AUTUMN AGLOW

To keep a Vermont garden vibrating with color year-round, a landscape designer took a layered planting approach, packing beds with waves of diverse annuals and perennials. Over the years, she and the property’s adventurous, hands-on owner have forged a friendship that also continues to grow and bloom.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAIRE TAKACS | TEXT BY MONICA MICHAEL WILLIS

DIVINE LINES

To soften the edges of the natural pond near Rita Ramirez and Tom Boudet’s home, garden designer Helen O’Donnell added sprays of tall, see-through grasses and loose perennials, such as feathery orange flame grass (Miscanthus sinensis ‘Purpurascens’), fanning golden Molinia comosa ‘Windspiel’, and Physocarpus ‘Summer Wine’, a ninebark with deep-burgundy foliage.
IF GARDENS ARE A REFLECTION of the people who nurture them, the vivid, carefree plantings covering Rita Ramirez’s property mirror the friendship she’s cultivated with her landscape designer, Helen O’Donnell. O’Donnell, the co-owner of Bunker Farm, a family-run operation that includes a nursery of hard-to-source annuals and perennials, lives just down the road in Dummerston, Vermont, and has overseen this plot’s breezy, naturalistic look for eight years.

Though largely self-taught, O’Donnell steeped herself in the classics several years ago by interning at venerable British gardens like Hidcote and Great Dixter, the East Sussex estate of the renowned late gardener and author Christopher Lloyd. At Great Dixter, O’Donnell met famed horticulturist Fergus Garrett, the property’s current director, and learned to grow unusual plants from seed. Back home, her passion for Britain’s exuberant, densely packed arts-and-crafts style never waned: “My beds have been full to the brim with perennials planted shoulder-to-shoulder, stems crossed, and annuals intermingled, no soil in sight, ever since,” she laughs.

This voluptuous look struck a chord with Ramirez, a social worker who had lived in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest with her husband, author and NPR humoüist Tom Bodett, before they settled on 50 acres in Dummerston in 2003. “We installed a geothermal saltwater pool and two natural ponds in 2013,” she says. “But we needed to visually connect the water to the house, so I reached out to Helen. They gave O’Donnell complete freedom, save for one major request: Ramirez wanted the garden to be a revolving door of color from season to season.”

“The house was plumped in the middle of a giant hayfield,” says O’Donnell, who had to loosen the soil, which had become compacted, with a disk before beginning work on the site. To anchor it to the land, she surrounded it with robust shrubs like hydrangea, burgundy ‘Summer Wine’ ninebark, purple smoke bush, and ‘Miss Kim’ lilacs. She installed drifts of tall grasses, such as Molinia caerulea ‘Windspiel’, and perennials in various heights, textures, and colors. O’Donnell also grows about 90 percent of her annuals from seed. It’s a win-win for both women: Ramirez gets plants other people have never seen, and O’Donnell can trial new varieties in real time. “Layering annuals and perennials helps us extend the season. When one plant crashes, it doesn’t wipe out the bed,” O’Donnell notes.

As the garden evolves, so does the women’s bond. Ramirez still clears her schedule every Wednesday to dig in the dirt with O’Donnell, and friend Lizzie Merrigan, a local gardener, often joins them to plant, water, and weed. Certain moments still wow the spirited pair, like when the autumn flame grass goes orange in tandem with the distant maples. “I still take chances here, because I know that anything that doesn’t work can be fixed,” says O’Donnell. “It’s a special thing when someone really trusts you to make their garden great.”
POWER PLAYERS

Above: Though O’Donnell inherited many of the plants in this bed from Brian McFarland, the talented gardener who tended the space before her, she reshaped the plot to weave in pink and purple tender perennials and annuals for color. Those include red-leaved ‘Mohogany Splendor’ hibiscus, magenta ‘Fascination’ dahlias with almost-black foliage, and ‘Benery’s Giant’ asters, a 19th-century German heirloom that can grow up to five feet tall. For left: ‘Euphoria’ coleus alone is only about a foot high, but its tiny flowers and lime-green leaves lend great color and texture all season,” she says.

Near left: The dwarf shrub Deutzia gracilis ‘Rikki’ enchants from April, when it has small white buds, to October, when its foliage turns burgundy.

HOME-FRONT HARMONY

A few years after moving onto their property, the couple relocated the exterior of the all-white Federal-style house with cedar clapboard and painted the trim reddish-maron. They later built a porch that overlooks one of the ponds and the views beyond. At the water’s edge O’Donnell incorporated self-seeding white Gaura and purple Verbena bonariensis among the grasses. “Sometimes you have to be ruthless with self-seeders,” she admits, and remove some of them when they start to take over an area. “A gardener’s responsibility is to find the equilibrium and not let nature totally take over; we have to rein it in, and then manage it.”