# GROW PLENTY, LIVE WELL

Jim McSweeney brings simple philosophy and know-how to the hilltowns.

BY SARAH WERTHAN BUTTENWIESER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL SHOUL

Living off the grid on forty acres in Chesterfield, how does Jim McSweeney, owner of Hilltown Tree and Garden, have time to run his landscaping and arbor business? Doesn't growing food and caring for woodstove hearth and home consume all his time?

"I happen to love everything outside, but in reality, this takes a fraction of the work you'd think it does," McSweeney insists, gesturing toward the south facing window, which overlooks the family's vegetable garden. Certified both as a horticulturist and an arborist, McSweeney adheres to this simple guideline: "Everything," he says, "is in the preparation." For the garden, that includes knowing where plants thrive and how to create sturdy beds. He chose to frame in raised locust beds.

"Setting up the garden required a huge effort in terms of time," he says, "but ever since, we've reaped the benefits of thoughtful planning. I don't have to do much in terms of maintenance."

Horticulturist and arborist Jim McSweeney believes that "everything is in the preparation."

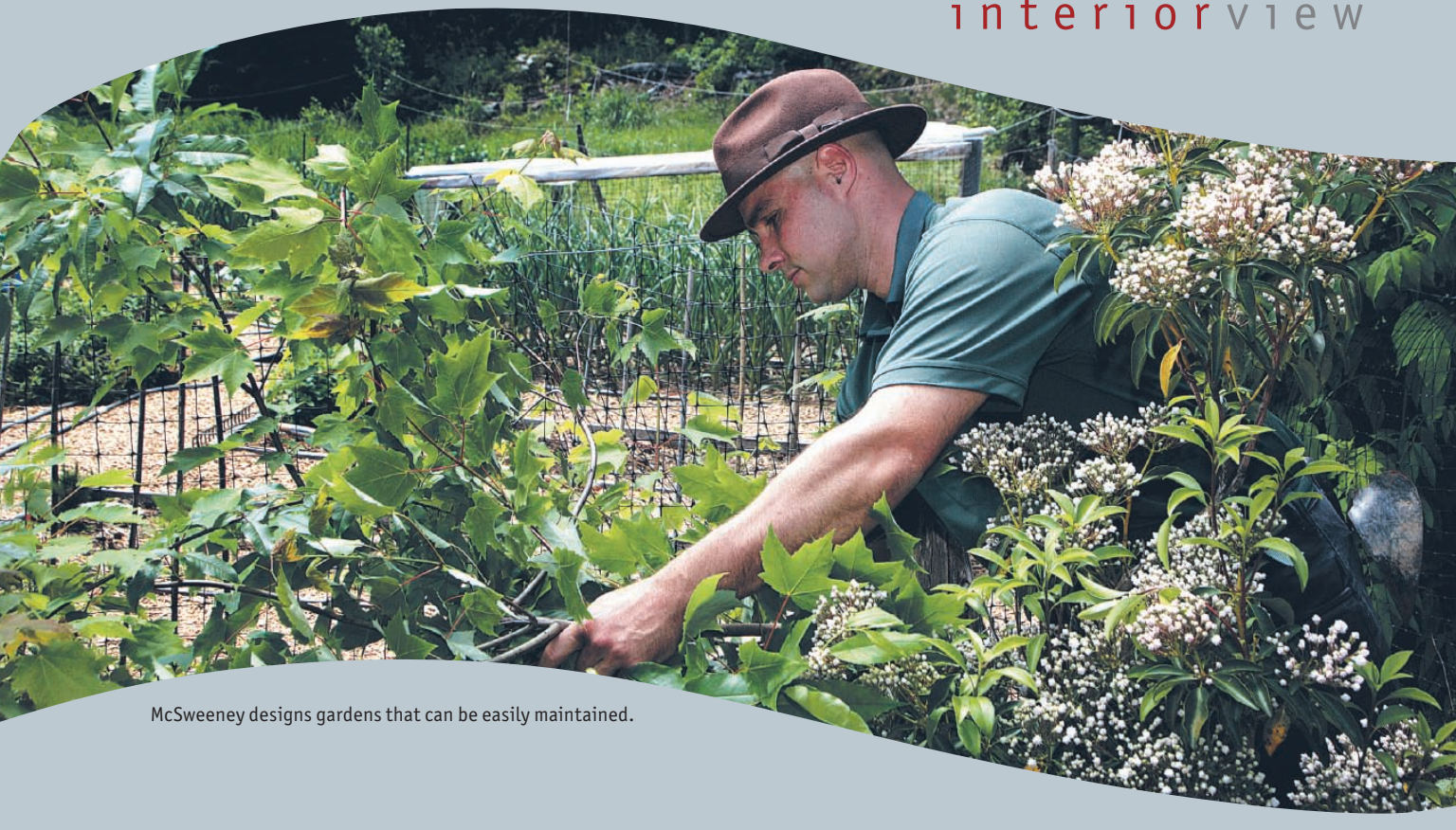
This same attention to preparation proved critical when searching for land. He needed a flat acre to accommodate the house, solar panels, and gardens. In addition to vegetables, herbs and flowers, sixteen varieties of fruit are growing: the expected apples, peaches, blueberries and strawberries, but also currants, kiwis, persimmons and apricots. "One acre is more than enough for a non-animal homestead," he explains. "Our only animals are barn cats."

