

WELCOME TO HORTULUS

WHERE TWO HARDCORE
NEW YORKERS
TRANSPLANTED THEIR
LIVES—AND A TROVE OF
ARTIFACTS, ODDITIES, AND
PLANTS—ONTO A 100-ACRE
PLEASURE GARDEN OPEN
TO ALL.

An early spring glimpse of this property in rural PA. Steps away from the circa 1793 house, an ornamental fence holds space for an abundant vegetable garden, and a cast-stone English urn and a ring of *Euonymus* 'Golden Queen' await the emergence of arrangement-worthy *Gomphrena*, yarrow, zinnias, and dahlias.



THE COUPLE'S
PENCHANT
FOR **UNUSUAL**
COLLECTIONS AND
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FLORA AND FAUNA.

IF you were to scoop up two powerhouse New Yorkers and plop them down in rural Pennsylvania, how would they spend their time? If those transplants happened to be event/landscape/floral designer Renny Reynolds and actor/creative director/writer Jack Staub, they'd turn an overgrown 18th-century farmstead into Hortulus Farm: a trove of handsome buildings, rescued wildlife, and jubilant gardens linked together by bridges, walking paths, and a healthy dose of whim.

The very name Hortulus, which comes from the Latin word for "little garden," as in a park, or grounds one can enjoy, signals the owners' playful spirit. Today Hortulus (hortulusfarm.com) comprises 24 exuberant gardens that blanket a third of the 100-acre property. Some

gardens are identified by their conditions: woodland, Mediterranean, meadowland; others are named for their central features, such as vegetable, swimming pool, edible, and urn, the latter referring to a Godzilla-sized aluminum vessel from Mexico that is edged by four *Cunninghamia lanceolata* trees.

The urn, like many of the hard-landscape accents peppered across the landscape—including an 18-foot tuteur (a pyramid-shaped tower for vines and climbing plants), the vegetable garden's ornamental wood fence, and the 1,600 'Delaware Valley White' azaleas that were once centerpieces at Rockefeller Center—started off as party props, thanks to Reynolds' days as a Manhattan event planner. In the 1970s and '80s, he was renowned for creating over-the-top galas, whether that meant

unleashing indoor snowstorms at the Studio 54 nightclub or launching Chinese junks into the Hudson River.

In 1979, shortly before he met Staub, Reynolds bought 15 acres in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The former dairy farm, about 1.5 hours southwest of New York City, contained a Federal-style farmhouse and several outbuildings, including two dairy barns. But aside from that, it was undeveloped—no gardens or hardscaping to be found. As adjacent vacant farmland came onto the market through the years, Reynolds and Staub expanded the property to its present size.

Given Reynolds' skills as a host, it's no surprise that Hortulus is visitor friendly. The estate offers self-guided and founder-guided tours (complete with box lunches

Above: Near the woodland walk, a sprawling oval of *Hyacinthoides hispanica* referred to as "the bluebell lake" contains islands of peach-flowering azaleas.

Opposite: Hortulus' expansive woodland garden has been planted with more than 200,000 bulbs, including these daffodils that complement other plantings in the yellow and variegated foliage garden. Magenta blooms of 'Forest Pansy' redbud and pink-tinged new leaves of a Japanese maple overhang a bank of forsythia and the faux bois furnishings Staub and Reynolds found at the famous Clignancourt flea market in Paris.





Across the driveway from the main residence, a hobbitlike hillside of dwarf Alberta spruce flanks the staircase up to the vegetable garden. The trees were leftover apartment Christmas trees from Reynolds' shop in New York. Behind them, the old milk barn features a scalloped roof detail that appears on outbuildings throughout the property.



