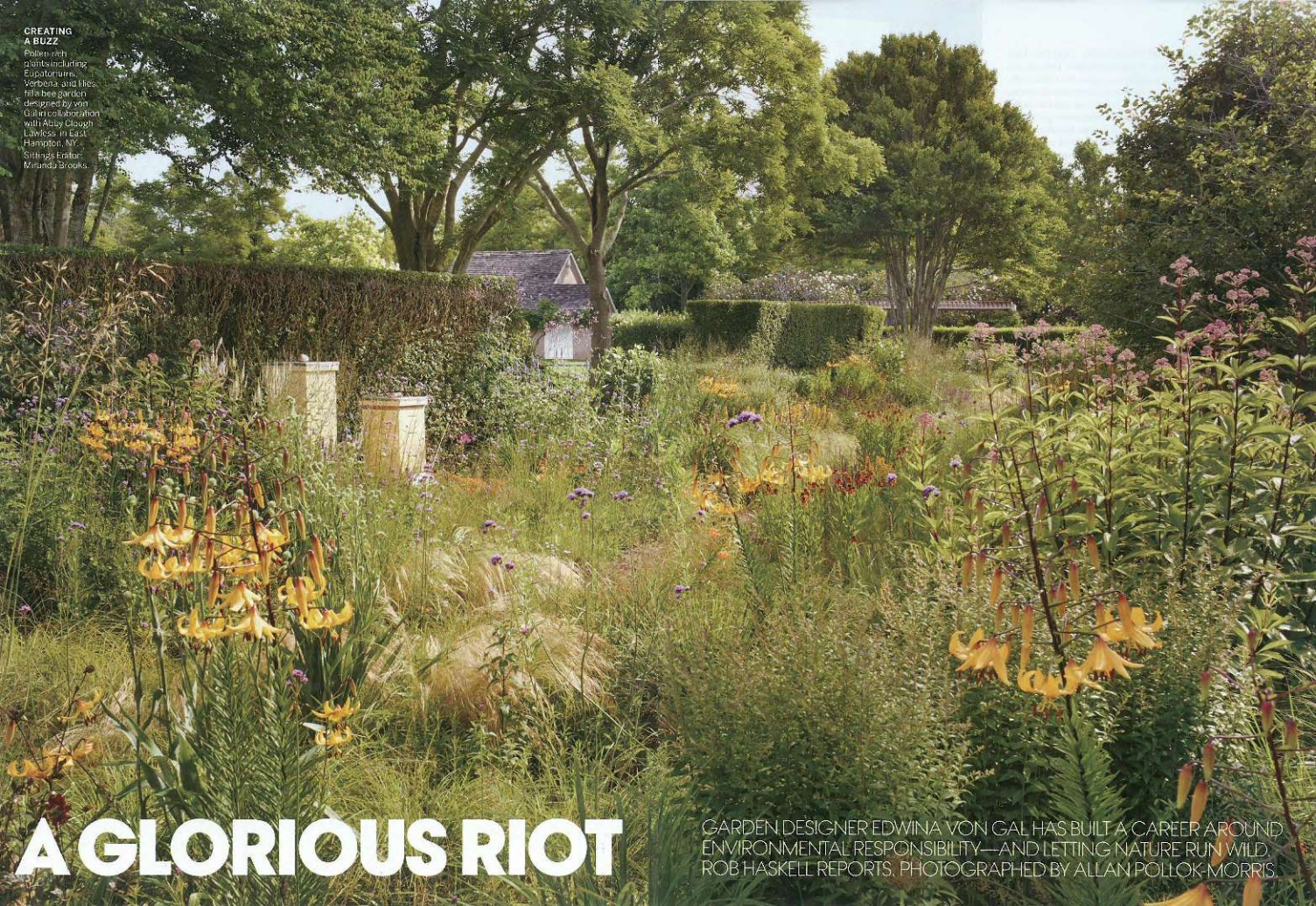

CREATING A BUZZ
Pollen-rich plants including Eupatorium, verbena and lilies fill a bee garden designed by von Gal in collaboration with Abby Clough Lawless in East Hampton, NY. Sittings Editor: Miranda Brooks.

