

ROOTED IN HISTORY



The preservation of
the gardens at Meadowburn
Farm, in northwestern
New Jersey,
gives new life to the legacy
of beloved writer
Helena Rutherford Ely.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NGOC MINH NGO
TEXT BY MELISSA OZAWA





GREEN ACRES

Left: Created in 1914, the evergreen garden was the last area Ely planted at Meadowburn. **Right:** The Coster-Gerard family embellished the space with garden ornaments, including the pool's fountain, as seen today.



With a trowel in hand and joy in my heart": So wrote the noted garden writer Helena Ruth-erford Ely when she set to work at Meadowburn Farm, her country home in Vernon, New Jersey. For years she took pleasure in her gardens. "Meadowburn was all very much a product of Ely's personal vision—everything from the layout to the plants to the practical horticultural techniques that were employed there," says garden manager Quill Teal-Sullivan, who is currently leading its preservation efforts.

A founding member of the Garden Club of America, Ely transformed the gardening world when she published *A Woman's Hardy Garden* in 1903. "It met a niche in garden literature that hadn't been met yet," says Teal-Sullivan. Written by an American woman for American women of all horticultural levels, the book was one of the most influential gardening manuals of its time—filled with practical advice on growing (including design plans and detailed planting information), and infused with Ely's passion for horticulture. "She inspired women to take on gardening, defying the social norms of her day," says Teal-Sullivan. Her influence spanned generations and even inspired Martha, who read all of Ely's books when she was designing her first garden.

For the past four years, the six-acre garden has been undergoing extensive rehabilitation. Teal-Sullivan has been working closely with the Coster-Gerard family, which has owned Meadowburn since they bought it from Ely's son 10 years after the writer's death in 1920. Over the years, the family made few changes, so it remains close to what

Ely created. The gardeners themselves are staunch protectors of her vision, too. Ely hired a young farmhand, Albert Furman, as gardener in 1883. "She taught him everything," Teal-Sullivan says. He passed on this knowledge to his son Albert Jr., who then passed it on to his nephew Walter DeVries, who still helps out at the property. "The gardeners were always quite stubborn," says Teal-Sullivan of their loyalty to Ely's legacy. "Even to this day, I'll hear, 'We do it this way because this is how Mrs. Ely did it.'"

Preserving the garden has been full of challenges and leaps of faith. Hedges have been eaten by voracious deer, and trees have come down due to storms or have grown tall over time, casting sunny areas into shade and vice versa. The perennial beds in the formal garden had to be dug up to combat invasive weeds. Still, the garden delights. Teal-Sullivan ultimately transplanted those perennials to the picking beds, combining them with old-fashioned annuals. The mixed borders overflow with many of Ely's favorites—phlox, nigella, petunias, and nicotiana—and romantically recall another time. The evergreen garden includes a reflecting pool surrounded by conifers, providing a calming verdant oasis. The 150-foot dahlia allée—filled with heirloom varieties—erupts with color in late summer, as it has done for more than a century.

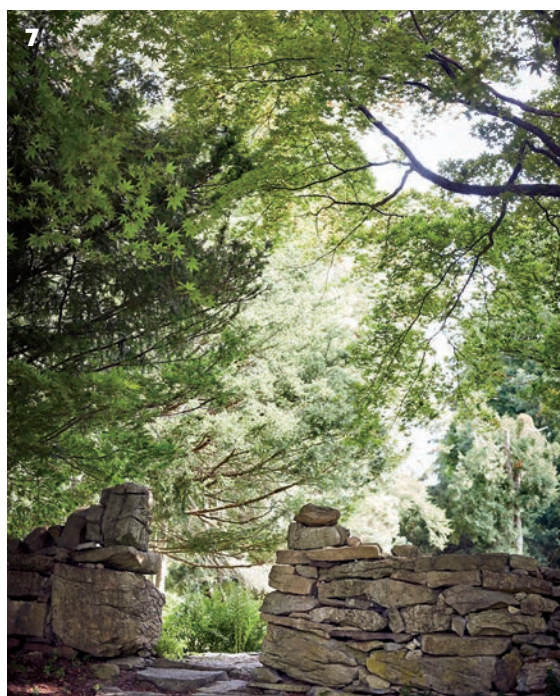
For nearly 40 years, Ely imbued Meadowburn with a generous spirit—welcoming visitors, offering advice, and sharing plant material. Today Teal-Sullivan and the Coster-Gerard family are keeping the tradition alive. The garden is open by appointment, with the hopes of making it even more accessible soon. "People fall under the Meadowburn spell," she says. "You get trapped by all the beauty here, and it's hard to leave."

