THE PATH WELL-TRAVELED

For the walkways in the herb garden, Dickey uses gravel, a material that lends itself to the garden’s ability and permanence. “It looks well worn,” she says. While the square plants are splashed with pots, she does resist using “giant” plants—those with a tendency to spread and overwhelm. She tries to narrow them down carefully to thin out, to prevent them from spreading out of control. She is careful to thin out the thyme, to stop its spread. She also plants other plants to keep the thyme in check, such as mint, lavender, and rosemary. Overall, she finds these plants are easy to take care of, despite the many perennials in the garden. In her romantic garden in rural New York, PAGE DICKEY makes room for happy surprises in the form of self-seeded—charming flowers that sprout up unannounced, unexpected but rarely unwanted.
For 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, those blooms—the foxglove, mullein, and peonies, 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 hardscaper hono Schell. Together they plant and prune their nearly four-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 box (Buxus microphylla 'Variegata') hedges. They provide a counterpoint to the looseness of foxgloves, creeping thyme, mullein, and violets 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 " edição out " unwanted plants. Dickey makes sure to stand up often to survey the tableau. "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 it's 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."
9. NEBinding LEAVED MULLIN (Perennials phallicae)
"Here's another short-lived perennial that seeds around the garden. We see clumps of flowers that flaunt their tassel-like blooms in spring, but after the flowers fade, they provide nice verticals in the borders."

10. SHIRLEY POPPY
(Papaver rhoeas)
The Papaver whose '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 cup up in every line of pick, lavender, red, and white."

11. LAVENDER
(Lavandula angustifolia)
These flowers bloom with the roses in the herb garden in June. Their loose, airy, intricately patterned lavender spheres are a welcome contrast to the pink-purple hedges of salvia. They smell about modestly, popping up here and there in the gravel paths or in the kitchen terrace below."

12. LOVE-IN-MIST
(Nigella damascena)
A charming annual, loved for its balloon-like seed heads and such as much for its delicate feathered flowers. I have been growing the common sky-blue sort, called 'Miss Bakewell', for years in the garden, and I can count on its appearing every late spring in the gravel around the herb garden beds. It consists white and almost black, both of which expand in the vegetable garden for cutting."

13. CORNFLOWER
(Centranthus roseus)
"Probably the longest blooming perennial I have in the garden, along with its relative, the yellow-flowering C. thapsus. It is a small, fragrant thing, growing in clumps of greenish-gray leaves, seeding in crannies in dry rock walls and in the gravel terrace where there is shade. Delicate racemes of creamy white flowers appear in late April and continue to flower until November."

14. FOXLLOW
(Dipticus purpureus)
"Foxtails are beloved by everyone who has ever read Beatrix Potter or driven a country lane in England inside the spring. They are quintessential cottage flowers, romantic and charming, and (in my opinion) are the prettiest in the garden at Duck Hill. They seed about obligingly if there is some grass standing after the flowers have faded."

Produced by Melissa Downs

LAND OF PLENTY
Arundel faces are kept in their beds and the fertilized garden beds are watered that weeds an insect for some toppers and peepers. The main path is surrounded by a double border of perennials that goes from yellow and orange to blue and white. "The border is my homage to Gertrude Jekyll," she says, referring to the Victorian English landscape architect who designed gardens that ran the spectrum from warm to cool.
A BIRD’S-EYE VIEW

The entrance to the herb garden is flanked by rosewood knives (so wonderfully fragrant that you have to squeeze through to get by),” Dekey says. This play with scale is echoed in the array of self-seeders in the garden. They range from low-growing thymes, jump-ups (saffron) and creeping thyme to tall shoots of mullein and fennel. Also, though it is larger, stately shrubs of pickled rosemary and scented grasses burst into flower in June. Dekey and Buhl are careful not to mix in the main gardens, “simply because I want things to seed,” she says. They fertilize only with compost and occasionally mulch when needed, such as for the roses.