A GLORIOUS RIOT

GARDEN DESIGNER EDWINA VON GAL HAS BUILT A CAREER AROUND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY—AND LETTING NATURE RUN WILD. ROB HASKELL REPORTS. PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALLAN POLLOK-MORRIS.

By early fall, the East End of Long Island has assumed an unruly lushness. Edwina von Gal, a landscape designer who likes nothing better than to let nature take its course, feels positively giddy. Just steps from the beach, in the superb biodynamic garden she created for the composer Jonathan Sheffer, dahlias grow the height of cornstalks, with petals like parrot feathers craning their necks over exploding purple salvia. Beyond the riot of magenta tufted Gomphrena and orange-eyed Echinaceas, heavy eggplants bow toward the ground, runner beans hide in plain sight amid tall vines, and golden raspberries taunt the deer from within their wire-mesh houses. The privet border looks shaggy, so unlike the laser-cut hedges that lend a forbidding aspect to fortress-like houses nearby. "Manicured hedges make me feel tired just thinking about the effort," von Gal says.

A few miles up the island, a sense not only of overabundance but of resurrection pervades the vast garden von Gal developed for Daniel and Brooke Neidich. A weeping willow that was reduced to a scarred stump by two hurricanes has finally sprouted silvery leaves. Pristine white blooms can once again be seen in a tree infirmary for gardenias blighted with midges, and a cherry tree that no one thought would survive seems hale again thanks to a compost tea that von Gal brewed and fed it. A nearby arbor spills out its surfeit of silver lace, and yellow lichen gilds the broad trunk of a Chinese elm. In the wildflower field, a spiky shrub known as Devil's Walking Stick has begun to assert itself. "On most properties you can't use it, because it just goes wild," says von Gal. "But we love wild."

If wild were as effortless as it sounds, then von Gal's redoubtable client list, which includes Richard Serra, Ina Garten, and Calvin Klein, might never have come calling. But in the Hamptons, the horticultural vernacular—exotic species, prinkly arranged—communicated by generations of genteel gardeners has had the unanticipated effect of stifling an appreciation of the native flora. There is much to undo. "Now that we have so many invasives, when you let a garden go it's not good," von Gal explains. "I wish it were." And so it is the rare East End landscape that spares von Gal the task of removing a tangle of Oriental Bittersweet or a mess of rosa multiflora to reveal the languishing native species underneath. Perhaps she'll move the cherries and Viburnums to more favorable or fetching spots—a correction of what she calls random acts of planting. "I like to work with what we've got," she says. "You have architecture, and you have Mother Nature. There's not much room for another ego in there."

And yet von Gal is proud lately to find that in the rarefied world of Hamptons gardens, her name conveys both a respect for nature's laws and a sense of environmental responsibility. In 2013, she founded the Perfect Earth Project, an organization devoted to the promotion of toxin-free gardening and landscape design. Perfect Earth extends the work von Gal began in Panama nearly a decade ago alongside scientists from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and the Yale School of Forestry. The Azuero Earth Project, as her Panamanian organization is called, advocates for reforestation and chemical-free farming.

Von Gal believes that American ecosystems have suffered from the profligate use of herbicides and pesticides in

The landscape designer's car, customized by artist Kenny Scharf.

Von Gal's home over the wetlands of East Hampton dates from the 1970s.

A von Gal–designed biodynamic vegetable garden in Sagaponack, NY.

Wild rabbits are a common sight on the marshes of East Hampton.

Tree stumps mark a path to the bay.

A boardwalk leads across wild marshes.

INTO THE WILD
Von Gutin a garden she designed in Wainscott, NY.

HIT THE DECK
A view of the wetlands from the designer's East Hampton home.

