flowers—apple mint, lavender, and the like. Otherwise, they could take over. Opposite: In the flower garden adjacent to the herb garden, Dickey grows butterfly bush, yellow lysimachia, white valerian, the purple columbine 'Six Hills Giant,' and single-flowered white peonies.



SENSE  SPONTANEITY

In her romantic garden in rural New York, PAGE DICKEY makes room for happy surprises in the form of self-seeders—charming flowers that sprout up unannounced, unexpected but rarely unwanted.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GABRIELA HERMAN TEXT BY MELISSA OZAWA

TYPE BY ANASTASIA HERBST



▲  
Page Dickey sits with her Norfolk Terrier, Royce, in the flower garden. She has bagged water on her next book, on self-seeding in the garden.

**F**or 33 years, Page Dickey has been tending her garden at Duck Hill, her home in North Salem, New York. And for 33 years, the one thing she has been able to rely on is that nothing is ever the same. "The garden changes every year," she says. The trees and shrubs on her property remain a constant, but the self-seeders (flowers that, once planted, propagate themselves) ensure unpredictability. Year after year, these bloom-like foxgloves, mullein, and poppies, as well as larkspur and *Verbena bonariensis*—crop up with abandon, rarely in the same place twice. "I never

know what vignettes are going to happen in the garden," she says. "And that's the fun."

Dickey—who has written seven books on gardening, her most recent being *Embroidered Ground: Revisiting the Garden* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)—lives at Duck Hill with her husband, avid hands-on gardener Rosco Schell. Together they plant and prune their nearly three-acre property, which is laid out tidily in a series of small garden rooms partitioned by shrubs, hedges, and fencing. "Thank goodness for boxwood," she says of the evergreen shrub that she relies on to organize her landscape.

The herb garden near the house features a geometric layout framed by oversized boxwood balls and dwarf Korean lilac (*Syringa meyeri* 'Palibin') hedges. They provide a counterpoint to the looseness of foxgloves, creeping thyme, mullein, and violas that seed into paths and appear in beds unannounced. "Since I want a certain amount of wildness, it is important to have a structure, whether it's from hedges or geometric beds. Even if you just see a hint of them, they bring some order to the garden," she says.

There are two critical times of the year when Dickey takes stock of how the garden is faring. The first is in April, after it has woken up from winter, when she pulls up weeds and fills in gaps in the beds. The second is in very early July, after the old garden roses and many of the spring blooms have faded. When she is on her hands and knees weeding or "editing out" unwanted plants, Dickey makes sure to stand up often to survey the tableau. "I look around and ask myself, What is the picture I'm trying to make here?"

Sometimes she has to be ruthless. "I have to decide each year how much is needed to make the garden look magical, and how much I have to get rid of," she says. It's a balancing act—one that calls for creativity and a bit of spontaneity. "It keeps you on your toes."





#### ▲ LAND OF PLENTY

Dickey tries to keep the corridors of the vegetable garden free of seeders, but makes an exception for some herbaceous and poppies. The main path is surrounded by a double border of poppies that goes from yellow and orange to blue and white. "The border is my homage to Gertrude Jekyll," she says, referring to the Victorian-era English landscape architect who designed gardens that ran the spectrum from warm to cool.

#### PAGE DICKEY'S FAVORITE SELF-SEEDERS

##### 1. COLUMBINE (*Aquilegia vulgaris*)

"This variety just showed up one day—it obviously came as seed with another plant. It is a tall double maroon-red flower, and quite dark, and it seeds mostly in the gravel paths. Columbines are charming, winsome, short-lived perennials that act more like biennials. I am always happy to see their scalloped leaves whenever they decide to appear."

##### 3. NETTLE-LEAVED MULLEIN (*Verbascum thapsus*)

"Here's another short-lived perennial that seeds around the garden. I love its bold clusters of leaves and tall spears of yellow flowers with red-violet stamens at their throats, for they bloom just after the foxgloves and provide nice verticals in the borders."

##### 3. SHIRLEY POPPY (*Papaver rhoeas*)

"The *Papaver rhoeas* 'Angels Choir Mixed' turns our vegetable garden into a charming fantasy for a week or two sometime in June. A few years ago, I sprinkled a couple of packets of seed in the cutting beds, and now hundreds of papery single and ruffled double cups crop up in every hue of pink, lavender, red, and white."

##### 4. ALLIUM (*Allium christophii*)

"These flowers bloom with the roses in the herb garden in June. Their baseball-size, intricately patterned lavender spheres are a welcome contrast to the pink-petaled damasks and gallicas. They seed about modestly, popping up here and there in the gravel paths or in the kitchen terrace below."

##### 5. LOVE-IN-A-MIST (*Wigandia dasycarpa*)

"A charming annual, loved for its balloonlike seed heads almost as much as for its delicate-petaled flowers. I was given seed of the common sky-blue sort, called 'Miss Jekyll,' years ago by a dear friend, and I can count on its appearing every late spring in the gravel around the herb-garden beds. It comes in white and almost-black, both of which I grow in the vegetable garden for cutting."

##### 6. CORYDALIS (*Corydalis ochroleuca*)

"Probably the longest blooming perennial I have in the garden, along with its relative, the yellow-flowering *C. lutea*. It is a small, fragile thing, growing in clumps of deeply cut glaucous leaves, seeding in crevices in our rock walls and in the gravel terrace where there is shade. Delicate racemes of creamy white flowers appear in early April and continue to flower into November."