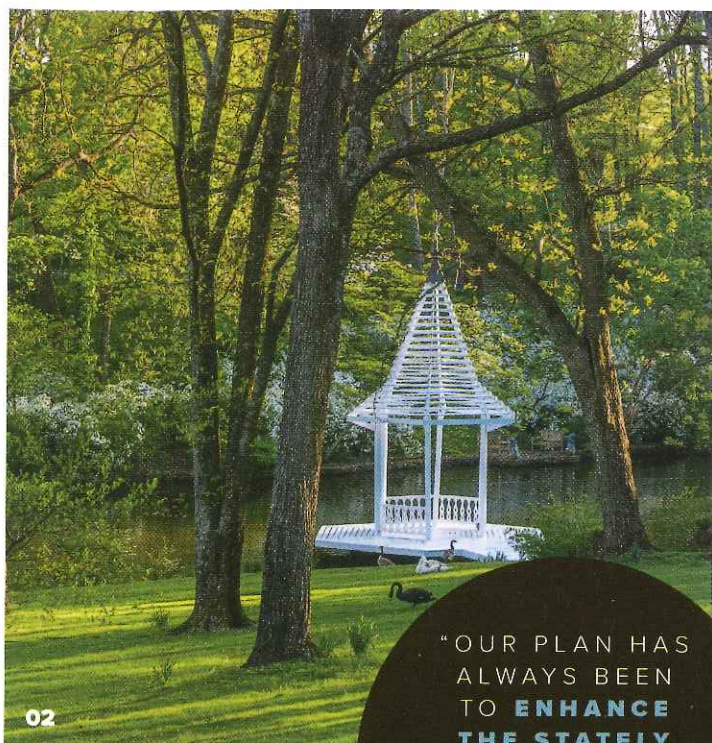
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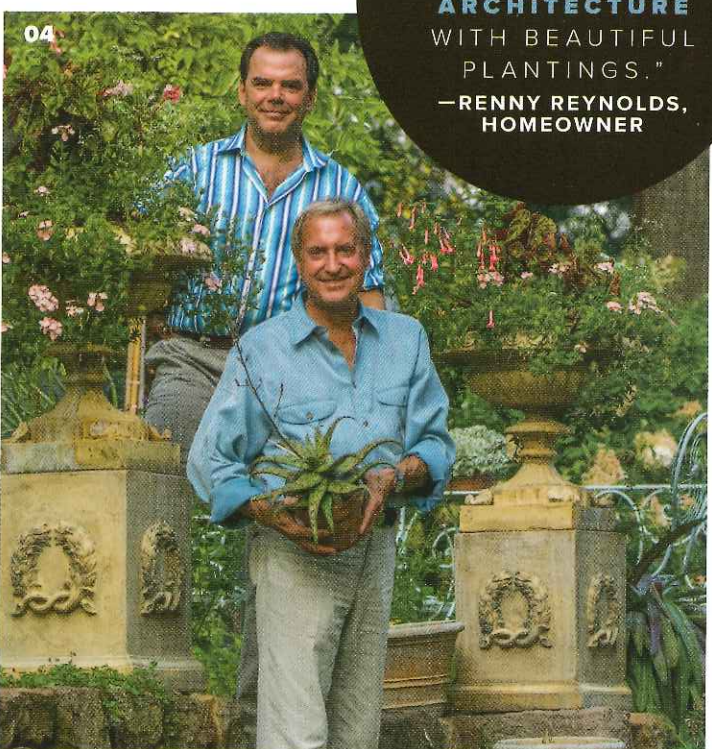
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01 A swath of *Allium*, including *A. schubertii*, 'Gladiator', 'Mount Everest', and 'Ivory Queen', borders a creek that runs through the property.

02 Black Australian and whooper swans meander across the lawn. Behind them is the gazebo the couple originally planned to roof—they halted the project when they saw the builder's handsome slatted support structure.



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"OUR PLAN HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO **ENHANCE THE STately ARCHITECTURE** WITH BEAUTIFUL PLANTINGS."
—RENNY REYNOLDS, HOMEOWNER

03 One of the snowball viburnums that ring the French garden in full glorious bloom. They were purchased 30 years ago at an end-of-season sale for \$5 each.

04 Staub (in stripes) and Reynolds in the terrace garden.

on a stone terrace), tours of the couple's renovated stone home, and a museum barn stocked with eclectic collections of antique English garden tools, vintage lawn sprinklers, cast-iron dogs, flower frogs, Fulper pottery, about a thousand gardening books, and paintings by Bucks County impressionists. The couple rents the property for weddings and for photo and film shoots. Ample parking borders the farm's retail nursery, which specializes in exotic plants, potted topiary, and an extraordinary selection of begonias.

