

# *A Gardening Destiny Fulfilled*

A LIFETIME OF PLANTING GARDENS AND COLLECTING ANTIQUES ACROSS AMERICA CULMINATES WITH THIS BEAUTIFUL NEW ENGLAND FARM.

By Gregory LeFever    Photographs by Mark Kimball Moulton



Some say our lives have patterns. Take the example of a little girl growing up in the 1960s in a small town in the Rockies who learns to love gardening and old houses. Eventually she marries and moves to Michigan where she continues to dig in the soil and collect antiques, then spends a few years in New Jersey and onto Kansas City, where she delves deeper into country furnishings while maintaining her green thumb.

In 1990, her husband gets transferred to New England – “the mother lode” of antique furnishings, as she considers it – where they buy a house in a subdivision and she creates a colonial feel in their home with early treasures from Brimfield and other well-known destinations for collectors. Then, almost miraculously, in 2006, she and her husband are able to buy Avery Hill Farm.





Connie and Perc Reeve today live on 16 acres of rolling Connecticut farmland in their stunning farmhouse built in 1700 and filled with the antiques Connie has collected over many years. And surrounding the house and outbuildings – like a destiny fulfilled – are bed upon lush bed of culinary and medicinal herbs, brightly colored flowers and vines, and a multitude of vegetables the couple have cultivated.

“It’s a phenomenal piece of property,” Connie says. “Perc and I both fell in love with the house, the big barn, the field and the pond. It was like, ‘Wow, the possibilities!’ It’s one of those lovely New England homes that stay in families forever.”

## Historical Inspirations

For Avery Hill Farm, “forever” was eight generations. Originally a single-room structure with a root cellar, the Ledyard, Connecticut, property was expanded to four rooms and later purchased in 1757 by Theophilus Avery, the first of several generations of Avery family members to own it. By 1785, more additions had changed the roofline into a traditional New England saltbox. Nearly a century later, another Theophilus Avery again extended the rear of the house and built an impressive barn that still stands on the property. (Avery Hill Farm and the Reeves’ work on the house was featured in the Spring 2014 issue of *A Simple Life*.)

Fortunately, the Reeves found much of the house to be historically intact, with three rooms protected through the National Historic Register. This meant they could concentrate on other areas of greatest need – stripping wallpaper, removing acoustic ceiling tiles and sanding layers of polyurethane from the period floorboards.



*Previous page: The house at Avery Hill Farm began as a single room and root cellar around 1700 and grew into a substantial saltbox over the next century. Today it faces a large field, and an American border garden fills the area adjacent to the two-story section and the single-story addition to the home.*

*Above and below: A comfortable, weathered rocker sits on the porch of the workshop, shown below at left. The workshop originally was attached to the house, and in 1870 was moved a short distance away. The porch is a more recent addition to the little building. A Trumpet Vine scales the wall of the workshop while a clump of Rudbeckia blooms near the doorway.*







She enjoyed creating the home atmosphere she'd sought for so long, but all the while her green thumb was itching. While she was removing wallpaper, she also was planning gardens that eventually would fill the land adjacent to the house and barn.

"We worked on the house for four years, then started establishing the gardens," Connie recalls.

"I really got into Adelma Simmons and her gardens at Caprilands," she says of the legendary herbal gardener and author of several books on growing herbs. Simmons (1903-1997) was America's leading herbal authority throughout the 20th century, owning and operating Caprilands Herb Farm in Coventry, Connecticut, for nearly sixty years. "I just fell in love with herbs, their wonderful scents and all you can do with them."

Another inspiration was the extensive herb garden at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, featuring more than 400 herb varieties commonly cultivated in New England in the early 1800s. Based on the Sturbridge gardens, Connie contemplated her own culinary, medicinal, and household herb beds. "Of course our herb gardens are much smaller than at Sturbridge, but I was definitely inspired by all that they have there," she adds.

