PASTORAL GARDENS

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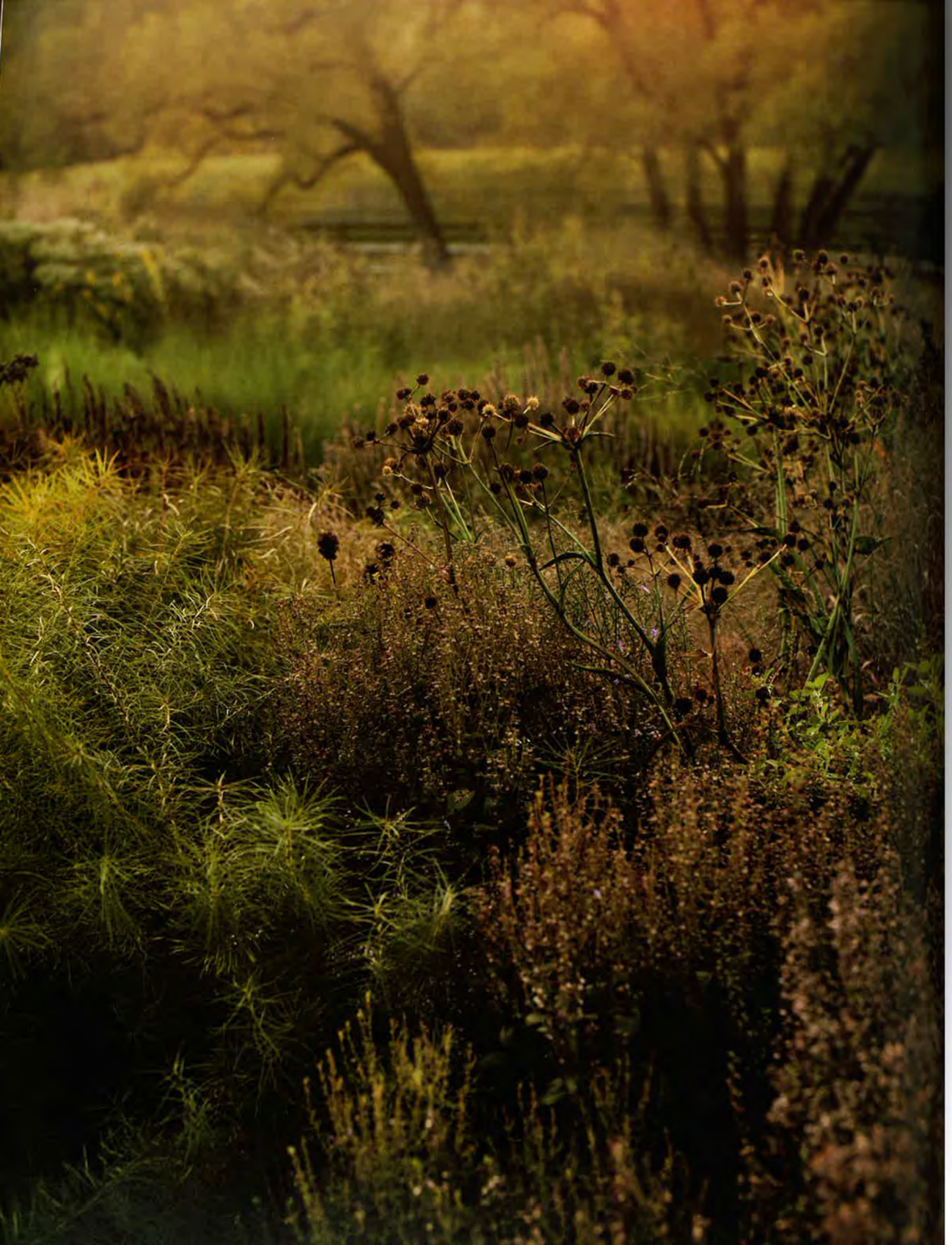


