Shoemaker Nancy Benoit is at work on the steps of her shoe studio, a passive solar design that faces south to capture the warmth of the sun.

1

AN ARTISAN GARDEN

'Sweet 100' cherry tomatoes

2

WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY *ELLEN ECKER OGDEN*
PHOTOGRAPHY BY *ROB CARDILLO*

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A COUPLE WHO MET WHEN THEY WERE 15 YEARS OLD PROVE THAT TEAMWORK PAYS OFF IN THEIR VERMONT GARDEN DEDICATED TO PERMACULTURE.

For Alan and Nancy Benoit,

it's all about teamwork. Even when they take a ride on their tandem mountain bike, they are thinking about balance and how to navigate the hills together. "We get to see the same things and talk while we pedal," Nancy says, as they sail through their garden on a practice run for an upcoming 50-mile trek. "Communication is important, too," adds Alan, who steers.

1. One of Nancy's shoe designs, Barley is part of a series she named after grains. This laced-up oxford is made out of lambskin with leather soles. **2.** A collection of Nancy's antique shoemaking tools once belonged to her grandfather; clockwise from left: nail puller, lasting pliers, Rye shoe on a last, soling hammer, needle-nose pliers, knife and sharpener, and shoe nails inside a quahog shell. **3.** Nocturnal daylily *(Hemerocallis cintrina),* bee balm, tansy, and *Rosa rugosa* thrive inside the picket fence in the front yard of Nancy and Alan Benoit. **4.** Alan sits at the entrance to his folly built with 1,200 salvaged bricks. It took three years to build and "besides being a focal point in the yard, it serves no function," he says. The design was based on the golden mean, a ratio that occurs often in nature.

Bosc pears *(Pyrus communis)*

Purple coneflower *(Echinacea purpurea),* rhubarb, Joe Pye weed, oatgrass, and dwarf conifers decorate the cottage garden leading to the front door. Flowers bloom from March to November, making sure there is always something in bloom for the pollinators. Dwarf fruit trees and ornamental grasses flank the entrance from the driveway to the garden gate.

The couple met in high school and have been married more than 25 years, yet they still act like newlyweds. A visit to their home, a 1940s brick house surrounded by fruit and nut trees, perennial gardens, and native shrubs, is living proof that their teamwork pays off. Moving to Vermont in 2001, their goal was to simplify life in harmony with their land. The lot was long and narrow, just shy of an acre, measuring 100 feet wide by 400 feet deep and devoid of any intentional landscaping. There also was a giant hole between the front door and the street, where the land dropped off precipitously.

Following a method called permaculture, which emphasizes sustainable and self-sufficient ecosystems, they made a map of the site to more intimately know every part of their land. Hardy fruit and nut trees were planted. "We plant perennial food crops not just ornamentals," Alan says. This includes asparagus, raspberries, rhubarb, fruit trees, nut trees, and blackberry and black currant shrubs—everything is a perennial.

Eating well is important to the Benoits' overall scheme, as is attracting beneficial insects such as lacewings, ladybugs, tachinid flies, and parasitic wasps to counterbalance the harmful bugs like tomato hornworms and aphids. In a permaculture landscape, plants thrive without pesticides or fertilizers, and the result is an ecosystem that works together as a whole—or in tandem, so to speak, just like the Benoits.

The areas they left natural serve as wildlife corridors and are used regularly by fox and occasionally by moose. Added layers of low shrubs, midstory bushes, and taller trees create habitats for all creatures, big and small, including bees, birds, rabbits, and weasels.

Gardens surround the house, including a front yard that is alive with peach, pear, plum, and apple trees and buzzing with bees. A cottage garden includes native perennials such as *Echinacea*, tansy, Joe Pye weed, *Cimicifuga*, aster, bee balm, and wild oregano. "We select plants based on their ability to thrive, finding microclimates where each is happy," Alan says. "We also select plants that produce small flowers, which attract the

