

HOME & GARDEN ISSUE

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REAL ESTATE ADVANTAGE

With Insights from Powerhouse **William Raveis**

PLUS: Influencers of the 2014 Market



BY JUDY OSTROW • PHOTOGRAPHS BY STACY BASS

The Productive GARDEN

EVERYTHING GROWN ON DIRT ROAD FARM IN
WESTON MAKES ITS WAY TO THE TABLE



Concord grapevines—and their fruit, in season—cover the pergola.

OPPOSITE:
Phoebe in her wildly productive garden • "Sungold" cherry tomatoes • Nicotiana "Only the Lonely" foliage • Nasturtium "Alaska"



Driving north into Weston, one feels farther and farther removed from twenty-first-century speed and stress. When your car reaches a part of the road that disappears into hard-packed dirt and gravel, you know that you have come to a different place. Such is the journey to admire the garden of Phoebe Cole-Smith.

It's a part of town where the trees make a canopy over the road, and many of the houses date from another time. It's quiet, except for the birds and the gentle clucking of Phoebe's chickens, their coop positioned at one corner of her growing area, close to the vegetable patch and a cutting garden for flowers. One border near the house is accented with a row of boxes containing active beehives and, she says, at certain times of the year sap buckets hang from

dozens of maple trees in the woodland area of the property. This hub of nature's creative activity welcomes friends and family to Dirt Road Farm.

Phoebe's relationship with growing things and raising food began early. "My mom was a great cook, and when we were small she introduced us to dandelion greens from our backyard in suburban Illinois, way before the words 'local' and 'organic' were even thought about," she recalls. Her parents later moved to a 120-acre farm in Illinois.

"We had bees and chickens, and my mother cooked from the garden. Later on, they realized that the local high school wasn't working out for me, and sent me to the Putney School in Vermont."

It was there that Phoebe's lifelong connection to food and farms solidified. Part of the program included working in the school's





barn and caring for the animals; she was hooked. Although she moved to the city for a publishing career after college, her passion for food remained unquenched.

In 1992, when the older of her two children was ready for kindergarten, the family moved to Weston. She was drawn to the rural character of the old farmhouse and the dirt road that led to it.

"I have to confess I was a little anxious about moving to the suburbs, but I loved this place," says Phoebe. This "productive gardener," as she calls herself, grew flowers, as is common here in Fairfield County, but she also made produce part of the plan. As her children approached high school age, she pondered the imminent

empty nest, and enrolled in the French Culinary Institute (now the International Culinary Center). As luck would have it, she served her internship at the newly opened Blue Hill at Stone Barns, a pioneer, and now a legend, in the farm-to-table restaurant movement. Inspired, she stepped up the productivity of her own garden.

Putting her newly refined cooking skills to work, she began to freelance as a personal chef, preparing meals and parties for local clients who knew or had heard of her expertise, and they spread the word about her talents. Although she has made liberal use of the food and knowledge of local farmers and the local farmers' markets to inform her selection of ingredients and recipes, she has

BELOW: The vegetable garden **OPPOSITE:** Gertrude, a French Maran hen • A Smith-Cole bouquet mix of chasteberry and hydrangea "Tardiva" • A table topped with Gilbertie's herbs, potted by Weston neighbor Frances Palmer • One of the Dirt Road hives

Growing & Eating Local

Some farms operate a Community Sponsored Agriculture (CSA) program, allowing customers to buy shares of what is produced during the growing season. Phoebe mentioned a few farms she knows well and has worked with over the years. There are many more. Both the Westport and Weston Farmers' Markets provide a rich introduction to local farms and a wide range of produce, meat, poultry and dairy products.

THE HICKORIES RIDGEFIELD

Certified organic produce, meat, wool, preserves, CSA farmstand and farmer's markets

HOLBROOK FARM BETHEL

Certified organic, family-run farm market

SAUGATUCK CRAFT BUTCHERY WESTPORT

Pastured, organic local meat

SPORT HILL FARM EASTON

Produce and eggs (sustainable methods)

STIETZEL FAMILY FARM REDDING

Eggs, vegetables, rhubarb and, says Phoebe, "Their watercress is heaven!"

Phoebe obtains all her herb plants from Gilbertie's Herb Garden in Westport.





“We started calling it DIRT ROAD FARM a few years ago, and the name stuck.”

also stepped up the action in her own garden. At her place—“we started calling it Dirt Road Farm a few years ago, and the name stuck”—Phoebe has followed in her mother’s footsteps, building a chicken coop for a flock of her own hens and starting up hives to harvest her own honey. At the same time, she has sown her produce beds with heirloom seeds from a variety of sources. A small orchard of fruit trees is a recent addition, though they haven’t produced a real harvest just yet.

Four years ago, she gave her husband, Mike, a kit that included three maple tree taps and three buckets as a gift. “Clearly, that present was a hit,” says Phoebe. “We’re now up to 150 taps, and our new evaporator can process 300 gallons of sap in eight hours. Three of our five-and-a-half acres make up our ‘sugarbush.’ We haul all the sap by hand, often in pretty bad weather, and with the help of our friends.” She adds, “It’s hard work, but the end product makes it worth all the trouble.”

Phoebe notes that the menus she creates have introduced many of her clients to the concept of local and organic ingredients.

“Nearly everything I use comes from a local source. A lot of people are excited to learn that what they’re eating has been harvested nearby. Even better, they realize how delicious it all is.”

In the midst of all this industry, the gardens—vegetable, herb and flower—are rich with the appealing forms, colors and scents that drive every gardener to plunge hands into the soil. Phoebe’s loose, informal arrangements of her own flowers dress her tables, and her clients’, with a beauty any garden lover would appreciate. But best of all, Phoebe has the satisfaction of staying true to her roots.

“It’s great to do what you love,” she smiles.

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OPPOSITE: Among Phoebe’s flowers, Cosmos, Zinnias and Scabiosa make the cut on a summer afternoon.

RIGHT: Zinnias, in flower • Zinnia bud • “Black Beauty,” Heirloom Turks-cap lily