LUCIANO GIUBBILEI

DEEP ROCK FARM

VIRGINIA, USA

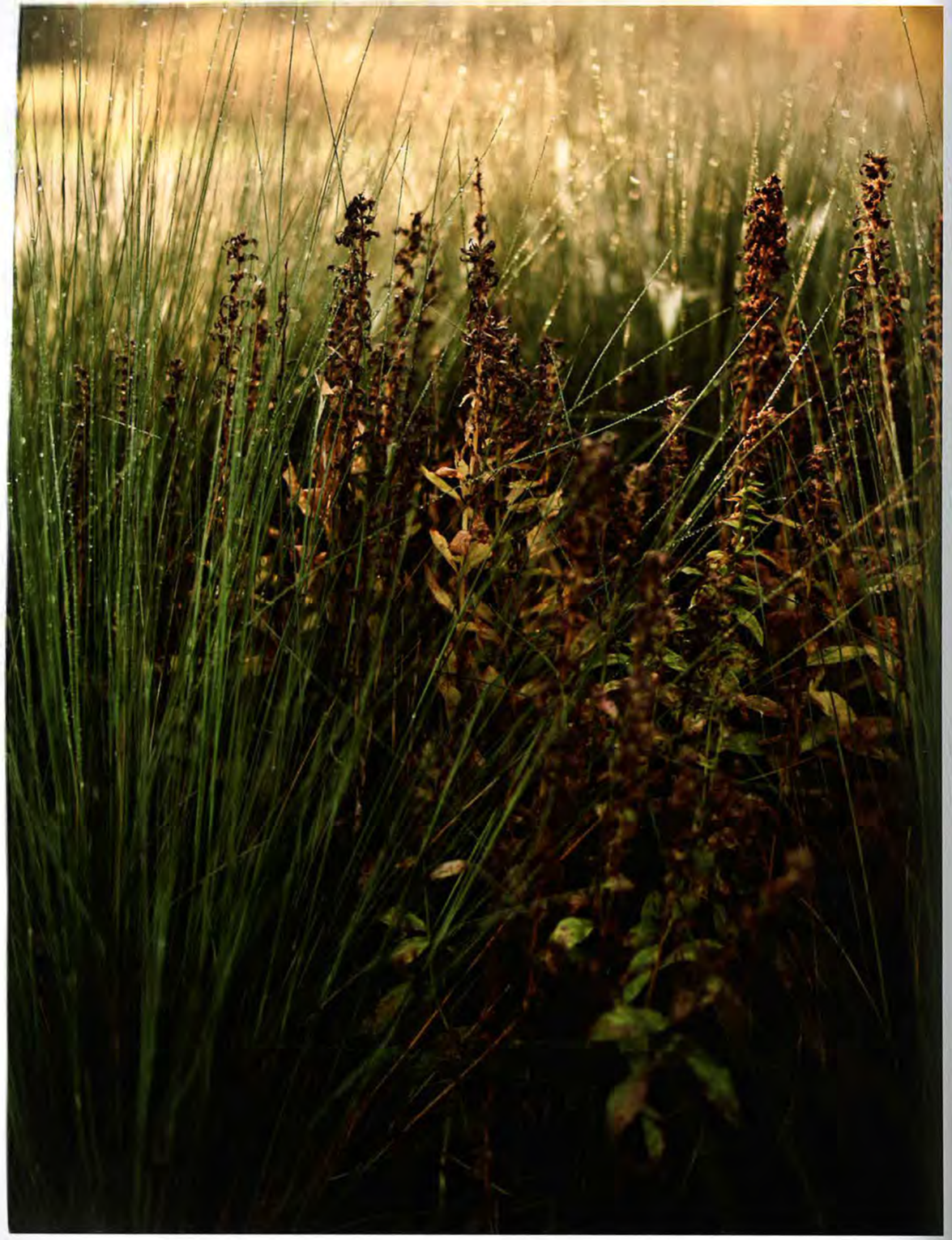
'OUR MOTIVATION IS TO CREATE TIMELESS SPACES; MULTI-LAYERED ENVIRONMENTS WHERE CULTURE AND NATURE ARE IN CLOSE COMMUNICATION'

LUCIANO GIUBBILEI

Luciano Giubbilei's exacting eye and innate sense of proportion and balance is evident in all the gardens he creates. Known in the past for his pared back, often minimalist schemes defined by clipped evergreens and sharp geometric landscaping, he made a conscious decision to change direction in 2011, when he realised he was yearning for more colour and living interest both in his life and in his gardens. His self-confessed 'midlife crisis' resulted in a visit to Great Dixter, where he worked with Head Gardener Fergus Garrett and his team to further his plant knowledge and immerse himself in the English flower garden tradition. Fast forward to now, and plants and flowers have become pivotal in Luciano's designs, evident in his own patch of land in Majorca, where he is developing an experimental naturalistic field, and in the wonderful prairie garden he has created at Deep Rock Farm, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia.