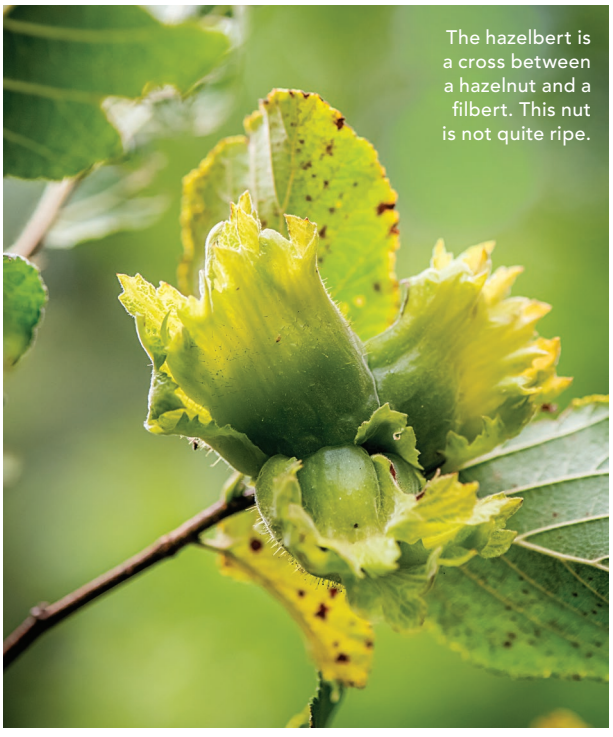
1. A ‘Liberty’ apple, trained as an espalier over the last nine years against the east side of their brick house, is ripe for the picking. **2.** Alan prunes the suckers off the espaliered apple tree. **3.** It only takes five plants of ‘Prime-Jan’ blackberry for an ample harvest. “The plants grew fast, and the fruit is huge,” says Nancy, who freezes them. **4.** Frozen ‘Titania’ currants, harvested at their peak, will make a tart and tasty winter treat.

ABOVE: After a day working in the garden, Alan and Nancy enjoy lighting a fire in the outdoor fireplace and relaxing on their slate patio.
BELOW: Dutchman's pipe climbs up the western side of the studio for shade, and buckwheat is sown in front to attract beneficial insects as well as feed wild chipmunks, distracting them from the nut trees. Oakleaf hydrangea and Tiger Eyes sumac frame the view.

most beneficials, including parasitic wasps, and we leave the seed heads for the birds to eat in the fall."

Alan, an architect by trade, specializes in environmental design with a soft spot for recycled materials. Everything in their yard was formerly something else and built by the two of them: the small barn where they host intimate dinners, the outdoor patio with a fireplace, and the shed where they keep bikes and garden tools. Even Nancy's shoe studio, where she crafts one-of-a-kind shoes, reflects their eco-friendly, sustainable lifestyle. "I found a fishery and tannery in Iceland that transforms fish skin into soft, durable 'leather,'" says Nancy, smiling widely as she shows off a pair of elegant pointed shoes with comfy flat soles.

From the deck of the shoe studio, which also serves as a guesthouse, she can see Alan's folly, made from 1,200 salvaged bricks mortared into an egg-shape dome. It took Alan and his nephew three summers to construct; unlike everything else on their property, it was created for pure whimsy. "We like to balance hard work, with play," Alan says. He has kept a garden journal for more than 25 years so he can document the progress of each passing year. "Like riding a bike, it's important to keep pedaling forward yet also good to look back to see where we've been," he says. They remember, too, to always enjoy the view. CG



The hazelbert is a cross between a hazelnut and a filbert. This nut is not quite ripe.

