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# Something WILD

*Cultivating a  
native habitat  
in Free Union*

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Sweat glistens on Amy Lewis' brow as she cracks open a bottle of beer in the kitchen of her home in Free Union. It's late August, and she's just back from the 1,000-acre Albemarle farm where she maintains the grounds and gardens, her full-time job. At the wooden dining table sits her husband of 21 years, Reid Humphries, and at her feet lie their two Australian shepherds. A hummingbird hovers at the feeder hanging on the back porch.

"Everything you see here, we did," she says, patting her forehead with a wadded-up paper towel. She sweeps her hand to direct my view out the glass-paned door. The land tumbles down to a dry creek bed and then climbs a broad hillside covered by a sun-drenched thicket of native plants.

She's sure they are native plants—with a few invasives to be weeded out—because she and Humphries put them there. They have been tirelessly creating their 11-acre "labor of love" (her words) since 2010. The landscape has become a showcase of cultivated wilderness and environmentally conscious living, so much so that the Piedmont Master Gardeners and Rivanna Garden Club chose it as a site this year in a series of tours of extraordinary domestic green spaces.

Lewis has lived in Charlottesville since 1978, when she moved here with her now ex-husband after he took a job at Georgetown Veterinary Hospital. Humphries, born and raised in Virginia, had been an itinerant carpenter—living and working in Manhattan, Colorado, and Nantucket—before landing in Charlottesville. He met Lewis 25 years ago on a job: She was installing a garden that included a water feature Humphries was building.

After Lewis' kids moved away—her daughter, 35, now lives in Washington, D.C., and her son, 32, in Denver—she and Humphries, who has a wry and slightly off-color sense of humor, bought the land in Free Union. He likes it because it's secluded. "My definition of privacy," he deadpans, "is that I can take a piss off the back porch and not get busted."

Amy lets that line slide without comment but takes it as a cue to begin our tour of the property. The upper portion of the parcel, in front of the house, has a small orchard, vegetable







Opening page: Amy Lewis works full-time as a gardener, and tends her native meadow in the evening and on weekends. This spread (clockwise from top left): A weeping willow is the focal point of a dry creek bed that's the threshold to the hill leading to the meadow; Australian shepherds Ollie and Mo trot through the native plants; mountains fill the long view from the garden; rows of sunflowers give structure to an otherwise wild place; Humphries built the barn and, using stone excavated on-site, assembled rock walls; stone steps lead from the patio to the backyard.

garden, chicken house, and barn, all built by Humphries, who is a multi-talented craftsman. When their house was being built, they hit rock—dense sandstone—not far beneath the surface, and excavated a great deal of it. Humphries used it to build stone walls that bracket the house—the wall in back is 82 feet long.

For gardeners, the real show begins at the creek bed, where ferns, bulbs, Virginia bluebells, and woodland phlox have naturalized. Paths of packed soil and mowed grass lead up the hill and into the meadow, a scraggly but beautiful three-and-a-half-acre display of native plants: witch hazel, bee balm, St. John's wort, plumbago, cedum, aster, prairie grass, cone-flower, sumac, and the list goes on. Grassy paths criss-cross the meadow, the plants buffering the sound and providing a green embrace. Butterflies flit around, alighting on flowers. Songbirds provide the soundtrack.

Before the couple cleared that land, it was a livestock pasture that, once abandoned, became overgrown with non-native trees, poison ivy, rosa rugosa, and more. "It was a mess," Lewis says.

To clean it up, Lewis and Humphries successfully applied for two federal grants to create the native habitat, one from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and the other from the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.

The funds enabled the couple to realize Lewis' vision. "I wanted to contain the soil on the hill with natives that have strong root systems," she says. "I didn't want a landscape that was tied to plants that require a lot of water and can't survive on their own."

Today, the meadow—and most of the property, in fact—consists of plants that not only survive on their own but are deer resistant. They provide an idyllic preserve where birds forage and bees and butterflies thrive, fulfilling their natural duty as pollinators.

The work, usually initiated by Lewis, has been intense for the couple, and the property is always evolving. "She gets this look in her eye," says Humphries, "and I say, 'Oh, here we go.'"

"People ask, 'What'd you do this weekend?'" Lewis says. "I say, 'Oh, we gardened.' We're cheap dates. Our entertainment is built in."