In 2019, the painterly scene that unfolds as you approach the farm along a meandering drive was simply pastureland, part of an idyllic 65-hectare (160-acre) farm where a 50-strong herd of grass-fed Piedmont cattle roam happily in the undulating landscape. When Luciano was asked to come and help with the landscaping around his clients' farmhouse, which was in the process of being renovated, he fell in love with an old barn that sat on a gentle hillock. 'It had such a distinctive sense of place,' says Luciano. 'I had a very strong feeling that I wanted to make a flower garden there. The setting was incredible, and the prairie-style planting was inspired by the landscape and the surrounding pastureland.' His clients decided to renovate the barn with the architect Gil Schafer, and Luciano subsequently introduced them to the interior designer Michael Misczynski. One misty autumn (fall) morning, these three creatives met to brainstorm ideas for the renovation of the barn and the landscape around it. Luciano's vision was clear from the start, and he had drawn up a masterplan for the site, with a simple geometric pool to mirror the architecture of the barn, and a series of large, intertwining beds on the slope below, skirted by an existing cluster of very beautiful catalpa trees. The extent of the garden had to be generous so as not to feel dwarfed by the landscape around, so it follows the contours of the land, wrapping round the elevation in a plant-filled embrace. Luciano's vision was for a garden that was immersive and tactile, inviting people to enter right into the planting along the network of grassy paths.

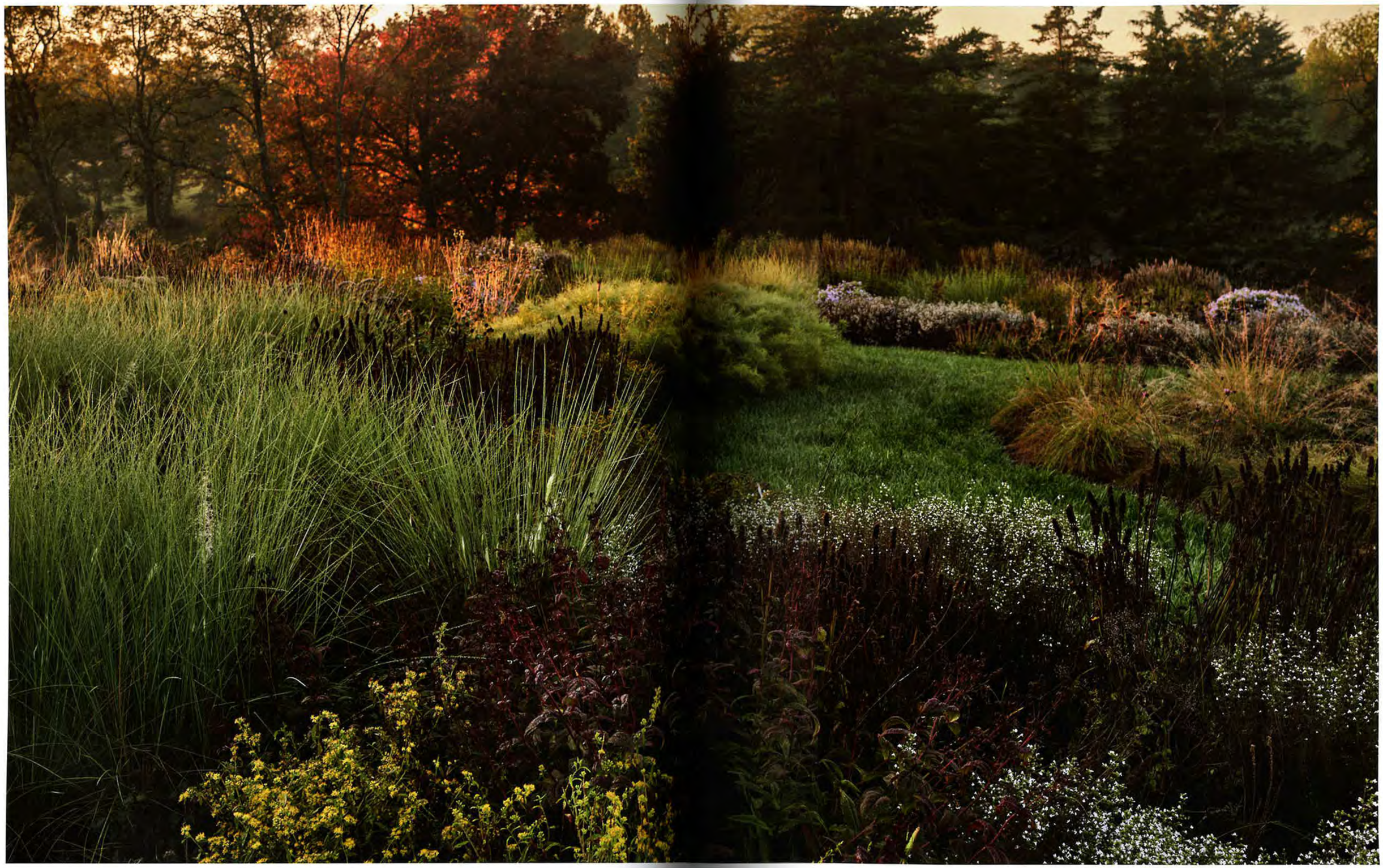
Based in London, Luciano was keen to work with someone more local on the planting scheme. He had been longing to work with Roy Diblik from Northwind Perennial Farm in Wisconsin ever since Fergus Garrett had introduced them in 2011, and this seemed the perfect opportunity. Roy is a specialist grower of both garden perennials and native prairie plants, and was the first American nurseryman in the US to sell containerised prairie plants way back in 1979. 'Collaborating with Roy to develop a planting plan for the space was a real pleasure,' says Luciano. 'He has such incredible plant knowledge, and it has been a privilege for my studio to work with him and hear him talk so inspirationally about plants.' Together they developed a planting plan for the space, working remotely over many weeks to fine tune exactly the aesthetic Luciano was after.