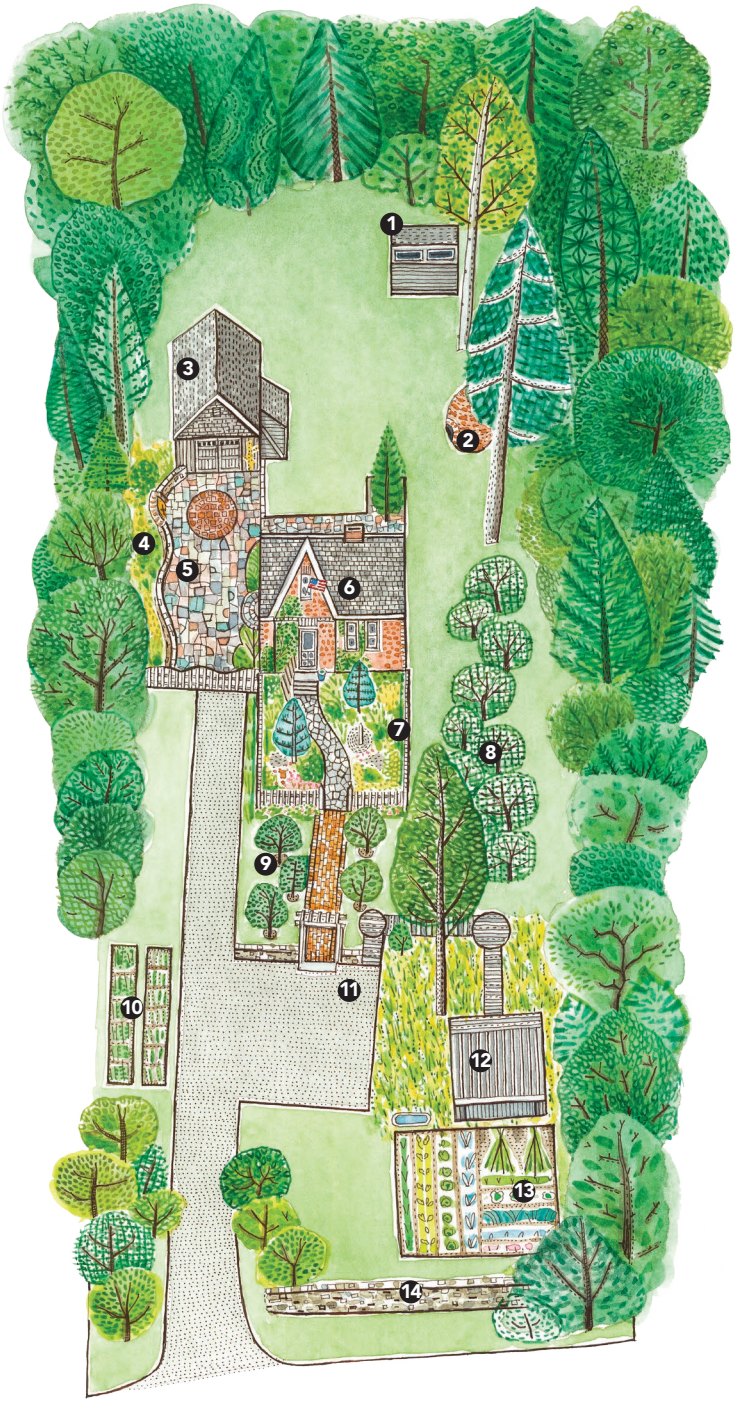
WHAT IS PERMACULTURE?

Permaculture, which is short for "permanent agriculture," emphasizes patterns that function with the existing landscape in order to allow all species to thrive. Often gardeners select specimen plants as a focal point, yet in permaculture, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, which can yield surprising results. Selecting plants to succeed in their environment and with other plants creates a synergy that allows everything to work together as companions, rather than each on its own.

When Alan and Nancy Benoit moved to Vermont, they adopted permaculture principles and began designing their garden by assessing their new yard for clues to nature's patterns of sun, soil, water, and terrain. They planted crops and fruit and nut trees, including hazelberts, a cross between hazelnuts and filberts. "It was perfect for the steep hillside, and they have thrived," Alan says.

Next, they carved out a narrow garden bed alongside the driveway for raspberries and asparagus, followed by a vegetable garden, also in the front yard. Everything they have planted is both ornamental and productive. "If something doesn't work and won't thrive on its own, we don't try force it," Alan says.

Attracting beneficial insects to defeat destructive pests means not using pesticides, one of the core principles of permaculture. Creating a layering effect by interplanting short and tall plants can result in extremely complex systems that produce a high density of food with minimal input. For the Benoits, it is ultimately about caring for the earth—and the harvest has become secondary. As Alan puts it, "It's building a more permanent system that will evolve over time."



GARDEN AT A GLANCE

ARTISAN GARDEN

1. Prairie shed
2. Brick folly
3. Barn
4. Patio garden
5. Patio
6. House
7. Cottage garden
8. Nut trees
9. Orchard
10. Raspberry/asparagus bed
11. Parking
12. Studio
13. Vegetable garden
14. Stone wall

For more information, see Resources on page 110.