SHADOW PLAY
In Wainscott, dogwoods shade a chemical-free lawn designed by von Gal and framed by oxeye daisies, grasses, and ferns.

domestic gardening. "It's like going to a doctor and getting prescribed every antibiotic, plus chemotherapy and radiation, whether you need them or not," she explains. "You suppress so much in order to foster so little. And you end up with new problems."

With a jolliness that belies the gravity of her mission, von Gal can wax poetic about the glaciers that formed Long Island, the forensics of forests, and the fate of the Pacific yellowfin tuna. "She seems to know everything," says the artist Cindy Sherman, her friend and neighbor. "She's an encyclopedia of the botanical and the biological, and she discusses this stuff with so much animation that you find yourself wanting to say, 'Yes, Edwina.' "

Without a single exception, all of von Gal's clients have said just that. At the Neidichs', a barn with solar panels now supplies 60 percent of the energy to the house and the pool. Von Gal insisted here, just as elsewhere, on conserving biomass: Anything dug up or cut away must make its way to the compost heap. She suggested garden lights tucked into the gables instead of the dramatic upsweeping spotlights that she calls "carnival stuff—bad for the birds, bad for seeing the night stars." And, of course, she urged beehives. Within a labyrinth of walkways bordered by tall sassafras trees sits what most people would call a birdbath but what von Gal refers to as a bee beach. "Hi, girls!" she says as she walks up to admire the afternoon quaff of a few dozen worker bees settled on the perimeter. The bees, she says, need good hydration to complete the business of loading up the pollen baskets attached to their back legs. "When people have hives on their property, they take a different kind of interest in being chemical-free," she explains. "People get very emotional about their bees."

In a garden where nature governs, von Gal expects animals to feel very much at home. She hangs houses for bats and owls and creates temporary disaster housing for thrushes and rabbits displaced by renovation. Lately, some of her clients have jumped on the craze for chickens. At the Sheffer residence, a few new girls stand nervously by the photoelectric door of a modernist chicken coop, like pledges at a sorority. There are wyandottes, broody Orpingtons, and Araucanas, whose blue eggs have caused considerable excitement in the kitchen. Sheffer recently adopted a pair of goats, with their promise of chèvre, from a hedge-fund guy across the street. "I figured if I'm going to do this gentleman-farmer thing, I'm going to take it as far as I can," he explains.

It's clear that the Zeitgeist is smiling upon von Gal, now in her mid-60s. "In 1984, when I opened my business, everything was bigger-bolder-golder," she recalls, "and I had to set aside the tree-hugger talk. It's still a challenge to get my ideas across without being too crunchy or too scientific. People's eyes glaze over when it's all rainbows and lunar cycles."

Von Gal grew up in Brewster, New York. Her great-grandfather H. H. Vreeland (father-in-law of von Gal's great-aunt Diana Vreeland) was a railroad magnate and a close friend of Buffalo Bill's. Her grandmother was a garden-club judge, and her father presided over a big, beautiful vegetable bed. She began to garden as a child, ripping up old sheets to make soft ties for the tomato vines. The first thing von Gal learned to cook was hollandaise sauce CONTINUED ON PAGE 327

until the wheels come off." His Hamlet, too, promises as much brio as tragedy. "You lean into him not because you want to take care of the poor guy or because he's an oversharing drip. He pulls you in because he's very entertaining and has a great sense of humor. He's very witty. The best Hamlets I've seen have been, without a doubt, the funniest."

Part of Cumberbatch's extreme good humor has to do with the fact that lately he has been seeing Sophie Hunter, 36, a lovely Oxford-educated theater director (and actress and singer) known for her avant-garde productions. They've been in a relationship for the past few months, not quite as secretly as they might have hoped. The papers published photos of them sitting at the French Open and walking in Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Garden—"Everyone now is a pap," he says, shaking his head. Although his romance with Hunter will doubtless break some teenage hearts, most of his fans should be relieved that their idol, whom they adore for his intelligence and complexity, is involved with someone worthy of their fantasies of him.