Eventually, in spring 2020, when the world was going into lockdown, 14,000 perennials and grasses went into the ground with the help of five landscape design students from the nearby University of Charlottesville, who had heard Roy give a lecture there.

The final planting scheme had roughly 60 per cent native species and 40 per cent ornamental garden perennials from elsewhere in the world – or, as Roy puts it, 'the entertainment'. Native species tend to be more recessive, but a mixture of native and non-native plants knitted together in self-sustaining communities is Roy's tour de force. Few people understand plant communities as intimately as he does, having spent a lifetime growing and observing their habits and individual quirks. He talks about plants in the most wonderful way, anthropomorphising them: 'A plant doesn't know who you are, what you are or what you want, how rich you are, how poor you are, all they want is a good life. But you need to be aware of who they are and how they've lived and the conditions they grow best in. When I started out, I was just curious. There was so much diversity in the plants, and they had such a way of sharing who they were with you, based on not just flower colour and bloom time, but on how they emerged in spring and how they die back at the end of the season.' His intricate planting schemes are based on this deep connection with plant communities, and an understanding about how they grow together, especially native prairie plants. For many years Roy was challenged by the public perception that these plants were weeds, but today times are changing, and our eyes have gradually been tuning into a more naturalistic aesthetic. A garden is not only about what it looks like anymore, but also about how it performs as an entire ecosystem. 'We're in the most transformational period of horticulture we've ever been in,' says Roy. 'We have so much plant material available to us, there's so much diversity to choose from. People are changing. More plants are being sold not just for entertainment value but for wildlife – for pollinator gardens, for bird or butterfly habitat.'

At Deep Rock Farm, the planting scheme comprises dynamic drifts of plants that wind in and out of each other and subtly repeat across the space to provide visual continuity. This is an artistic evocation of a prairie landscape with a large percentage of North American native grasses and perennials such as echinacea, aster, veronicastrum, monarda and eupatorium. In late summer and early autumn, when these photographs were taken, the fine-spun, pinky clouds of *Eragrostis trichodes* contrast beautifully with the almost black seedheads of *Betonica officinalis* 'Hummelo' and lumpy mounds of the intense mauve-blue aster *Eurybia* x *herveyi* 'Twilight'. With its bone-white haze of flowers and pale green foliage, *Muhlenbergia capillaris* 'White Cloud' communes happily with *Penstemon* 'Dark Towers', while more delicate shots of yellow wreath goldenrod, *Solidago caesia*, run through. The strong dying forms of plants such as *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Diane', *Eryngium yuccifolium* and *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune' stand out against the vibrant foliage of *Amsonia hubrichtii*.