The couple's penchant for unusual collections and compositions extends to their flora and fauna. They have amassed 35 varieties of magnolias, including Reynolds' favorite, *Magnolia sieboldii* 'Colossus'. The woodland garden features more than 20,000 spring bulbs, from daffodils to pale blue muscari, as well as a section that features plants and trees with variegated foliage, designed to give the impression that it is sun-dappled even on the most overcast days. A peony-edged walk produces 10,000 stems each year, some of which are sold at New York and Philadelphia flower markets. "It's our big spring crop," Staub jokes.

As for animals, Staub and Reynolds have taken in many of the winged and footed orphans the local SPCA has to offer. Visitors are likely to see clusters of waterfowl around the lake, from black swans to mallards and Canada geese. Three dogs of various scruffiness follow the men around; a trio of peacocks named Charles, Camilla, and Diana adorn the aviary (built from a corn crib, with an added stone base and an urn at the top); and the cluster of sheep

in the pasture are called the Mitford Sisters, a reference to the celebrated siblings from an aristocratic 20th-century British family.

Mementos from the couple's travels appear throughout the property: statues and sculptures, faux bois seating areas, and all manner of wrought iron. "We've done a lot of shopping over the years," Staub says. And when they weren't shopping, they were visiting gardens all over Europe and the United States. Their gardening hearts, however, belong to England.

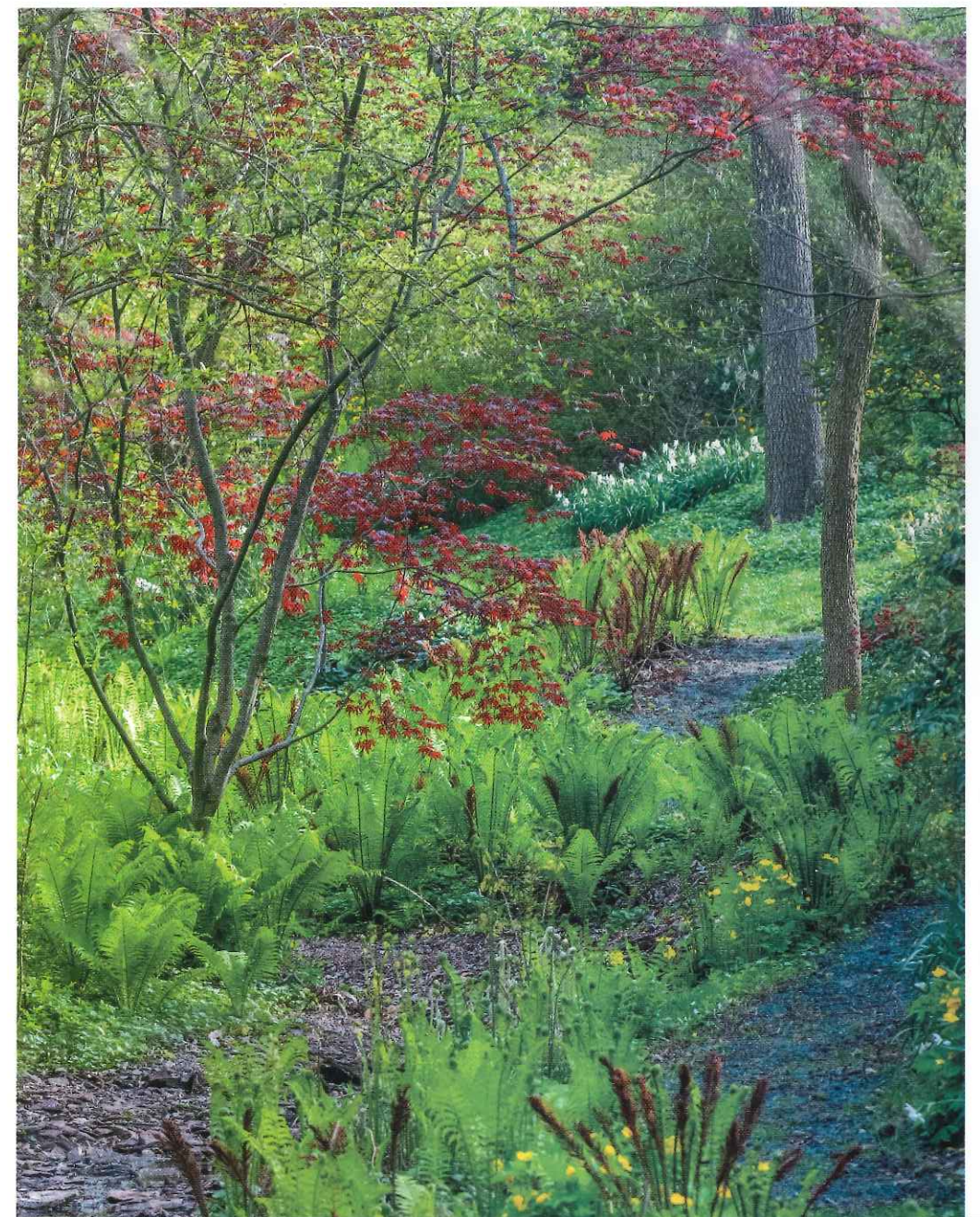
"We're crazy for English gardens," Staub says, noting that he and Reynolds have led tours through Kent and Sussex, stopping at such

