

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 fen.

Size 17 acres.

Climate Hot summers and cold winters, usually with a good deal of snow.

Hardiness zone USDA 5b.

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 furrowed bark streaked with black green moss" that is within touching distance of Page's third-floor study window.

This image Moss-encrusted limestone boulders in one of Church House's meadows marks a transition to the solid rock of the high woods behind.

A land of lavender and burnt sienna sunsets beckoned Page Dickey and Bosco Schell to New England when they realised their much-fêted garden at Duck 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 icicles drip in winter, melts to a weep-worthy carpet of native bulbs, ferns and grasses; there are gasp-inducing, perennial-rich, butterfly-enticing meadows and a heavenly garden open to the landscape but subtly fenced off from bears 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 ▷

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Facing page When Page and Bosco arrived at Church House the pool garden already benefited from a hardy hydrangea theme with *H. arborescens* ‘Annabelle’ and *H. paniculata* cultivars ‘Limelight’ and ‘Tardiva’. To these cool whites Page has added two deep-pink *H. paniculata* cultivars, ‘Quick Fire’ and ‘Fire Light’, the fern-leaved *H. arborescens* ‘Green Dragon’, and two early bloomers, *H. paniculata* Little Lamb (= ‘Lammetje’) and *H. ‘Dharuma’*. **This image** A cedar post and rail fence, creates a rustic enclosure for the pool garden. In front of it, the carpet of pink-flowering anemones pre-dates Page, but she believes it is the pretty but slightly thuggish *Anemone x hybrida* ‘Robustissima’, which she has discovered is named with good reason.

▷ Hills. The garden areas around the house are lean on exotics but exceptions are made for anything that will encourage pollinators.

In the front borders *Nepeta sibirica* 'Souvenir d'André Chaudron' accompanies native baptisias beloved by hummingbirds. Fancy relations of meadow denizens make familial echoes in the borders, *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen' and *Rudbeckia subtomentosa* 'Henry Eilers' with clear yellow-quilled rays of daisy flowers are laid on for the goldfinches. *Veronicastrum virginicum* is planted for bees to feast on both nectar and pollen and the vibrant purple corymbs of *Vernonia baldwinii* are feeding stations for fluttering clusters of swallowtail butterflies. Page calls this area that leads you into the house "an intimate space of flowery instances". Which pretty much describes inside as well.

Page found "the collector's gene" too strong in the swimming pool garden where she added a range of hydrangeas to the paniculatas already there. No more *H. arborescens* 'Annabelle' since learning that its sterile bracts are useless for pollinating insects but the lacy, fern-leaved *H. arborescens* 'Green Dragon' and the magenta-flowered butterfly magnet *Phlox paniculata* 'Jeana'. To the pink and white she added ▷

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This page A burst of bright-orange *Rudbeckia subtomentosa* is woven into the pinks and whites of the pool enclosure beds where the mildew-free *Phlox paniculata* 'David' joins hydrangeas and anemones.

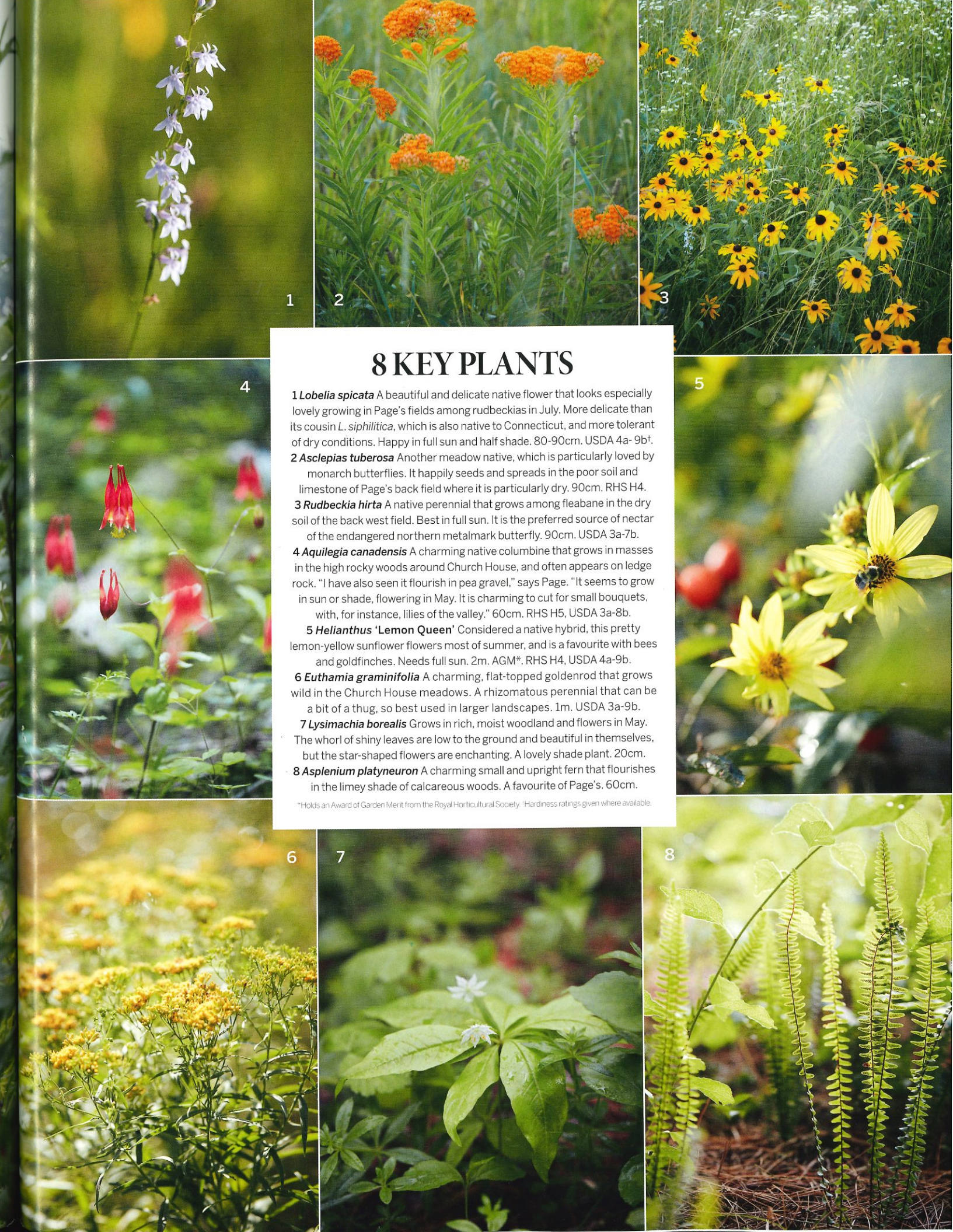
Facing page Fence posts and wigwams for sweet peas are made from the native cedar found in the Church House woods. Here in the cutting garden rudbeckias, zinnias, dahlias and cosmos grow in rows for the exuberant arrangements Page places throughout the house.