Roy's scheme is designed to be low maintenance and sustainable, needing little irrigation once the plants are fully established. 'Any plant scheme starts with durability,' he says. 'To begin with, I choose plants that I know are going to respect their space, so I don't use thugs and bullies that will seed everywhere. Later, as the planting matures and there is less light hitting the soil for seed germination, you can add the thugs if you want.' The key to this type of planting is that it is evolving, and it needs the understanding of a good gardener to take it forwards. Roy and Luciano are lucky that the garden has a full-time gardener, Mary Schwartz, who has been working there ever since the garden was planted. 'Mary is the future of this garden, because she has her eye on it every day,' says Roy. 'She is getting to know the communities these plants are making for themselves, and she understands about keeping the balance right. It's a constant dialogue, and if we screw something up, that's good, because it's an opportunity to learn.' In terms of seasonal management, the routine is easy. The whole garden is strimmed in February or early March, and then mown with a mulching mower, with the clippings left as a mulch around the plants. Every plant that has ever grown in the wild grows this way, with the dying plant matter left to decompose around itself, so this is just another way that the garden uses nature as its teacher.

Luciano is delighted how the project has come together. 'It's been enlightening the way it has been such a collaborative effort,' he says. 'I got Roy involved, and then Roy drew in different people too. This prairie-style planting was experimental for me, but pushing boundaries is how you learn, how you develop as a designer.' Today, as the sun goes down over the Blue Ridge Mountains, the prairie garden at Deep Rock Farm is imbued with a magic that is hard to articulate. The soft, diffused light bathes everything in a golden glow, and creeping shadows highlight nuances in texture that cannot be seen in the harsher light of day. Backlit in the distance, the mountains really are the smoky blue their name suggests, their colour echoed in the bruised purples of the asters in the garden, and as the penumbra deepens, the colours become more resonant. The hum of the insects diminishes, and a sense of peace descends, interrupted occasionally by the gentle low of a cow or hoot of an owl. The affinity to the natural world is palpable.

Page 308 / In autumn (fall), seedheads and grasses come into play in the garden at Deep Rock Farm. Here, the graphic seedheads of *Eryngium yuccifolium* contrast with the soft foliage of *Amsonia hubrichtii*, which turns a vibrant shade of green before maturing to mellow yellow towards the end of the year.

Page 311 / A view out from the barn over the pool with the boundary of trees in fiery autumnal tones. The architect for the restoration of the barn was Gil Schafer and the interior designer Michael Misczynski.

Pages 312–313 / The misty morning light throws a golden glow over the massed perennial planting designed by Roy Diblik in collaboration with Luciano. The native prairie dropseed grass (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) provides a hazy background for native asters and a variety of perennial seedheads.

Page 314 / Seedheads play a crucial role in this prairie-style planting, providing interesting shapes and textures to contrast with the grasses. The seedheads are left intact until early spring, when the whole garden is cut back.

Pages 316–317 / Wide grassy paths sweep through the beds, inviting visitors to interact closely with the plants. Native species such as yellow *Solidago caesia* contrast with purple-stemmed *Penstemon* 'Dark Towers' and seedheads of *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune', while the native muhly grass *Muhlenbergia capillaris* 'White Cloud' stands out behind.

Page 319 / The restored barn is reflected in a simple, geometric swimming pool.

Pages 320–321 / Billowing clouds of prairie plants including white-flowered *Eupatorium hyssopifolium*, yellow *Solidago* 'Wichita Mountains' and the switch grass (*Panicum virgatum* 'Heavy Metal') with curtains of seedheads beyond.

Pages 322–323 / As the sun sets behind the Blue Ridge Mountains, the prairie garden glows in the mellow light. The garden was designed around an existing trio of catalpas, their elegant trunks fanning outwards to create a natural work of art.

Page 325 / The button-like seedheads of *Echinacea pallida* fade gracefully among a feathery bed of muhly grass.