well-known gardens as Great Dixter and William Robinson's house along the way. "You can't throw a stone without hitting a beautiful garden in that country," he says. "It's a perfect climate for growing."

It's also an aesthetic that suits Hortulus' rural surroundings and is reflected in its carefully tended but loosely arranged perennial and summer beds. In Staub and Reynolds' view, French and Italian gardens, lovely as they are, would be too formal for their pastoral setting.

Staub's original role at Hortulus may have been as Reynolds' right hand ("He was the visionary, and I was the garden acolyte," Staub says), but he quickly staked out his own

Right: Cinnamon ferns and a young Japanese maple line the winding streamside walk that meanders over a series of rustic bridges from the farm to the couple's specialty nursery operation.

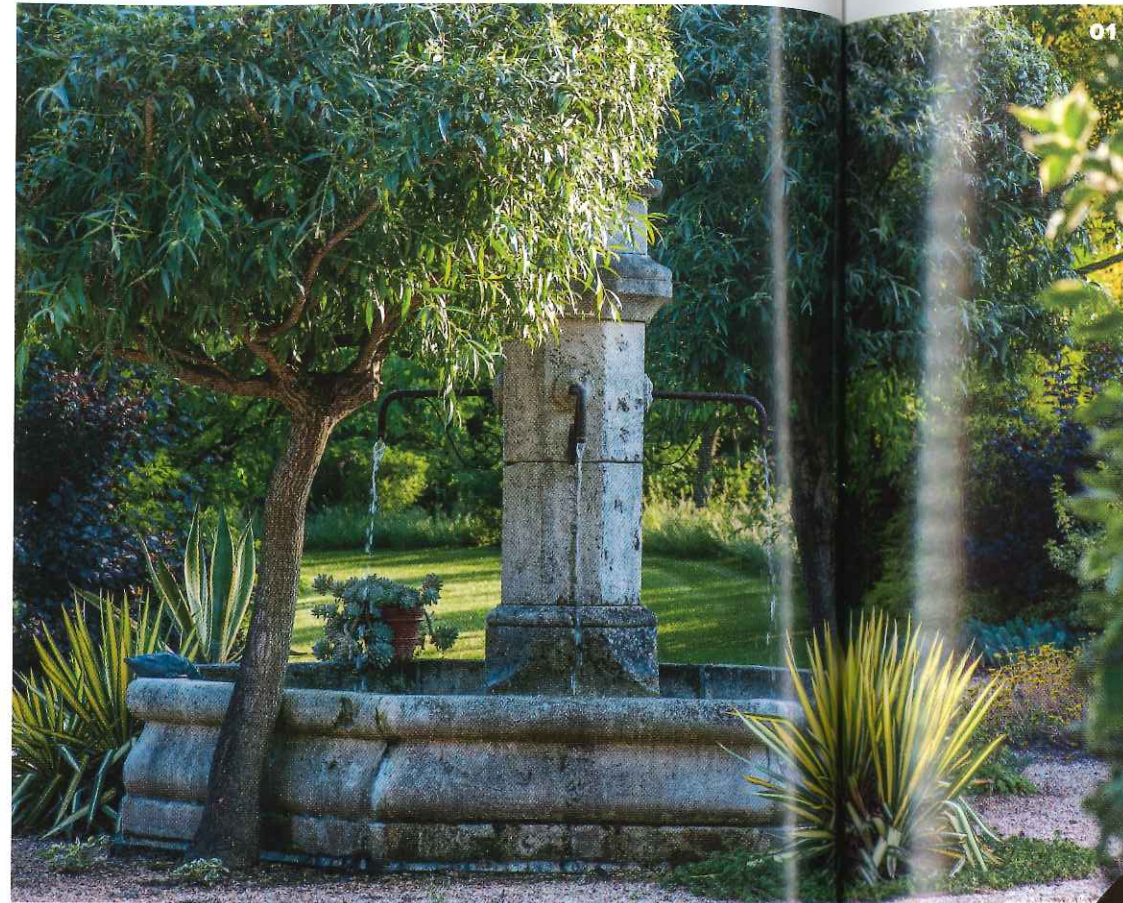