McSweeney's house is inviting, kid-filled—Forrest reports that he's "three-and-three-quarters" and Pria's seven months—and fully functional (including a home office). Powered and heated by solar panels and a woodstove, it is, according to McSweeney, far "grander" than any dwelling he'd imagined for himself. He says, "Lisa [his wife and business partner] stood firm that we had to have a comfortable house."

Even with careful planning, mistakes can—well, do—happen. McSweeney explains, "This was originally constructed as a straw bale house. But that's just the wrong kind of house for this climate." Fortunately, the post-and-beam structure, frame and floors remained usable. "We had to put in new walls and windows," he says. "Building the house was one of the best learning experiences I ever had."

McSweeney doesn't want to sound too extreme (flaky extreme or *Into the Wild* extreme) when he admits that he spent many years living with far less than most of us deem necessary. "Over a period of about eight years, I lived without electricity," he says, "and at times, without running water." This rustic living occurred in Williamsburg and other spots in the hills, in cabins, and even a three-sided lean-to (during the non-winter months). He enjoyed "the simplicity of it," and wanted to save money while studying horticulture at UMass. He elaborates, "When I got running water, I moved up in the world, but I chose—and choose now, too—to live simply if not exactly for political reasons, then certainly with all the obvious environmental reasons factored in." Economics also plays a role. "We intentionally selected a piece of land far from power lines, because the land was less expensive than a piece close to the grid," he says. "I could bargain for a price reduction—money needed to get to power lines—although in fact, I used that savings of about ten thousand dollars to pay for our solar system."

If McSweeney's rugged non-wintertime lifestyle didn't seem sufficiently distinctive, part of the draw to landscaping and horticulture for him is its seasonal nature. While he enjoys working, he also likes having time for other things, namely travel. During the off-season from heavy-duty landscaping (he does design and planning work, and tree maintenance during the winter months) McSweeney has traveled extensively—from Alaska to Guatemala—but especially through Asia. In foreign lands, he's carried on "informal study" of horticulture. Yet he finds it hard to distill specific lessons carried back home, in large part because "those places have become so much part of me it's hard to tease out



McSweeney designs gardens that can be easily maintained.

Tree Doctor: McSweeney is a careful diagnostician, using "tree forensics" to determine what might be making a tree sick or what caused it to die.

what I've learned specifically." He then ventures, "I really learned to be appreciative of what I have, health for one thing. I'd come back and my lean-to without electricity or running water would seem luxurious." Since having kids, his travel hasn't stopped; last winter, he took Forrest to Guatemala, where they hitchhiked and backpacked through the mountains.

Asked what he thinks attracts people to Hilltown Tree and Garden, McSweeney cites professionalism as "quickly apparent." He says, "The fact that I'm certified as a horticulturalist and an arborist stands out." Besides Lisa, who does drafting and bookkeeping, he's got three employees (the "new kid's" been with him for seven years). He's also proud that the company upholds environmental values: by paying into a green energy project to offset its carbon consumption (mostly transportation-related), the company is deemed "Carbon Balanced" through TerraPass, a group that evaluates the carbon footprint of businesses.

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McSweeney estimates that the majority—"about 70 percent"—of the business is designing and installing landscapes; the rest, caring for trees. McSweeney is especially interested in tree diagnostic work, which he calls "essentially tree forensics." Imperative in deciphering such mysteries is developing an understanding of the site's history. McSweeney elaborates, "You have to figure out what happened. Did a septic system go in nearby? Did drainage issues change?" He describes how one apple tree in a 25-tree orchard in Worthington hadn't borne fruit for seven years. "I asked over and over about factors that might be affecting the soil. The owner said there was nothing. We got tissue samples, soil samples and still couldn't figure it out. The tree was growing incredibly fast, although it remained fruitless. Well, we finally discovered that the landscaper had been fertilizing the grass four or five times a year." Without fertilizer, says McSweeney, "the tree bore more fruit practically than it would have in seven years combined. It's unbelievable."

While owning orchards is uncommon, McSweeney says, "Many people have a few fruit trees in their yard." He notices, "People are getting more interested in growing food. There seems to be a refocusing on self-sufficiency." No question: McSweeney can guide people—and their landscapes—toward that goal. P