"I'm really, really happy," he says of the relationship, "and I'm happy to say it." He gives a smile so shy that I believe him absolutely.

"The wonderful thing about Ben is that he's having a great time," Knightley tells me with obvious affection. "It's nice to see somebody getting what he always wanted and then really enjoying it."

Still, it's one measure of his good sense that he tries to keep his success in perspective. Rather like George Clooney, who also didn't get big until his mid-30s, Cumberbatch took off when he was old enough to appreciate fame without being undone by it. He can be tickled by Oscar speculation but not enthralled by it. "I sometimes worry about the currency surrounding the furor—the Internet, the teens. I'm careful that it doesn't obscure other things that I care about. When somebody says that I'm perfect for a role because it will get an audience, that immediately makes me cold on it."

Indeed, when I ask whose careers he might like to emulate, he names actors who he feels have "gone the distance," meaning they rose through the ranks, did decades of great work, and keep going strong: Michael Gambon, Ian McKellen, Bill Nighy. . . .

"The adoration thing is amazing," he tells me, "but it won't carry on forever, and I want my work to carry on forever" he stops, laughing at such grandiosity. "Or at least for the next 40 years." ☐

SHAPE SHIFT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 250

research—including making his own chart of Merrick's physical maladies and traveling to London to walk the halls of the hospital where he spent his final years—put on an excerpt as his master's thesis. And while Cooper concedes that his performance "might have had some room for improvement," he remembers it as "cathartic" because his father—a working-class Irish kid from North Philadelphia who had made good and put his son through Georgetown—was in the audience. "I remember him hugging me afterward and sort of shaking in my arms," Cooper says. "And he just said, 'You picked the right profession.' That meant the world to me."

When we meet Merrick in the play—which was staged at Williamstown two summers ago under the direction of Scott Ellis (*You Can't Take It with You*), with Cooper and the same sterling cast that's coming to Broadway—he is a freak-show attraction. After his horrifying looks almost spark a riot in the streets, Merrick is taken in by Frederick Treves (Alessandro Nivola), an ambitious young doctor who cares for him at the London Hospital and introduces him to an actress, known only as Mrs. Kendal (Patricia Clarkson). Kendal, who manages to hide her initial revulsion, develops a tight bond with him, discussing *Romeo and Juliet* and, in a moving act of compassion, taking off her blouse to give him his first and only glimpse of a woman's body.

Though the play itself is filled with neo-Brechtian conceits and barbed attacks on Victorian hypocrisy and cant, Ellis is less concerned with social commentary, and his stripped-down production aims to remove a distancing layer of theatrical artifice. "I want to make it almost a kitchen-sink drama, as if you're right there in the room with them," he says. "And I really want to make it a chamber piece, because it's a triangle—a love story among the three of them."

As Treves, an up-and-coming paragon of the English gentleman, Nivola (last seen on Broadway in *The Winslow Boy*) is both Merrick's savior and his rival. "It's hard to believe that Treves is sexually jealous of the most deformed man in history, but he is," Nivola says with a laugh. "Merrick and Mrs. Kendal have this profound connection that's very upsetting to him—they're both part of this alternative society of circus freaks and theater people—and he's in love with Merrick, platonically, as well. It's a sort of Victorian *Jules et Jim*."

The smushing, sultry-voiced Clarkson, returning to Broadway after 25 years, is known for both her impeccable craft and a willingness to give herself over to a character. "I think that Merrick awakens something so deep in Kendal, something so vulnerable—a true, real love for another human being," she says. "And it's a very personal journey: I have to bring my own depth and sadness onto the stage every night. Like her, I'm a woman of a certain age; I'm an actress; I've had and lost love. All the things that life has and hasn't offered me, all the things that I have had to come to terms with—that's what I have to bring onstage."