territory with the kitchen garden. While Reynolds formulated a plan for their vernal theme park, contemplating sightlines, axes, and plant palettes, Staub contemplated food. In the late '70s, Staub says, Bucks County supermarkets didn't stock much in the way of fresh produce. "All they had on the shelves was pre-historic iceberg lettuce," he recalls, "and I just wanted to eat."

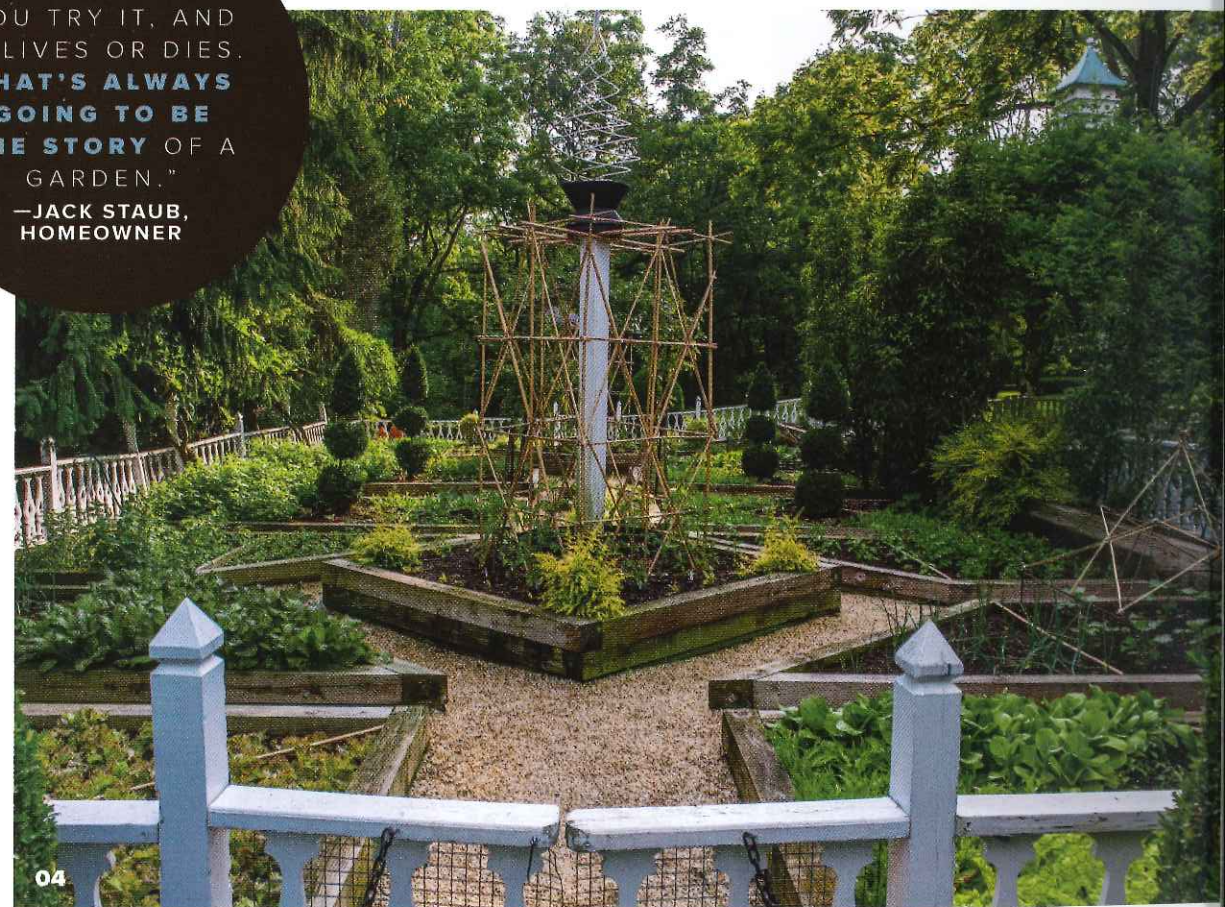
He picked out a flat spot close to the house and studied up on crop rotation, raised beds, potato beetles, and parterres. Then, on one of the couple's garden trips, he had an epiphany. "I was at Barnsley House," Staub recalls, referring to the Cotswolds estate that was revitalized in the 1950s by the lauded garden designer Rosemary Verey. "And it was eye opening to see that a food garden could be so decorative and productive." Staub also learned that placing structures in the beds not only adds an architectural element but also increases your gardening real estate. Sure enough, Staub's tuteurs and bamboo sculptures support his wax beans, tomatoes, and squash vines; his raised beds, separated by gravel paths, are patterned after a Turkish carpet.

