

# MILLER HILL FARM, NURSERY & GARDENS GARDENERS' DELIGHT

BY SUSAN ORZELL-RANTANEN  
PHOTOS PROVIDED BY NAN JENKS-JAY

BASED SOLIDLY ON THE VERMONT LOVE OF LAND STEWARDSHIP WHILE UNDERSTANDING THE ARTISTIC DELIGHT OF GARDENING IS THE THRIVING ENTERPRISE OF MILLER HILL FARM, NURSERY & GARDENS, A VERMONT FAMILY FARM THAT MESHERS PRODUCTS AND SERVICE. The wholesale and retail nursery featuring native and ornamental plants, located at 2127 Route 73 in Sudbury, is under continuous development by co-owners Carl Phelps and Nan Jenks-Jay. The mission is to provide the merchandise and inspiration to help customers clarify and then realize their version of the perfect northern climate garden. It keeps it





interesting that this ideal is a moving target.

According to Nan Jenks-Jay, the first thing that a customer notices when motoring up to the farm are split-rail fences, stone walls, display gardens designed to inspire horticulturists and, of course, “a stunning view of the Green Mountains.” The nearby cape-style farmhouse was built in 1798, and the property itself is listed on the Vermont State Registry of Historic Places. This panorama

fits hand-in-glove with another stated mission of Phelps and Jenks-Jay. “Our vision for Miller Hill Farm is to remain part of Vermont’s working landscape, to demonstrate a strong sense of community, and to incorporate earth-healthy practices for a sustainable world,” they explain.

Surrounding the barns and other outbuildings, some of which play an updated part in the overall commercial plan, are 185 acres of land, including meadows and hayfields, along

with the forests that provide firewood and the timber for barn projects. One hundred acres of this quintessential Vermont countryside have recently been protected with a conservation easement. “The nursery, farm buildings and greenhouses — including a new greenhouse this year dedicated to the production of perennial flowering plants — are located on six acres,” states Jenks-Jay.

All of this is a backdrop to the masses of inventory: a riotous explosion of

color and multiple shades of greenery in all shapes and sizes. Hundreds of annuals and perennials, along with medicinal and culinary herbs harking back to the earlier days of the farm, are just the beginning. Woody plants range from stately shade trees to ornamental and fruit trees to flowering shrubs to help create sustainable homestead gardens, water gardens, and shade gardens. Value-added nursery stock such as hanging baskets and planted containers help shop-





pers see the possibilities of combined blooms. There are varieties of ferns, some at home in the Vermont woodscape and others reminiscent of elegant Victorian parlors. Indeed, one of the unusual plants offered at Miller Hill is the Victorian Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina* “Victoriae”). Speaking of parlors, there are houseplants ranging from easy-going to persnickety in terms of care required. The newest cultivars tempt those who love the old favorites but would also like to try something new.

Speaking of the care and feeding of plants ranging from azaleas to zinnias, decades of experience growing and nurturing plants equip the owners and their six employees to provide advice tailored to the living things their customers take home. As a member of the Vermont Nursery & Landscape Association, Miller Hill is part of a network of new ideas and long-standing traditions.

Visitors to Miller Hill often bring a two-pronged interest in the traditional cultivars and natural flora favored by earlier generations of Vermonters. One is for sentimental reasons as they remember thriving gardens from yesteryear. Another is this: they work in the unpredictable weather of the United States Department of Agriculture's Hardiness Climate Zones

for Vermont. Expounds Phelps, “For many years we have been collecting seeds and cuttings of native trees and shrubs from the Champlain Valley to grow along with a complement of numerous varieties of woody ornamental plants such as lilacs, hydrangeas, ninebark and so many others. Many of our native woody plants are used in restoration and shoreline

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with Mom, Sylvia and  
sister, Debbie



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stabilization projects both public and private. Also, a number of our customers value these native plants to incorporate into their landscaping for aesthetic appeal as well as attracting birds and pollinators.” These plants

come with expert advice about local diseases and pests. The Little Shop of Wayward Items, located in the main courtyard, also celebrates Vermont. This garden-themed store stocks statuary, plant-

ers, and what the co-owners enticingly call “wood and stone and found objects along with other treasures from the land.” The often one-of-a-kind works of local artisans are well represented, such as the garden benches by S.H. Bovie and L.A. Rudd. Antiques for house, yard or garden range from tables to mid-century modern pottery to small kitchen gadgetry.

As a business, “we invite people here to experience plants, gardens and landscape in an imaginative and gratifying way,” Jenks-Jay and Phelps add, summing up the newest incarnation of how the historical farm along Otter Creek provides a livelihood for its owners. The property was originally settled in the late 1700s by Timothy Miller, who wrested a living by producing and selling charcoal. A dairy herd replaced that rudimen-



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tary enterprise, to be replaced in turn by sheep. "The farm today stands as a testament to all past proprietors over the past two hundred years," note the current holders. The buildings include an English-style barn which is undergoing restoration under the oversight of timber-frame specialist Michael Huck of Champlain Timbercraft, funded by a barn grant from the Vermont Department of Historic Preservation. The old spring house now serves as the central hub for the nursery's irrigation system.

Helping people choose plants wisely to tend and cherish is a large part of the service offered at Miller Hill, and workshops held throughout the growing season add heft to the broader educational objectives. Co-owner and plant expert Carl Phelps, along with guest teachers, hold mini-courses in various subjects. On June 27, Nancy Rowe presents Herbs: Culinary & Medicinal. On July 11, Henry Homeyer ("The Gardening Guy") leads Growing Old Favorites and Lesser-Known Beauties. Other sessions are in the planning stages.

For more information on Miller Hill Farm, Nursery & Gardens, including the dates of future events, visit [millerhillfarmvt.com](http://millerhillfarmvt.com).

Please check the website for updates about this season's procedures and schedule changes due to COVID-19 [millerhillfarmvt.com](http://millerhillfarmvt.com)

*Susan Orzell-Rantanen has worked as an editor and freelance writer in the Rutland area for the past 33 years. A seventh generation Vermonter, she holds degrees in animal husbandry and journalism. She lives in Rutland with her husband, a badly spoiled dog and an opinionated cat.*

Rutland Magazine

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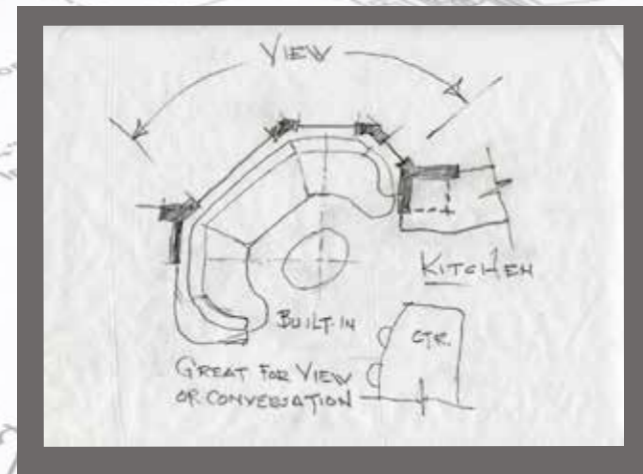
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