

# a labor of love

AN ARTIST FINDS A DIAMOND  
IN THE ROUGH AND HONES IT  
INTO A MULTI-FACETED GEM.

Text by Nancy L. Claus  
Photography by Thomas Moore





It's easy to see what drew Deborah Schmidt-Crary to Lakeview, a property just off a dirt road overlooking a lake in the bucolic hamlet of Waccabuc; population 750. Sure, the setting is stunning, but it's the main house that's the showstopper, with its gingerbread charm and distinctive cupola. It's unclear exactly when the house was built; some history books say 1860 and others date it back to 1820. Tucked behind the residence is an adorable guest house and a restored barn, surrounded by specimen trees, perennial gardens, and a vineyard. But things are not quite what they appear to be—and a far cry from what Schmidt-Crary started with more than a decade ago.

Back in 1997, she was living in Holland, divorced, and looking to move back to New York. "I was leaning toward moving into the City," she says, "but my son, Julian, seven at the time, wanted 'a house in the country and a dog with a tail.'" Who could resist such a sweet request?

On one visit stateside, she was having lunch in Katonah with a friend and noticed all the "for sale" signs in the window of Houlihan Lawrence. "There were all these houses for three or four million dollars," Schmidt-Crary recalls. "But then I saw the listing for this little house, guest cottage, and barn on six acres for around \$400,000." She went to see it that very day. It was a total wreck—the grounds had been neglected, weeds ran rampant, everything was overgrown, there was no septic system, the inside plaster was cracking—but she bought it on the spot.

"Everything was in total disrepair," she says, but, as an artist and interior designer, she could see the potential.

In her first three years, Schmidt-Crary's focus was to make the 2,000-square-foot main house "livable," updating the kitchen, three bedrooms, and baths (and, of course, getting that "dog with a tail"). Surprisingly, modern art adorns the walls of this charming antique, an interesting juxtaposition of old and new. The beautiful cupola now caps off the master bath. Phase two was to renovate the two-bedroom, two-bath guest cottage, to accommodate visiting family and friends.

Then she married Calvert "Cal" Crary in 2002 in Napa Valley, where Crary, a litigation analyst, got interested in making his own wine. And somehow, just two buildings didn't seem enough. "I had been wanting a studio," Schmidt-Crary says. "Then Cal decided he wanted an office. While we were at it, we decided to create a space for Julian as well. Then we thought, why not incorporate a kitchen and winemaking area since we were planting a vineyard out back? Basically, we created a weekend house in our backyard."

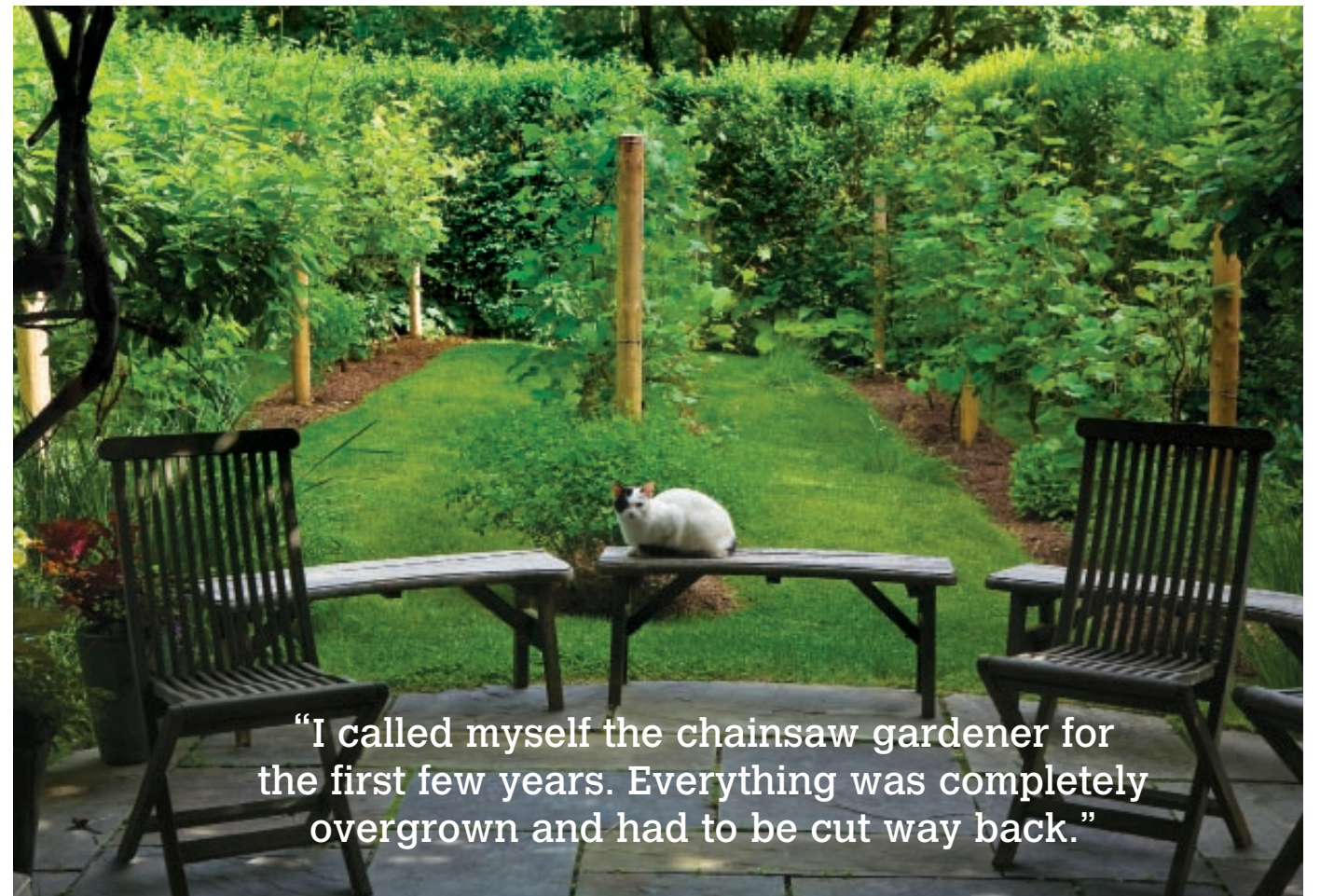
And what a sweet retreat it is. The entrance to the rustic barn looks small, but looks are deceiving. Deer-resistant plants—flowering thyme, catnip, salvia, iris, lamb's ear drawing lots of bees—fan out from the doorway. Inside, the unexpected: a wide-open, sleek, and minimalist media room accented with dramatic, oversize artworks, some by the artist herself. "I like the element of surprise in decorating—you turn a corner and a tableau unfolds," she says. "While the barn looks small from the outside, inside, it is surprisingly large, bigger than the main house." A large flat-screen television is mounted on the wall across from the modular sofa. Her studio is to the right; his space is in the back; Julian has his own digs upstairs, all with beautiful views of the Northern Westchester countryside.