Today, Staub presides over an abundant potager that produces fennel, chard, eggplant, and lettuces. No iceberg. He also grows a selection of slicing and cherry tomatoes each year—one of his recent introductions, the striped, sweet 'Mint Julep', is his current favorite.

- 01 A village fountain from France anchors the Mediterranean garden, which suggests that warmer climate with variegated *Yucca* 'Color Guard' and the olivelike silver foliage of willowleaf pears.
- 02 An ancient Kentucky coffee tree greets visitors to the lower barn, which now serves as a horticultural library and museum.
- 03 *Spiraea* 'Gold Mound' and panicle hydrangeas (not in bloom) surround the pool that doubles as a fountain.
- 04 In the vegetable garden, Staub establishes vertical planes using columnar apples, boxwood topiary, and bamboo-clad columns flanking the central apple pavilion. For its luminous color and quirky habit, he has strategically placed *Lonicera nitida* 'Baggesen's Gold' (aka box honeysuckle) as an accent throughout.



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—JACK STAUB,
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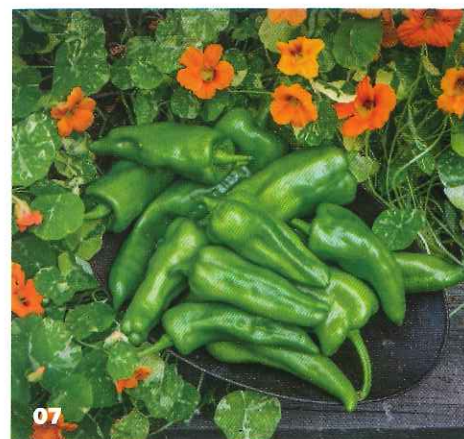