## A Sense of Belonging

A longer-term inspiration, though, was Connie's childhood back in Utah. "I grew up in a small Utah town in the Rocky Mountains, where we had sheep and pets and my parents always had a big vegetable garden,"

*Top: The large post-and-beam barn was built around 1870 and features a cupola and stone foundation. The open door is the entrance to Connie's antiques and garden business, which she operates seasonally.*

*Right: A Clematis vine grows up a ladder propped up against Connie's shop, while a Geranium and a Sweet Potato vine grow along the widow sill.*

*Far right: An early nesting box in its original blue hangs on a barn wall above a shelf with early gardening pots in a wire carrier and a tin watering can.*



she explains. “Love of the land and animals was instilled in me at an early age. Summer chores were weeding and picking beans, peas and berries of all sorts – not to mention big harvests in the fall when we’d freeze and can.”

“My grandfather was an avid gardener and I used to walk down to his house,” she continues. “He was always in his gardens – beautiful vegetable gardens and beautiful flower gardens, where not a weed could be seen. Even when he was in his eighties and plagued by arthritis, he was in his gardens sun-up to sun-down. He was a widower, and as any gardener knows, gardening is good for the soul. I believe his gardens kept him going.”

She says her grandfather’s home also was the origin of her love of antiques. “Not only was he my biggest influence when it came to gardening, but I also always enjoyed his house,” she explains. “It was old, and he had these wonderful old things I never forgot. Ever since then, I’ve enjoyed antiques, becoming somewhat of a collector.”

Connie and Perc, who was from Saginaw, Michigan, met in college at Utah State University. They got married and moved to Lansing, Michigan, while he attended veterinary school. “We had our very first

*Below: Two photos of Connie’s shop in the Avery Hill Farm’s big barn. At left is the antiques area as she begins stocking it for opening. The door at rear opens onto the large, tiered herb garden. At right is the herb portion of her shop, featuring such things as fresh and dried herbs, heirloom pumpkins, gourds, broomcorn, bee skeps and other garden items.*







*These two American Pekin Ducks arrived at the farm on Easter of 2013, when they were three days old. "They bonded quickly with us," Connie says. "You can pick them up and hold them. They love people."*

*In the photo above left, Maggie is in front and Murphy is behind her. "They're my two little helpers," she says, "They dig holes and pull weeds with their beaks."*

*"They both lay an egg every morning so we know Murphy actually is a girl," she adds. "It's quite comical. She's a mock drake, which means she has taken on the drake role and guards Maggie."*

*You'd think they'd enjoy the nearly three-acre pond on the property. "They're terrified of it and won't go near it," Connie laughs. "But they swim in the kiddies' pool every day."*



*Maggie and Murphy*







garden when he was at Michigan State,” she says. “It was one of those little plots of land you can get in married student housing. We fertilized that thing so heavily and planted everything so close together that there was literally no dirt to be seen between the plants. We’ve never had a better garden, ever. That little square thing produced so much stuff it was unbelievable.”

Perc’s work as a veterinarian took them to New Jersey and, by 1984, to Kansas City for six years. “I had a neighbor in Kansas City named Vickie Hale who I really give credit to for pointing me in the direction of more primitive decorating,” Connie says. “It was the ‘country look’ back then, with the oak furniture and hoosier cabinets. But when we moved to New England, Vickie was so excited for me that she brought over all sorts of books so I could become more familiar with New England pieces. I switched – as so many people do – from ‘country’ to the earlier style of primitive and painted-surface pieces.”

The Reeves bought a 1970s home about three miles from Avery Hill Farm. “I furnished it like an early house on the inside, taking it about as far as I could go,” Connie says. When the couple’s children graduated from high school, Connie and Perc began looking for a different – preferably much earlier – home and fortuitously were able to purchase Avery Hill Farm.

“Clearly it was Connie who fell in love with everything about New England and the history and the old homes,” explains Perc, who had become a research veterinarian with Pfizer, Inc. “She’d been doing her collecting over the years and had made our other home look early. But it wasn’t until we’d bought this house and moved the furniture in that I could really appreciate what she’d been doing. When we put the antique furniture into this house, it all just seemed to go together, like it belonged here.”