(Previous spread) The sleek media room in the barn is accented with a dramatic painting by Australian Jan Riske; Schmidt-Crary creates all the floral arrangements from her cutting garden behind the vineyard.

(Opposite page, clockwise from top left) Schmidt-Crary at work in her studio; the artwork "Human Collections" was a prototype of a large art installation she created with her first husband, Eric Staller, for the Butterworth Hospital's Women and Children's Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan; the entrance to the barn looks deceptively small.

(This page) Schmidt-Crary's working studio is awash in natural light; the painting on the back wall is by Babe Shapiro.

(Opposite page) The covered dining terrace has exquisite views from every direction; an ancient grapevine frames the vineyard, just off the terrace.



"I called myself the chainsaw gardener for the first few years. Everything was completely overgrown and had to be cut way back."



(Opposite page, clockwise from top left) A baby bathtub on a stand was repurposed into a sink for the powder room off the kitchen; objects found while "taming the land" adorn the walls and ledges of the terrace; the hot tub overlooking a yoga/exercise room is a welcome retreat; an outdoor shower is perfect for a quick rinse after a day working in the gardens.

(Above) The rustic wine-making kitchen features chestnut countertops made from the original stable floors. Carboys containing Grenache, Muscat, and Cabernet Sauvignon are in the post-fermentation stage.

(Above right) The distinctive cupola adds charm to the main house, which dates back to the 1800s.

Downstairs, the space transitions back to rustic. Old chestnut, reclaimed from the original stable's floors, finds new life as countertops in the barn's kitchen. Deborah cut and grouted into place 12"x 12" pieces of slate for the backsplash; a travertine sink sits below. Floors are Brazilian teak, stained dark. Refrigerator drawers are covered with barn wood; the wine fridge is usually stocked with house wines. Even Julian has gotten involved in the "family business," making dandelion wine, hard cider, and beer. Found objects are everywhere: old tools and bottles—items Schmidt-Crary discovered while taming the land—line shelves and adorn walls. "I called myself 'the chainsaw gardener' for the first few years," she recalls. "Everything was completely overgrown and had to be cut way back."

Beyond the kitchen is a covered outdoor terrace designed to take full advantage of the vistas. A 100-year-old grape arbor frames the view of the vineyard. (The 20 vines yield between two and three cases of wine each year.) To the right is a long stretch of neatly manicured lawn, meeting up with wetlands. Adirondack chairs are lined up by a firepit, at the ready for making s'mores.

"It feels like Tuscany here," says Crary. "I walk out here and step into a completely different environment from where I've been working all day." Indeed, home from work, Crary dons gloves and tends to his vines as Schmidt-Crary sits with feet perched on the antique coffee table from ABC Carpet sipping the house Frontenac wine, semi-feral cats lolling in the late afternoon sun, just out of reach.

"This house has had many lives," she says. "This is a new one. I think this type of living is the way of the future, having more private spaces, smaller structures used for different purposes, instead of having one huge house where you only use a few rooms at a time." 📍