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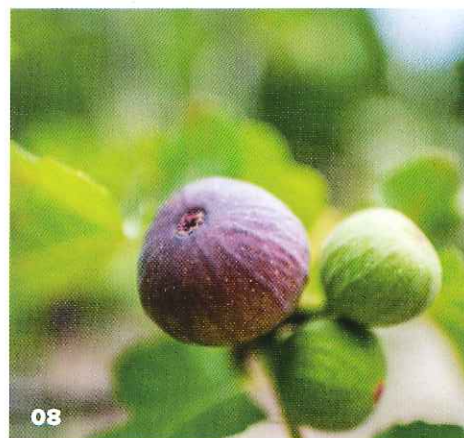
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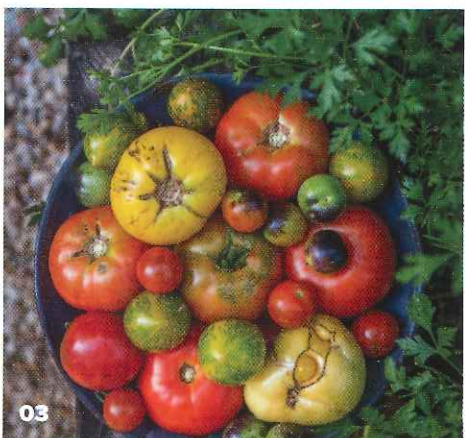
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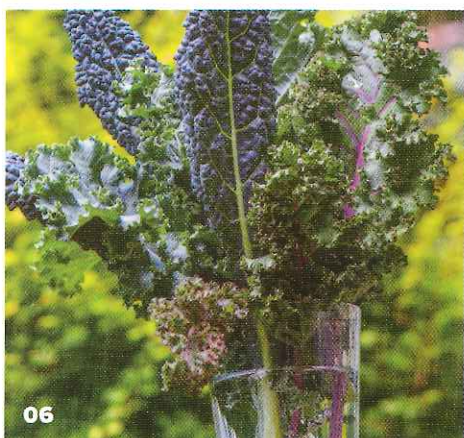
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01 POSH SQUASH

Beautifully striated 'Delicata' and 'Sweet Dumpling' squash share a platter with 'Jarrahdale' and 'Baby Boo' pumpkins.

02 TRUE GARDEN FRIENDS

Small cucumbers and a French wax bean, 'Roc d'Or' (golden rock). Beans are a true garden friend as they add nutrients to the soil.

03 TOMATO BRAVADO

Heirloom tomatoes. The nursery hosts an annual Tomatofest in mid-June, offering two-dozen stellar varieties of heirloom and hybrid tomato starts.

04 COLORFUL KOHLRABI

Staub loves Kohlrabi 'Purple Vienna' for the jolt of color it brings.

05 UNDERGROUND DELIGHTS

Onions, garlic, and 'Adirondack Blue' potatoes. These potatoes are notable for being a deep purple/blue both inside and out.

06 A HEALTHY SNACK

Three types of kale: 'Lacinato', 'Redbor', and 'Dwarf Blue Curled Scotch'. Healthy kale chips are a favorite: Toss torn leaves with olive oil and salt, spread on a baking sheet, bake until crisp, and enjoy.

07 SPICE WITH SOMETHING NICE

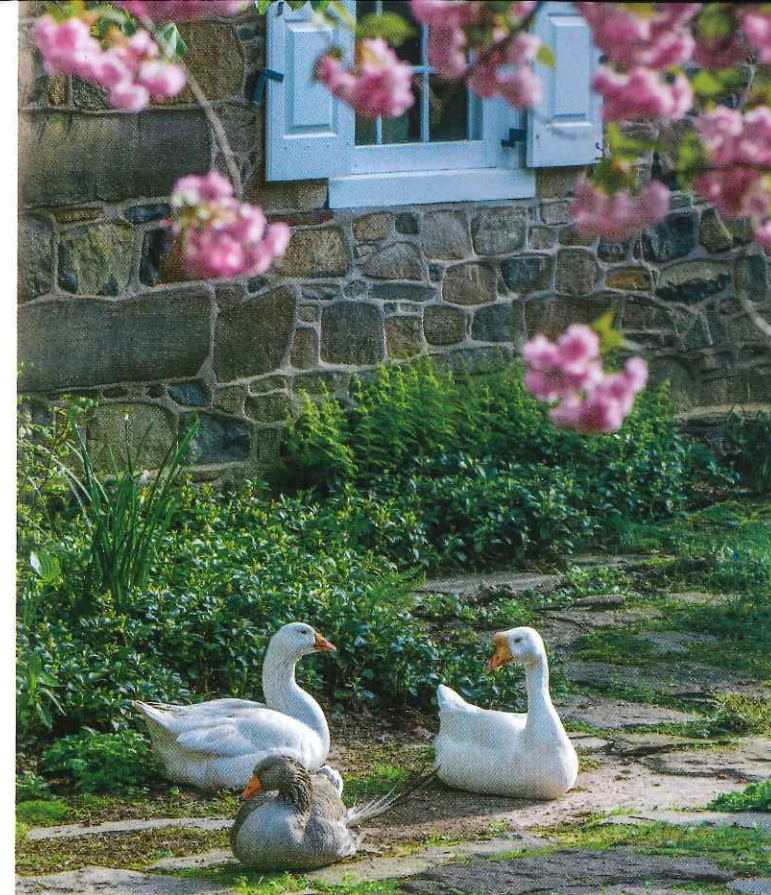
'Jimmy Nardello' peppers with 'Alaska' nasturtium, which offers the added bonus of pretty cream-splotted leaves.