##### 7. FOXGLOVE (*Digitalis purpurea*)

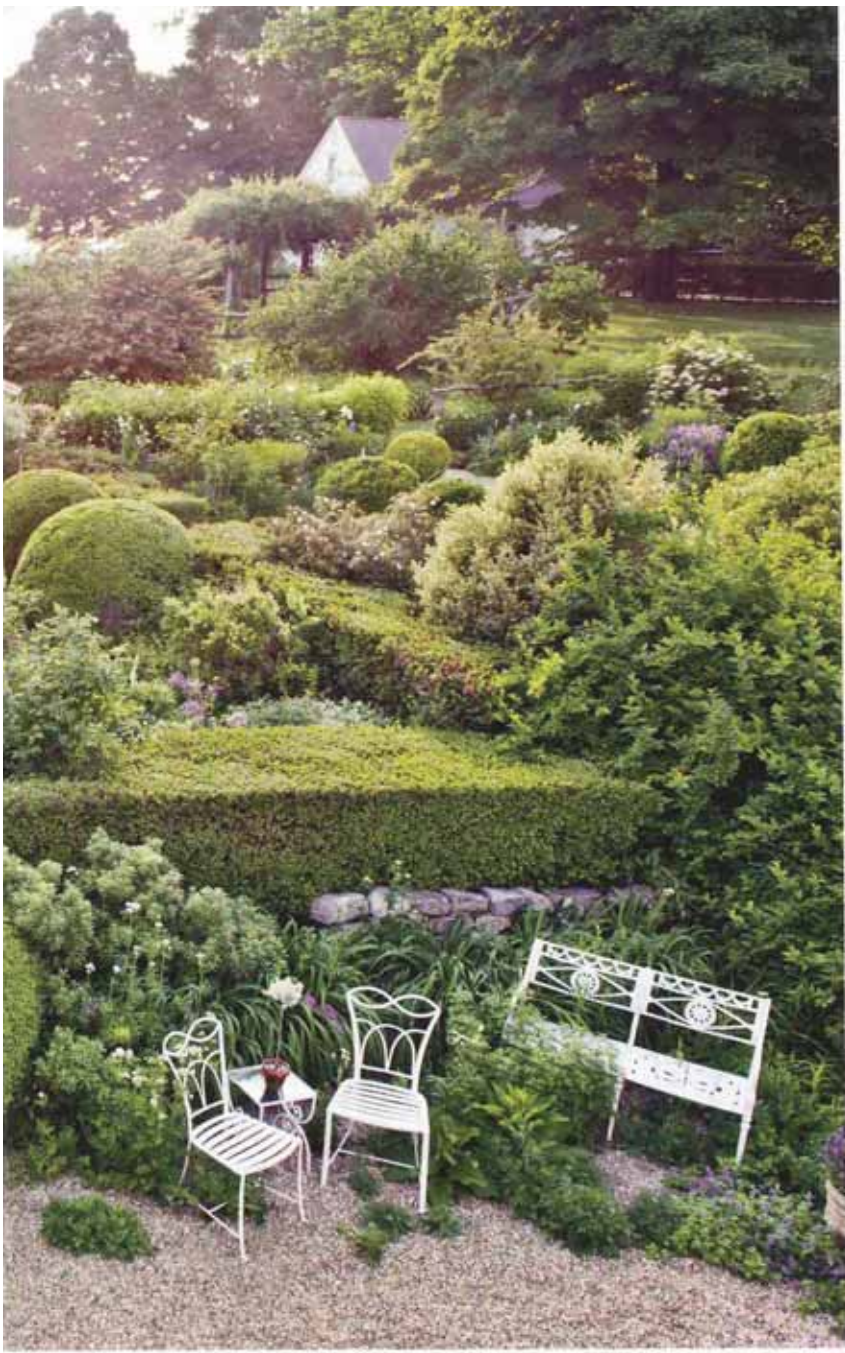
"Foxgloves are beloved by everyone who has ever read Beatrix Potter or driven down a country lane in England in the spring. They are quintessential cottage flowers, romantic and charming, and I thrill to their presence in the gardens at Duck Hill. They seed about obligingly if I leave some stalks standing after the flowers have faded."

Produced by Melissa Ozawa



#### SHAKE IT UP

"I haven't planted a foxglove in decades, and never in the wood yard," says Dickey. "But each year the tall sprigs of bell-like flowers arrive. Thanks in part to their love of the firm, wooded chips that make up the path in order to encourage more of the white variety she favors, she saves the seeding process: She waits for the foxgloves to go to seed, and when the seeds are ripe and ready, she cuts off the stalk and "shakes it like a pepper shaker" in the desired area."



**A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW**

The entrances to the herb garden are flanked by boxwood balls "so wonderfully big that you have to squeeze through to get by," Dickey says. The play with scale is echoed in the array of self-seeders in the garden. They range from low-growing Johnny-jump-ups (violas) and creeping thyme to tall stalks of mullein and hogworts. Add: bonny, large, blowing shrubs of old damask and gallica roses burst into flower in June. Dickey and Sachell are careful not to match to the main garden, "simply because I want things to stand," she says. They fertilize only with compost and occasionally manure when needed, such as for the roses.