*Previous Page: The extensive herb garden is situated on various levels just outside the barn. Connie and Perc built the tiers because of the steeply sloping land, using the terraced gardens at Old Sturbridge Village as inspiration. Some of the plants visible here are Woad, Calendula, Soapwort, Apothecary Rose, Scented Geraniums, Lavender and Orris Root. At the left corner of the barn a rose climbs a trellis and a large hop vine grows over an archway.*

*Above: The open barn door is to Connie's shop that features antiques, herbal and gardening items. The first tier of the extensive herb garden greets visitors with an array of household and medicinal herbs. The wooden barrel beneath the shelf is one of Connie's favorite items that, along with the early nesting box, came from Walker Homestead.*



*Far left and left: Concrete bee skeps are among the ornamental garden items the Reeves make and sell in Connie's shop. This one is nestled among Calendula, Lavender and Rudbeckia. Left, a bee seeks nectar from a flowering dill blossom.*



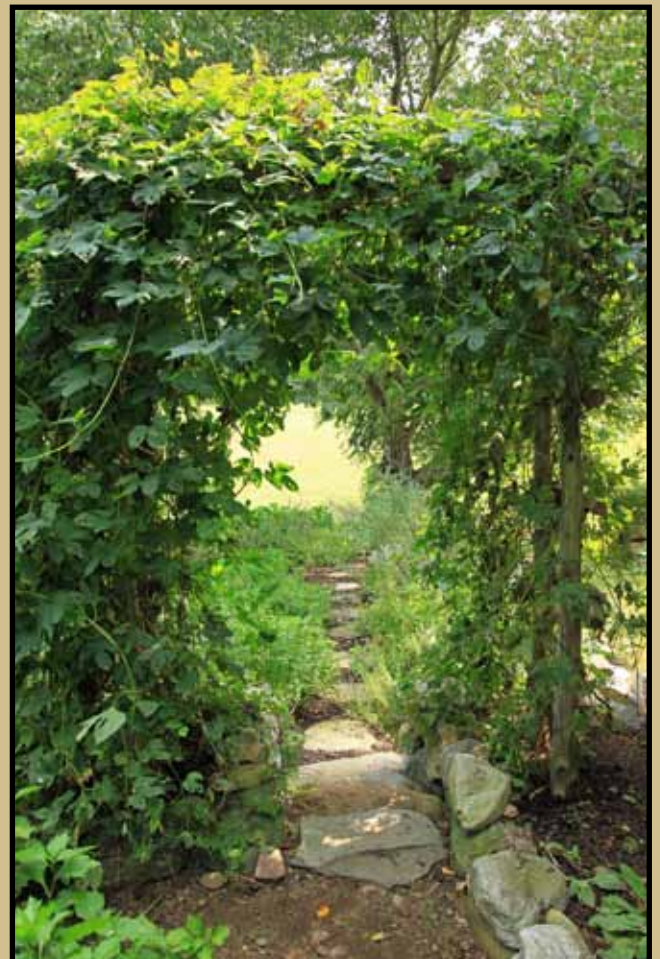
## A Labor of Love

When the Reeves were able to break free from the refurbishing work in the house, they planted a kitchen garden behind the house. “That’s where we started,” Connie recalls. “We looked at it and said, ‘That’s way too small.’ We decided to go bigger and moved to the area behind the barn.”

With the Old Sturbridge gardens as a template, they decided to terrace the slope behind the barn and hired a crew to build a large retaining wall. “You know, this is where the glaciers stopped, and when they retreated, they left all of these stones,” Perc explains. “In preparing these gardens, we dug out all of the rocks too small to use and hauled them back to the woods. Then, when we decided to expand the gardens, we needed to outline the beds. So all of those rocks I’d hauled into the woods, now I’m hauling them back again so we can use them.”