Though this production may be an ensemble piece that focuses on human relationships over stage tricks, our experience of the play will depend on Cooper's ability to reveal the inner life of this broken man, and on his gift for self-transformation—especially in the scene when, as Treves outlines the symptoms of Merrick's malady, he becomes the Elephant Man before our eyes. "You start out watching a normal man—me—becoming this freak, and then once you've given yourself over to the illusion, you slowly start to see him as a normal man beneath the skin," Cooper says. "And from there, you start to identify with him, to see him as yourself. It's a very interesting ride, and we're asking you to suspend your disbelief in a very stripped-down, nuts-and-bolts way." And that's pretty much the essence of theater, isn't it? ☐

A GLORIOUS RIOT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 289

because her father was so proud of his asparagus.

Though she hoped to be a scientist, the sixties got in the way. "I tuned in, dropped out, had a child, became a hippie mom, then a single hippie mom," she explains. Von Gal did it with rigor, however. As a young mother, she ate only what she grew. She made all her daughter's baby food. She made her own tofu.

In the late 1970s, she got a job with Peter Jay Sharp, who owned the Carlyle Hotel. Sharp became an important early mentor, teaching her how to bid at auction and introducing her to the work of the important architects and interior designers he routinely enlisted. Soon enough he invited von Gal to design the gardens at his home on Martha's Vineyard. At night, she took architecture classes. More design work followed: an old garden in a Millbrook arboretum, where CONTINUED ON PAGE 328

she learned about surveying; topiaries, grass gardens, intricate herb hedges at Rockefeller Center. Finally she opened a business of her own in a small office in the basement of 450 Park Avenue. "Peter told me I needed a good address," she recalls.

The old hippie spirit pervades von Gal's own house, a 1970s wooden box floating over the salt marshes of Accabonac Harbor, in East Hampton, which she bought in 2003 after the death of her husband, the legendary adman Jay Chiat. To get there, one passes what von Gal calls her Long Island forest-restoration project—oak, Eastern Red cedar, American hornbeam, and beech saplings she has planted and screened in until they shoot safely above the brows of the famished deer. She has turned the deep front lawn into a meadow, which meant waiting patiently for the things that ought to be there to get there by themselves: switchgrass, little bluestem, other lovers of sandy soil.

Though she never cared much about lawns, von Gal has been preoccupied with them of late. The green, pristine American lawn is any garden's greediest consumer of chemicals and also the site of rampant overwatering. Von Gal laments the still prevalent taste for close-cropped, featureless turf, which reminds her of wall-to-wall carpeting. "The biggest challenge in building toxin-free gardens is convincing people that clover is great," she says. "It's just a question of perception. We don't think smoking looks cool anymore. This battle should be much easier since lawns aren't addictive. People will see that a biodiverse lawn is healthier, more weed-resistant, more lavish, and, to me, more inviting."

Back at the Neidichs', von Gal is admiring the progress of a stand of flowering shrubs. Stewartia and spirea burst with blossoms, and soon the old espaliered pear trees will be heavy with fruit. Come spring, the breeze will carry the scent of honeysuckle straight to the door of the house. Walking to one edge of the property, she finds that a few old, gnarly cedars rescued from a local developer's bulldozers are finally beginning to take on a native aspect, while the old bittermut hickories have started to self-sow. All around is the sense, common to von Gal's projects, that things had to happen so that other things could happen on their own. With a chuckle, Brooke Neidich says that a friend dropped by the day before and deemed the whole effect "messy-fabulous." The assessment is fair but incomplete, for though von Gal is paid to make splendid gardens, her greatest joy is to make healthy ones and to teach others to make them, too.

"Do not fire your landscaper," she says. "Convert him." ☐

GRAND FINALE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 290

Here is how you make mille-feuille, as per my next three hours under his instruction.

Step 1: Make a dough of flour, butter, and water. Chill twelve hours. (Olivier did this ahead of time.)