B. DANFORTH ELY & FAMILY (VINTAGE PHOTO); ILLUSTRATIONS BY NATASHA TIBBOTT

IN THE PINK

"There is no flower in the garden more beautiful, more easily cultivated or giving so much bloom as the phlox. I could certainly never have a garden without it," wrote Ely in *A Woman's Hardy Garden*. Teal-Sullivan transplanted Ely's beloved pink phlox from the formal garden to the picking bed, combining it with Ely favorites such as an old-fashioned fragrant petunia in white, hot pink, and lavender.

AS SEEN IN
LIVING



DOWN THE GARDEN PATH

In the formal garden, Ely planted wisteria along the rustic pergola, which was constructed from cedar wood found on the working farm at the end of the path. "Ely was a real 'dirt gardener,'" says Teal-Sullivan. Through her books, Ely encouraged women to take an active role in the garden. "Patience and perseverance are traits necessary to the gardener. One must not be discouraged, but determined to succeed," she wrote in *A Woman's Hardy Garden*.

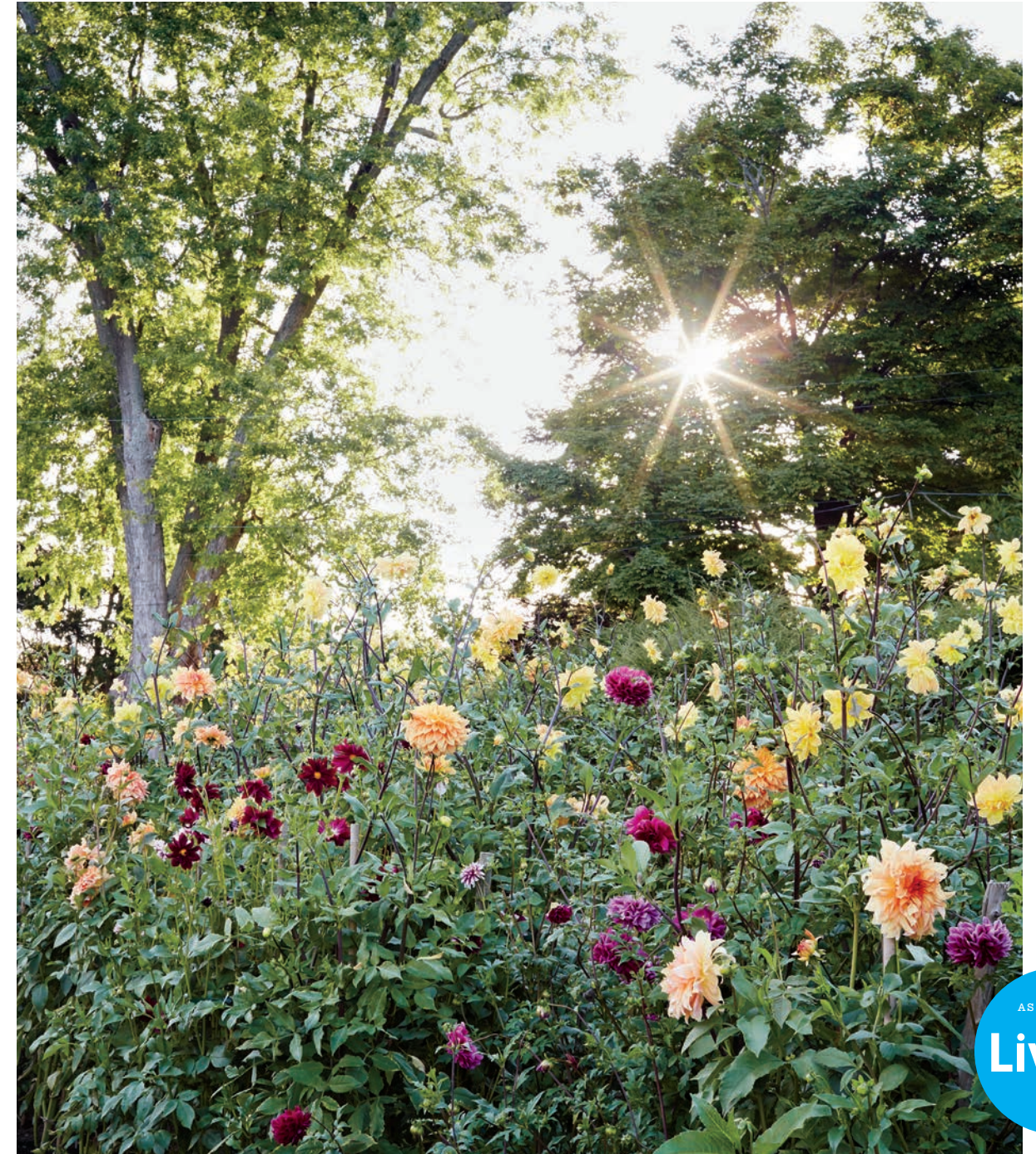
ONE WOMAN'S VISION

1. Terra-cotta pots are stacked and ready for planting. 2. Foxgloves grow by the greenhouse. 3. A sphinx-like relief is one of the several decorative features in the evergreen garden. 4. The pool garden was completed around 1905 and is framed by hemlock hedges and arborvitae. 5. Ely's first book, *A Woman's Hardy Garden*, was a best seller and was printed 16 times; she wrote two subsequent books, including *The Practical Flower Garden*, a copy of which is shown here, signed to her "faithful friend and gardener," Albert Furman. 6. 'Helena Rutherford Ely' dahlias can reach 10 inches in diameter and grow on sturdy purple stems. 7. An opening in the stone wall leads to the evergreen garden. 8. Teal-Sullivan plants the picking garden with varieties she thinks Ely would have used: "Ely was an experimenter," she notes, "so part of my philosophy when gardening is to emulate her and give myself some flexibility by trying new things."