08 HARDY HARVEST

The 'Hardy Chicago' fig, which stands up well to both cold and pests. Grown in substantial pots, they are wheeled into an unheated garage beneath one of the barns to go dormant over the winter.

09 PETITE PRODUCE

Yellow 'Eight Ball' squash. These are a farm favorite as they don't get as large as other varieties of summer squash.



Over the years Staub has come into his own as a noted garden author, with titles including *75 Exciting Vegetables for Your Garden*, *Private Gardens of South Florida*, and *The Illustrated Book of Edible Plants* (Gibbs Smith).

Because Hortulus has been largely a DIY effort, Staub and Reynolds have learned the way intrepid garden lovers often do: by making lots of mistakes. They sited their native azaleas too close together ("We're as impatient as anybody," Staub says), and the kitchen garden competes for light and nutrients with an enormous black walnut tree. The 800 *Allium* they planted by a creek are falling into the water as the bank erodes, and after all their efforts to rid the trees of a plethora of vining invasives, they inadvertently planted invasives of their own. Of those, the variegated miniature bamboo they installed has been the least aggressive, but the trumpet vine and knotweed pose a constant threat. "These two are things we have to be constantly vigilant about and it's a continuing love/hate relationship," Staub notes. They love

that the trumpet vine is vigorous and has beautiful flowers, but since it self-seeds they have to dig out the seedlings to control it. And the knotweed is also pretty with its variegated green- and white-splotted leaves on red stems, but it sprouts suckers so they chop them off to keep it contained. And they will not plant more *Allium*. The setbacks, however, are accepted as part of the experience. "You plant it, you try it, and it lives or dies," Staub says. "That's always going to be the story of the garden."

In a 2015 lecture Reynolds gave at the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art in Manhattan, he said, "Our plan has always been to enhance the stately architecture with beautiful plantings." Visitors to Hortulus might argue that the plan goes far, far beyond that, given the enormous range in biological diversity and styles across the many gardens.

In fact, in the 37 years since Staub and Reynolds arrived, they've transformed the former dairy land into a true *hortulus*, a pleasure garden for themselves and the enthusiasts who come to walk its paths.

They've also worked to preserve and promote Bucks County's history, a rural legacy that dates back to William Penn and is at risk of being swallowed up by subdivisions and office parks. Now that the men are in their sixties, they are calculating how to be stewards of the land in perpetuity. Toward that end, they have added their house to the National Register of Historic Places and converted Hortulus Farm into a nonprofit foundation, a restructuring that is supported by nursery sales and the tour fees from their 5,000 annual visitors.

Even as they plan for the long term, the men aren't shying away from new projects. When a recent storm knocked down 30 mature trees, domino-style, the couple responded by filling the barren slope with new grasses, 2,000 perennials, 1,500 hydrangeas, and 1,500 azaleas, all to be topped off by a gothic folly. That's garden number 25 (known as the dell garden—it's their biggest thus far). Garden number 26 is a new topiary cove, courtesy of clipped boxwood castoffs from a friend in Virginia who no longer wanted to maintain them. The topiaries are mature, some of them 9 feet tall, but the plantings at their base just went in during the summer of 2016.

"Come back in 5 years," Staub says. By then, in all likelihood, gardens number 27 through 30 will be ready to explore, too.

Resident geese enjoy a quiet moment on the sun-warmed flagstone court in front of the Isaiah Warner house, named after one of the original owners. The house has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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