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



A mix of *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen', pink and white cosmos, sweet peas, *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune' and *Lilium* 'Black Beauty' create a joyful medley in Page's cutting garden.



8 KEY PLANTS

- 1 *Lobelia spicata*** A beautiful and delicate native flower that looks especially lovely growing in Page's fields among rudbeckias in July. More delicate than its cousin *L. siphilitica*, which is also native to Connecticut, and more tolerant of dry conditions. Happy in full sun and half shade. 80-90cm. USDA 4a-9b.
- 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 Page's back field where it is particularly dry. 90cm. RHS H4.
- 3 *Rudbeckia hirta*** A native perennial that grows among fleabane 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 *Aquilegia canadensis*** A charming native columbine that grows in masses in the high rocky woods around Church House, and often appears on ledge rock. "I have also seen it flourish in pea gravel," says Page. "It seems to grow in sun or shade, flowering in May. It is charming to cut for small bouquets, with, for instance, lilies of the valley." 60cm. RHS H5, USDA 3a-8b.
- 5 *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen'** Considered a native hybrid, this pretty lemon-yellow sunflower flowers most of summer, and is a favourite with bees and goldfinches. Needs full sun. 2m. AGM*. RHS H4, USDA 4a-9b.
- 6 *Euthamia graminifolia*** A charming, flat-topped goldenrod that grows wild in the Church House meadows. A rhizomatous perennial that can be a bit of a thug, so best used in larger landscapes. 1m. USDA 3a-9b.
- 7 *Lysimachia borealis*** Grows in rich, moist woodland and flowers in May. The whorl of shiny leaves are low to the ground and beautiful in themselves, but the star-shaped flowers are enchanting. A lovely shade plant. 20cm.
- 8 *Asplenium platyneuron*** A charming small and upright fern that flourishes in the limey shade of calcareous woods. A favourite of Page's. 60cm.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. Hardiness ratings given where available.

▷ dashes of native orange to echo the way the “brilliant-orange, jewel-like butterfly weed *Asclepias tuberosa* enlivens 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’, zinnias and *Tithonia rotundifolia* whose vibrant orange daisies are “favourite 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 culled but the only other intervention is the mowing of an occasional “green band coursing through a feathery field”, of *Schizachyrium scoparium* and smoky purple *Eragrostis spectabilis*. Pale lavender-pink milkweed *Asclepias syriaca* and mauve-lavender bergamot *Monarda fistulosa* alongside the goldenrods *Solidago juncea* and *Euthamia graminifolia* flower among tall, arching stems of *Sorghastrum nutans*. It is a flower-rich paradise. Meadows melt into the high wooded bluffs bejewelled by *Aquilegia canadensis* and *Arisaema triphyllum*, the low east wood carpeted in lush skunk cabbage leaves melds into the fen studded with paniced aster *Symphotrichum lanceolatum* and pink swamp milkweed *Asclepias incarnata*. Page and Bosco seem to be the most contented custodians of nature. □

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Facing page The fen, an open calcareous wetland, rich in minerals and plant species, is carpeted by late September in the paniced aster, *Symphotrichum lanceolatum*. This sunlight-filled habitat contrasts the adjoining low wood where red and swamp maples, American hornbeam, *Carpinus caroliniana* and elms tower over shrubby willows and dogwoods.

This image *Anaphalis margaritacea*, grows in the high woods that are peppered with rocky outcrops among the moss- and lichen-encrusted trunks of white pine, eastern red cedar and chinquapin oak, *Quercus muehlenbergii*. A bluff leading to the picnic rock and vernal pool is scaled via rustic cedar logs set into the slope.