“I swear, if I dig a hole for a fence post and come back a few minutes later, the hole has rocks in it,” he laughs. “I think the ground here has a million little rocks whose job it is just to hold the big rocks in the ground.”

*Below left and right: At left, a Scented Geranium grows in a stone pot amid an array of little plant pots and gardening tools. At right is an arbor Perc built, now covered by a large hop vine. Walking through the arbor brings you to the medicinal-herb section of the garden.*





The rocks have been a challenge, but they've enabled the couple to build a number of beautiful beds for herbs, vegetables and flowers. For example, the herb garden behind the barn has a top tier for household herbs, a middle level for medicinal plants, and a lower level for culinary plants. Adjacent to the herbs is a large, fenced in garden featuring vegetables and heirloom pumpkins. In an area at the front of the house is an early American border garden.

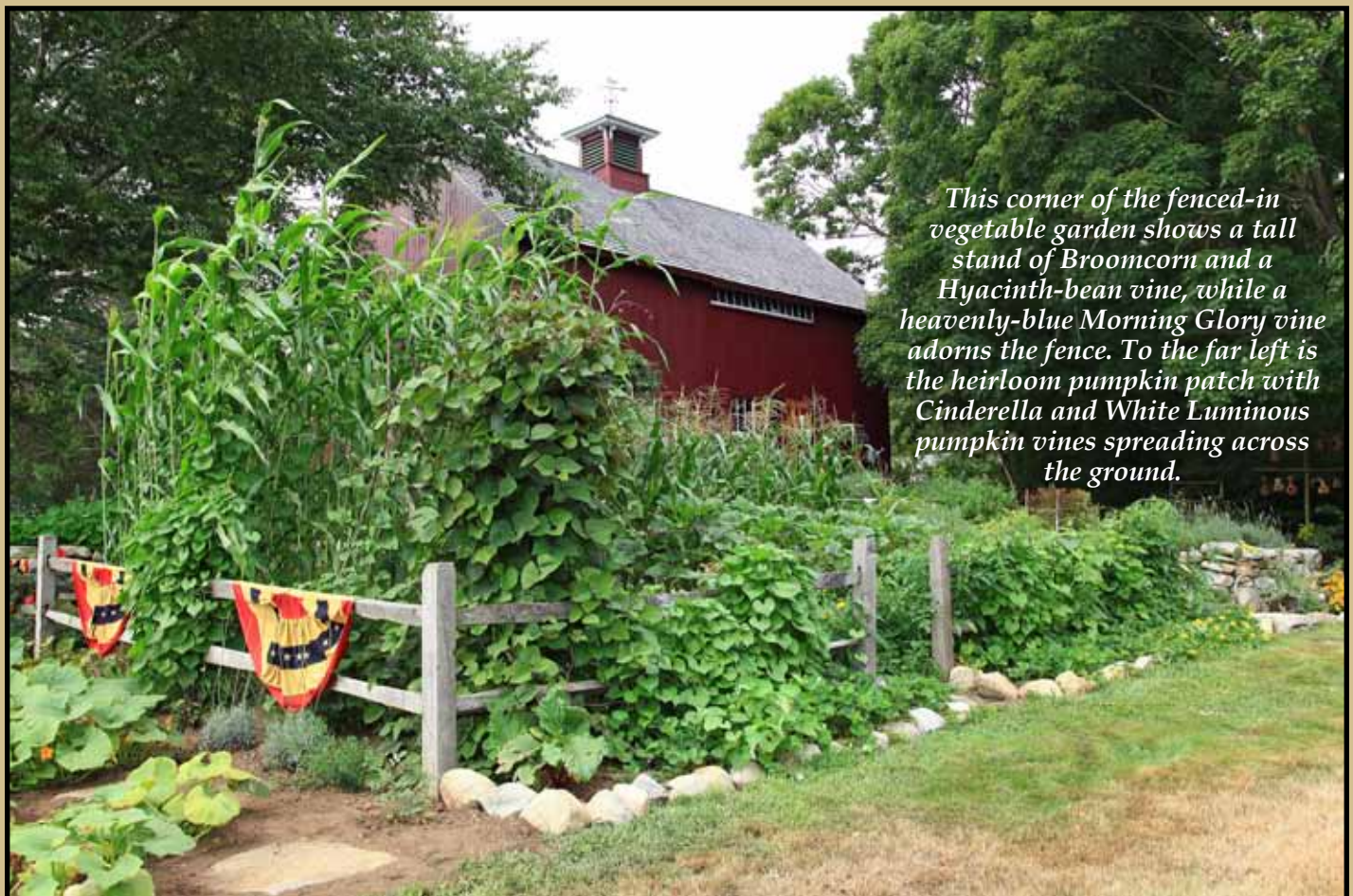
With these main gardens established, Connie now can expand selected plantings to other parts of the property, bringing her artistic green thumb to a number of other plots – some sunny, some shady – calling for diverse plantings.

