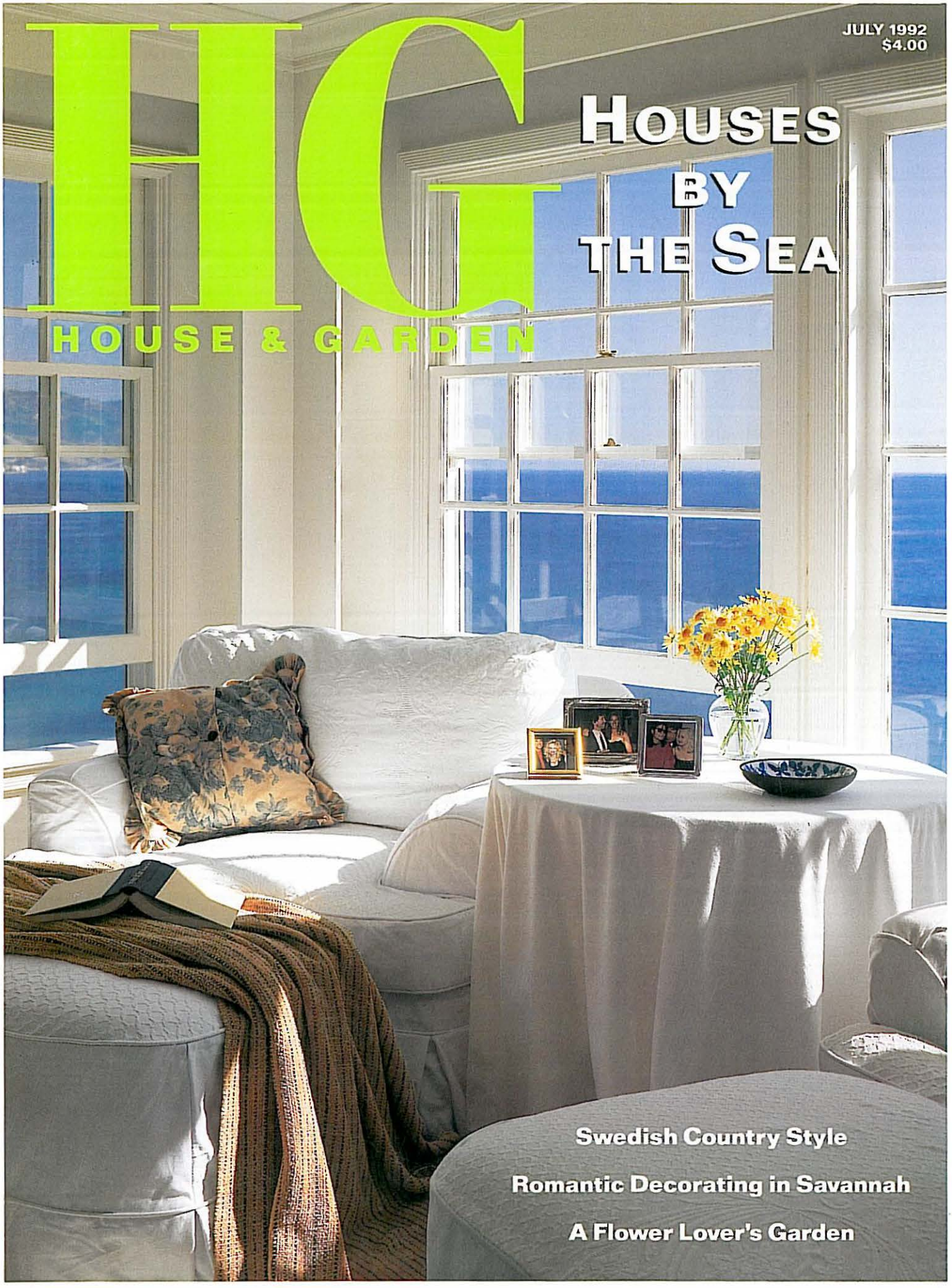
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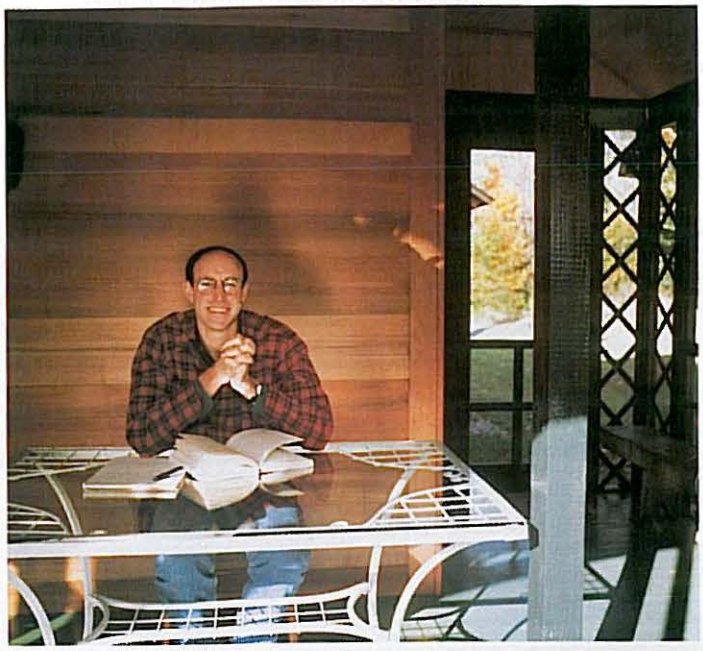
A Gardener Cultivates His House