MEADOWBURN'S DAHLIAS

1. 'Jane Cowl'—the only previously identified cultivar, featuring peach petals tinged with gold.
2. The cactus dahlia 'Meadowburn Albert Furman,' a prolific bloomer.
3. The antique peony-flowered 'Meadowburn Danny Bea,' magenta with streaks of maroon.
4. 'Meadowburn Byba Vincenza,' with its bobbing magenta form.
5. 'Meadowburn Clara Helen,' with fuchsia-and-white blooms.
6. 'Meadowburn Old Tweet,' which can reach nine feet.
7. The decorative yellow-and-bronze 'Helena Rutherford Ely.'



AS SEEN IN

IN FULL BLOOM

Dahlias were all the rage in the 19th century, when thousands of cultivars were grown and bred. But as interest waned, many cultivars were lost forever—which is why Meadowburn's dahlias are so significant. For more than 100 years, they

have been carefully tended the same way: The tubers are planted in rows after the last frost in spring. All the shoots are pinched back except one, letting the single stalk grow. "That's one reason our dahlias are so tall," says Teal-Sullivan.

After they've bloomed, the tubers are removed each autumn and stored on earthen banks in the cellar, where they are spritzed with water so they don't dry out or shrivel. "Albert Furman Sr. was dedicated to the dahlias, which explains how they sur-

vived all these years," she says. Subsequent gardeners continued Ely's methods, simply because it was the tradition. "It's not conventional," Teal-Sullivan admits, "but it's the Meadowburn way." Since no record of the dahlias' names existed, she worked

doggedly to identify the varieties, enlisting help from experts. In the end, only the rare cultivar 'Jane Cowl' was recognized, and she furnished the remaining six with new names. All can be purchased from Meadowburn Farm (meadowburnfarm.com).

Produced by Melissa Ozawa