Step 2: Whack a pound of butter around, then fold parchment paper into a perfectly square envelope. Somehow get butter into the envelope. Whack until butter precisely fills packet. (Olivier gives me a look I interpret as wondering why I can't make a square. A *square*.)

Step 3: Take chilled dough and roll it into a square. Take whacked butter out of parchment and fold dough around it, until it's entirely enveloped and . . . square. What I have written in my notes here is "I am not good at making squares."

The next seven steps involve folding dough in thirds, then chilling it, rolling, folding, chilling again and again, until you have 729 feuilles in one coherent layer. You're now through Step 10.

Steps 11–15: Bake the pâte feuilletée in several arduous stages. Finally, dust with confectioners' sugar. Place in an extremely hot oven, but only for a moment. Repeat on second side. This is "caramelizing."

Step 16: Make crème diplomate filling. Chill overnight.

Step 17: Put crème in a bag, and pipe between pastry. Quick math: This should all take about 40 hours.

While I have been pummeling flour and butter and scribbling notes, Olivier has baked a sheet of immaculate dough to a lacquered golden brown. He cuts it into neat rectangles and hands three—plus vanilla cream—to each student and gives careful instructions on piping, which we do, each producing a finished mille-feuille in which we can claim, if we are generous with ourselves, a small hand.

At 7:30 P.M., cycling home, pastry in knapsack, through the smog of downtown Manhattan, I notice that I smell rather wonderfully of butter and sugar. Once there, I serve the mille-feuille to Peter, confessing to the limits of my involvement. We note the silkiness of the diplomate, the fragility of the feuilletage. "It's wonderful, love," he says. "Just wait," I promise. I'm on a path.

I remember seeing Chef Daniel Boulud make mille-feuille on the *Today* show once. I call the public-relations office of Daniel and explain that I'm a chef-cum-writer doing pastry-self-help-intervention therapy and need to train in their pastry kitchen. I'm working through something, I explain. Pastry chef Ghaya Oliveira agrees to take me on for two days. "I'll bake you a mille-feuille," I offer, "so you can gauge my skill level and help me improve." She laughs and says, "Whatever you want."

The next morning I panic. I'm convinced that everything in my kitchen tastes of garlic. All I can smell is garlic. What if I bring a garlic-flavored mille-feuille to Daniel? I briefly consider trying to pass off the remaining sliver of my mille-feuille from class as newly baked. But Olivier had insisted it be eaten immediately or discarded. "Mille-feuille is the cake of one day!" he'd shouted as we filed out of his bakery.

"Do it when it's cold," David Lebovitz had instructed. Our heat had been on. The kitchen thermostat reads 85 degrees, but it can't be helped, so I roll my dough into a sort of kidney-bean shape, put it on a cookie sheet, use scissors to cut off what doesn't fit, and slide it in the oven. It emerges, half an hour later, a bit buckled and mottled. I cut it into rectangles, though I can't get their sides straight. My crème diplomate, made during the baking, is impossibly lumpy. I do the best piping I can, step back to survey, then quickly put my first attempt at mille-feuille in a beautiful chestnut leaf–embossed Parisian cardboard box and head off.

Ghaya Oliveira, a tall, warm woman in chef's whites with a charming Tunisian-French accent, greets me in Daniel's vaulted dining room. She is so floury and compassionate that I feel reassured; the instant she sees my homely mille-feuille, she will hug me, then assign me to cracking eggs or counting cartons of cream—something with low stakes. I keep trying to hand it to her, to get this formality out of the way, but there are introductions, a tour. Then she's called into a meeting with Chef Boulud. The box goes into a pastry refrigerator.

I'm put in the charge of an affable sous-chef, who asks me to select ripe figs for figues en robe. This is not a pastry skill. I do it well. Then to cut lime supremes—wedges without pool or pith; something any cook can do. My declarations of pastry ineptitude are thenceforth interpreted as false humility. I'm instructed to glaze the only 20 figues en robe in the restaurant, beautiful sweet purses of baked, dough-wrapped figs.