Renovation raises a modest bungalow to the standard of its well-loved surroundings

BY MICHAEL POLLAN

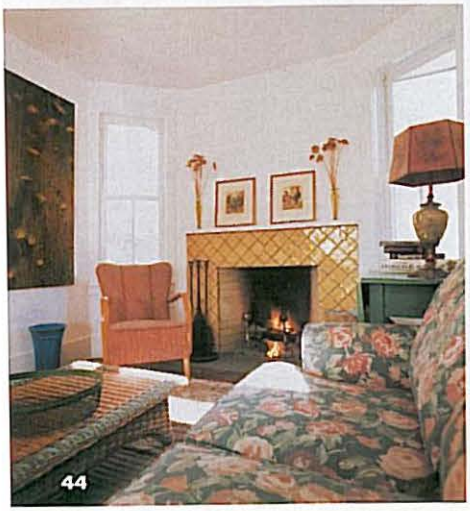
It's strictly a hunch, but I'll bet that gardeners move a lot less often than the average American—who, we're told, will change houses some thirty times in the course of a life. Compared with our more restless countrymen, we gardeners are sticks-in-the-mud, literally. Gardening attaches a body to the earth, and besides, it takes a whole lot longer to make a garden than it takes to outgrow a house.

Consider this place. Seven years after we bought our house in northwest Connecticut—a run-down Sears, Roebuck bungalow assembled from a mail-order kit by a farm family in 1929—it started to feel uncomfortable. We needed more and different space, and the house was showing worrisome signs of entropy. Yet we'd put seven years into the gardens, gradually bringing a portion of these five rock-strewn and anarchic acres under a semblance of government, and the thought of abdicating so soon seemed slightly outrageous. After seven years a gardener is just becoming fluent in the language of his land, just learning to draw that deep map of the place which tells him where a tender Bourbon rose might make it or which spot is damp enough to sustain a fountain of Japanese iris. It takes a long time to get literate about your own land, which is why, for a gardener, to move even across the street is to find yourself in a country where you don't speak the language.



