A new leaf

After 30 years perfecting her garden at Duck Hill, garden writer Page Dickey took on a new challenge with a vast garden in Connecticut.

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IN BRIEF

What: A private garden surrounded by meadows and woodland.
Where: Connecticut, USA.
Soil: Calcareous (the garden is on limestone ledge rock).
Quick-draining near house; deep, rich soil in low woods and ferns.
Size: 3.7 acres.
Climate: Hot summers and cold winters, usually with a good deal of snow.
Hardiness zone: USDA 4b.

Facing page: Page Dickey's new home, Church House in Connecticut, was built in the 18th century as a Methodist church. Towering above it is huge Acer saccharum, a great and glorious sugar maple with lustrous bark streaked with black green moss that is within touching distance of Page's third-floor study window.

This image: Moss-encircled limestone boulders in one of Church House's meadows marks a transition to the wild rock of the high woods behind.
A
land of lavender and burnt sienna sunsets beckoned Page Dickey and Bocco Schell to New England when they realized their much-lusted garden at Dusk Hill in New York had become a Herculean challenge. The intention was “to buy tomatoes now, not grow them” so the move to 17 acres and a drop in climate zone to build bridges across a wetland fen in Litchfield County, Connecticut took their friends by surprise. But Church House, built in 1793 as the first Methodist church to be erected in New England, was something of a call of the wild for them both and the wetland fen is only one in a rich matrix of interlocking habitats they now inhabit. The limestone boulder strewn woodland with a quarry, from which yard-long sides drip in winter, melts to a weep-worthy carpet of native bulbs, ferns and grasses; there are gasp-inducing, perennial-rich, butterfly-harassing meadows and a heavenly garden open to the landscape but subtly fenced off from hares and deer.

One thing was clear, Page was done with enclosed gardens and her mantra never to “put flowers in front of a view” was jettisoned when she saw the shifts in light that roll over the soft Berkshire...
Hills. The garden draws the house are landscaped on exotics but exceptions are made for anything that will encourage pollinators.

In the front borders, *Nepeta x faassenii 'Eaon.' Chaudron* accompanies native Baptisia, beloved by hummingbirds. Fancy relations of meadow rue, *Euthamia* 'Lemon Queen' and *Buddleja* 'Lochinch' are planted for bees to feast on both nectar and pollen and the vibrant purple corymb of *Veronica capensis* are feeding stations for fluttering clusters of swallowtail butterflies. Page calls this area that leads you into the house "an intimate space of flowered surfaces." Which pretty much describes it as well.

Page found "the collector's garden" too strong in the swimming pool garden where she added a range of hydrangeas to the potted plants already there. No more *Helenium* 'Sahin's Beauty' since learning that its sterile bracts are useless for pollinating insects but the lady's mantle *H. arborescens* 'Green Dragon' and the magenta-flowered butterfly *Philadelphus paniculata* 'Jenna': To the pink and white she added

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The limestone boulder-strewn woodland melts to a weep-worthy carpet of native bulbs, ferns and grasses.
Veronicastrum virginicum is planted for bees, and corymbs of Vernonia are feeding stations for fluttering swallowtail butterflies.

8 KEY PLANTS

1. Lobelia spicata: A beautiful and delicate native flower that looks especially lovely growing in Paper’s fields among sedum. It flowers in July. More delicate than its cousin, L. spectabilis, which is also native to Connecticut, and more tolerant of dry conditions. Happy in full sun and half shade. BO-90cm. USDA 4a-8b.

2. Asclepias tuberosa: Another meadow native, which is particularly loved by monarch butterflies. It happily seeds and spreads in the poor soil and limestone of Paper’s tea lawn. It grows to 1.2m. RHS H4.

3. Rhus typhina ‘toxicodendron radicans’ A native perennial that grows among blackberry in the dry soil of the back west field. Best in full sun. It is the preferred source of nectar of the endangered northern metalmark butterfly. 90cm. USDA 3a-7b.

4. Asperula canadensis: A charming native columbine that grows in masses in the high rocky woods around Church House. It is fire-resistant and flowers on red stems. It flowers in May. It is a native of W. and E. Europe and Asia.

5. Helianthus ‘Lemon Queen’: Considered a native hybrid, this pretty lemon-yellow sunflower flowers most of summer. It is easy to grow and produces large yellow disc flowers. Needs full sun. 3m. USDA 3a-8b.

6. Eupatorium 'Eimini': Attractive, rat-tailed comfort that grows along the Church House meadow. It is a moist-meadow perennial that can reach 1.8m. Needs full sun. USDA 3a-8b.


8. Asclepias polydactylaea: A charming small and upright fern that flourishes in the dry shade of calcareous woods. A favourite of Paper’s. 90cm.

*From the North American Native Garden Guide by the New England Wildflower Society. Used by permission from the publisher.
lash of native orange to echo the way the "brilliant-orange, jewel-like butterfly weed Asclepias tuberosa enfolds a field of wheat-coloured grasses and Queen Anne’s lace in the wild." In the cutting garden, sweet peas appear among rows of Tagetes ‘Cinnabar’, statice and ‘Trifumis retusa’ whose vibrant orange daisies are “favoured landing places for monarch butterflies.”

The wild habitats beyond the tended garden are so balanced and beautiful that they are areas of gentle instruction to tinker in but not control. Non-native invaders are called but the only other intervention is the mowing of an occasional "green band coursing through a featherly field" of Schizachyrium scoparium and smoky purple Eupatorium purpureum. Pale lavender-pink mallow flowers Asclepias syriaca and treasure-lavender bergamot Monarda fistulosa alongside the goldenrod Solidago juncea and Euthamia graminitifolia flower among tall, arching stems of Sorghastrum nutans. It is a flower-rich paradise. Meadows melt into the high wooded bluffs borderlanded by Asclepias asperula and Atrazine triplot, the low exit wood carpeted in hub-shunk cabbage leaves melts into the 5m studded with panicked aster Symphyotrichum lanceolatum and pink swamp mallow Asclepias incarnata. Pege and Bosco seem to be the most contented custodians of nature.