



Hilltop Haven

AT HOME WITH THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

WRITTEN BY JENNIFER MOORE STAHLKRANTZ // PHOTOGRAPHED BY JANE BEILES



TABLE READY
Sarah serves up a sumptuous repast using produce from her garden and recipes by Jamie Oliver, Nigel Slater, and Delia Smith.



There's a path cleared through the wildflower meadow behind Sarah and David Kowitz's hill-top home on Wood Road in the far reaches of Bedford. It leads toward an old, vacant aviary and meanders behind the vegetable garden and the "holding pen," where perennials that have been lifted and divided elsewhere on the 12-acre property are temporarily held for replanting.

Sarah is an avid plantswoman. A native of England, she married David, an American, and they settled in New York City before embarking on a search for a family home in the country. "We had almost given up," she recalls. "When the estate agent finally brought us to the last house on the last day, we drew up in front, and our eyes were out on stalks. I thought it was the most beautiful and magnificent place."

The Kowitzes were decidedly smitten with the circa 1863 Victorian set amid mature maples and conifers. The original owners, the Hyatt-Lyons family, had worked with an architect to ensure that their summer home's design and orientation would capture the site's dramatic Hudson River views and maximize the cooling breezes. Remarkably, the house's rather grand, Palladian charm was still intact when David and Sarah, who were expecting their first child, arrived in 1995.

"We bought the house from an architect who was very stylish. She was only the fourth owner of the house and had done it up very nicely—though very "California" with pale, neutral colors," says Sarah, as she leads a late-morning tour up the front steps to the porch and into the front hallway.

While the interior was beautiful, Sarah wanted to put her own stamp on her family's first home. She promptly papered the sitting room and hallway walls in shades of yellow and painted the library a deep forest green. "I wanted to create a very English, country-





CLEAR SKIES It is said that in the early days, Manhattan was visible from the cupola (left). Sarah and her gardener Sondra Lombardo walk among the wildflowers (below). Francesco Clemente's painting makes a bold statement in the dining room (right).



house interior which, in its true form, is a mixed collection of furniture, art, and decorative furnishings that have been amassed over a number of generations—and generally very little that is 20th-century,” she continues.

She then furnished these rooms with Oriental rugs, traditional George Smith couches, William Yeoward chairs, and plenty of 18th-century antiques, all of which were purchased in England (ironically, the Kowitzes bought a second home in England in 2004 and furnished it with 20th-century American and Italian furniture). The adjacent dining room, however, is a surprise, thanks to the juxtaposition of the fine, late-Georgian crystal chandelier by Peris overhead and the striking painting by contemporary artist Francesco Clemente that claims one entire wall.

“Our tastes have changed a little over time,” she says with a nod to David’s art collection that has historically featured Dutch and Flemish Old Masters but has recently included more modern pieces.

When she enters the kitchen at the back of the house, Sarah confers with her staff on their preparations for a lunch she is hosting this afternoon to raise awareness of Generation Ubuntu. The charity, founded by Bedford native Whitney Johnson, seeks to improve the health and well-being of children and teens living with HIV in South Africa.

As the clock strikes 12, the doorbell chimes, and she greets Taek Gi Lee, a piano prodigy from Warren, Connecticut, who has arrived to





perform a recital in the library for Sarah's guests. A serious yet genial high-school student, Lee was the 2014 winner of the Hastings International Piano Concerto Competition, which the Kowitzes sponsor annually. Sarah soon settles him in at David's piano and heads out the back door.

Walking through the formal gardens, the first of which is English in palette—blues, purples, and pinks—and followed by the white garden, Sarah explains the evolution of her property. "The garden we inherited was natural and open and very *provençal*," she explains. "At the beginning, we made the mistake of thinking that we could recreate an English garden in terms of the plants we chose, but once we decided to go organic, we realized it was better to go native wherever possible."

A few steps down, the tables on the brick terrace are set, friends are arriving, and champagne bottles are being uncorked. After a toast, Sarah leads the guests to the library, where they listen with delight to Lee's impeccable performance of Bach, Rachmaninoff, and Chopin and then return to the terrace for lunch beneath expansive shade umbrellas.



Sarah has chosen to feature a menu that, with the exception of meat and fish, relies solely on her garden's bounty. As the staff passes platters of aubergine on homemade toast among the guests, Sarah introduces Shay Behrens and Robyn Deutsch from Generation Ubuntu (GU) and then invites the crowd to be seated.

During lunch, Behrens and Deutsch share the successes, challenges, and goals of GU and field questions from the guests. By 3 p.m., the homemade blueberry-meringue roulade and peach-jam cobbler have been washed down with proper cups of tea, and the guests are saying farewell.

While it's been a busy day, Sarah is eager to get back to the garden



GARDEN PARTY Sarah's guests enjoy lunch in the garden, featuring mozzarella and grilled chili salad, boiled potatoes with avocado and watercress, roasted chicken with basil and lemon, Sicilian roast halibut, and roast tomatoes with basil, garlic, and olive oil.



MUSICAL INTERLUDE
Taek Gi Lee, a piano prodigy from Warren, Connecticut, perform for Sarah's guests in the library (above).

after the last car pulls away. Because the Kowitzes now spend the majority of the year at Fairlight Hall, their home in Sussex, England, Sarah tries to maximize her time in the Bedford garden when she is stateside.

"My mother's gardener, Alan Guest, who helped me plan this garden 20 years ago, taught me that birds eat the bad bugs, so you want birds in your garden," she says as she enters the orchard in search of Sondra Lombardo, her head gardener. "You want a balance of nature, and you've got to create safe spaces for the birds to fly between." She realized early on that the big, open lawns that came with the house were not safe for the birds—they needed sheltered perches, so together with Lombardo, she added fruit trees. "Alan also taught me about the importance of honeybees, not for the honey—although that's a fabulous by-product, but for pollination in the orchard and for the flowers."

Sarah and Lombardo executed Guest's plans, made new plans of their own, and learned how to make the property work holistically. They speak an easy shorthand that comes from knowing, loving, and nurturing the same land. With their heads tilted toward one another as they pass under the boughs of apple and peach trees, they commiserate about lifting and shifting and di-

viding and pruning. A gardener's work, like a mother's, is never done. But progress and unbelievable beauty is seen every day through all of the seasons.

Just beyond the grape arbor and pool house, Sarah and Lombardo sit down in rocking chairs, where they can survey the birds and butterflies thriving. "This is David's favorite place in the world," Sarah observes. "Right here, in this garden. I think when we come back here, he draws a huge metaphorical sigh of relief. It's like a big Valium," she says. "We're in the garden a lot. We really love it." ■



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