“The gardens are a labor of love,” she says. “The herb garden is really quite self-maintaining, the vegetable garden not so much. The secret is to mulch. If you mulch your plants and keep your weeding down, it's really not that bad. My favorite is cocoa mulch – oh, it smells like chocolate and it's wonderful.”

### Opportunity Galore

Connie and Perc consume most of the vegetables they grow, but they share the bounty from the herb and flower gardens through Connie's shop, housed in the big barn. It's open seasonally and features antiques and primitives, Connie's hooked rugs, and seasonal wares such as fresh and dried herbs, broomcorn and heirloom pumpkins.

Connie and Perc have dedicated the past eight years to their home and gardens. Far from exhausted, both are brimming over with ideas – everything from enhancing the spring-fed pond that covers nearly three



*This corner of the fenced-in vegetable garden shows a tall stand of Broomcorn and a Hyacinth-bean vine, while a heavenly-blue Morning Glory vine adorns the fence. To the far left is the heirloom pumpkin patch with Cinderella and White Luminous pumpkin vines spreading across the ground.*





*Top left are stone steps leading up to the culinary bed of the herb garden, while a bed of Mammoth Dill grows amid twig supports at top right. Below left is a large Santolina plant surrounding a heart-shaped water trough. Below right is the scene looking from the culinary herb tier down into a section of the vegetable garden. To the right of the steps are Basil, Thyme and Nasturtiums.*







*Left: Some medicinal herbs grow behind the tall sunflowers in the elevated bed, while across the stone path the ground is covered with heirloom-pumpkin vines. Behind the fence is the tall stand of Broomcorn.*

*Below left: The Reeves call this "The Forgotten Radish" because they missed it when harvesting. "When I finally found it, it was mammoth, with the root about 18 inches long," Connie says, and way too stringy to eat.*

*Below right: A couple of the Cinderella heirloom pumpkins the Reeves grow in their large pumpkin patch and that Connie sells in her shop.*



acres of their property and is a wonderful fishing spot, to perhaps getting farm animals, to further enriching the gorgeous gardens.

"One thing about Connie," Perc chuckles, "she probably has more interests and more energy and ideas than anyone I've ever known. I don't have hobbies per se, but Connie has so many interests that I'll never have to worry about what I'm going to do when I retire."

What can I say?" Connie laughs. "We love this property and all of the wonderful opportunities it offers us."



*Right: A section of the picturesque spring-fed pond on the property. It covers nearly three acres and is plentiful with bass, trout, bluegills and even snapping turtles. Perc enjoys fishing, so the pond is one of his main pleasures the property offers.*

*Below: Impatiens and a Sweet Potato vine adorn a twig bench, along with the gourd and old watering can.*

*Bottom: An unusual twig bench with attached wooden box sits in a newly planted garden bed. The gourd tree features gourds that Connie offers in her shop. The surrounding bed is blooming with Impatiens, Sweet Woodruff, Delphinium, Foxglove and Witch Hazel plantings.*



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