There was this, too: for both Judith and me, "working the land" had come to mean something more than the usual efforts with spades and trowels. Besides helping me reshape this landscape, Judith had been painting it, finding a rich vein of imagery in the marsh grasses and brush that march across the property's untended parts. And I'd already written half of *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, a book that tried to approach this particular garden as my personal Walden woods, a place to work out the terms of one man's relationship to the earth. Every chapter was rooted in some corner of the garden: here were the antique roses I'd planted for their harvest of tropes; over there was the ground where I'd battled a woodchuck to an epiphanic draw. Moving was out of the question. We would have to renovate.

With this necessity came opportunities. Spending time in a garden, you get to know a house as well as its land, and over time we had come to realize



At Michael Pollan's farm a screened-in porch, top left, now links the house to the garden and perennial border, left. Above left: Pollan, on his porch. Far left: *Seed Heads #5*, by his wife, Judith Belzer, brings the landscape beyond the garden into the living room. Details see Resources.

RICHARD FELBER

that one thing we didn't like about our house was how little it had to do with its site. Our accomplishments in the garden were largely invisible from the house, which had been built facing the road by people who evidently took little pleasure in their intransigent, barely arable land. The more extensive the garden became, the more out of place and irrelevant seemed the house.

The garden has developed principally along an east-west axis, initially set by an old stone retaining wall and the perennial border we planted beneath it. The path back from the house is a journey from the relative refinements of the perennials and roses, through an arbor clothed in clematis, and out toward the unruly sort of growth that shows up in Judith's paintings. Just when you think the garden has been defeated by the meadow grass and boulders and brush, you come upon a stone stairway that lifts you—deus ex machina!—up a slope to an unexpectedly formal herb garden, a circle of brick set into a cool gray pool of (mostly) lamb's ears, lavender, and catmint. This orderly little retreat, which adjoins the barn where Judith and I both have our work spaces, is an island of calm in an otherwise storm-tossed landscape. Not a bad scheme but it couldn't be seen from the house.

Ordinarily, the house comes first and the gardens are a kind of architectural afterthought, designed to respond to a building that is always going to have pride of place. Here was an opportunity to approach matters from the opposite direction. It was the garden that was fairly well along, and we wanted a house that would respond to and make use of it rather than turn its back.

Our architect did not need to be told he was designing a house for gardeners. Charles Myer was an old friend, an accomplished gardener himself, and he set about creating a house that would provide the kinds of spaces we needed and also be on intimate terms with the garden. Now the house is oriented toward the gardens, whose moods and seasons make their presence felt in virtually every room. There are lots of divided-light windows, many of them framing small-scale vignettes—an apple tree, a section of stone wall, a lilac. In this the house seems to reflect a gardener's approach to the landscape, which is a lot more familiar than that of, say, a wilderness lover, who would be more likely to favor picture windows overlooking distant vistas. Our views search out the intimate rather than the sublime.

On the ground floor, for example, Charlie took as his inspiration a clematis growing against a ramshackle toolshed immediately behind the house. From the old front door—we decided early on to preserve the original façade and the overall scale it sets up—you can catch a glimpse of the clematis, and the supporting columns that now run through the center of the house conduct you toward it, almost as though you were passing through an arbor to a distant point of interest in a garden. Along the way you pass through a sun-filled double-height space whose shape and surface (pine boards painted white) put you in mind of being outdoors.

But perhaps the house's most pleasing gesture toward the garden is the screened-in porch off the kitchen. The porch sits squarely in the garden, not ten feet from the stone wall and the perennial border, whose sounds and scents inhabit it. By painting the porch dark green and trimming it with arches and trellis work, Charlie all but erased the line between house and garden, creating a space from which the garden (with the welcome exception of its flying insects) can be fully experienced. Viewed from outside, from down the garden path, the detailing of the porch makes the entire building look less like a house than the sort of intimate structure you'd be apt to find in a garden—delicate in scale and amenable to vines and climbers. In the middle of a summer afternoon, I can't decide whether the porch is the sweetest spot in the house—or the sweetest spot in the garden. ▲