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WRITTEN BY MARY FITZGERALD // PHOTOGRAPHED BY RANA FAURE

# Home Grown

A WILTON FAMILY PUTS DOWN ROOTS







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VISIT TO THE MONRO HOME IS LIKE STEPPING BACK IN TIME. The first clue is a welcoming committee of ducks, guinea fowl, and chickens. Situated on a bucolic two-acre spread, the unassuming farmhouse and separate artist's studio appear to have been part of the landscape forever, but the property has seen substantial changes over the years. The original farmhouse, circa 1900, stood where the studio is today but burned down in the 1930s. At that time, a new residence was built on the foundation of the adjacent barn.

Now home to the Monro family—Francesca, an artist and nature lover, her husband, Bob, a marketing and product design professional, and their three children. Selecting Wilton for its school system, the couple was also attracted to the “low-key Yankee” feel of the town. The house had been on the market for three years, waiting for people with vision to come along. A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, a painter and textile designer, Francesca saw the inner beauty of the neglected property. “I wanted enough land for animals and gardening,” she says. “It was a little farmhouse and exactly what I wanted.” But there were some real concerns. “The house was a leaky mess. The gardens were overgrown. It was just a wreck.”

The couple wanted to protect and preserve the integrity and character of the farmhouse and grounds, and hired Wilton architect Rob Sanders to help fulfill their vision. New windows were installed, and the dormered roof was raised to accommodate their growing family with new bedrooms. Reworking the home's layout, a screened-in porch became an inviting dining room with a view, and the claustrophobic kitchen, which once did double duty as the laundry room, was opened up for greater efficiency. A living room addition off the kitchen became the perfect fam-







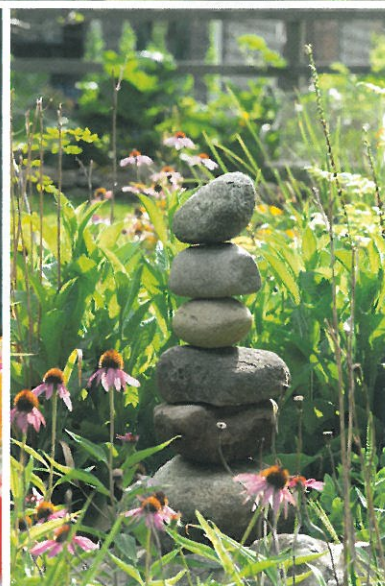
**MOTHER HEN** Four young guinea hens follow Francesca; a garden cart full of bright yellow Rudbeckia; a baby chick; oversize peachy-pink poppies; a decorative arbor blooming with New Dawn roses. **RIGHT:** The art studio; a red wrought iron tag sale chair; a front view of the Monro home; Francesca tending to her gourd garden whimsically anchored by a child's wooden playset.







**NATURE'S BOUNTY** A table set with vintage linens and glassware, a jug of cranberry ice tea and mint and a plate of fresh croissant; a tin enamel bowl with Dragon Tongue beans and Lunch Box peppers; a free-standing stone cairn. Francesca relaxes on the terrace after a full morning working in her gardens.



ily spot for congregating and relaxing. The result is a comfortable, laid-back home, decorated in a palette of warm earth tones, and filled with art that includes many of Francesca's own pieces, family collections, and treasured tag sale finds. Francesca's art studio is linked both literally and visually to the main house with a trellis covered with pale pink New Dawn roses. Inside the studio, a pleasing jumble of tubes of paint, easels, vintage magazines, and an assortment of natural items picked up from around the property surround Monro as she works.

Francesca's favorite place is not inside the house. "I like to be outdoors, tending to the gardens to get away from it all," she says. "The kids know not to bother me if I'm outside, because if they do they might have to help." Weeding, digging, planting, and building her prized stone walls and sculptures, Francesca worked on the outdoor areas piecemeal, but with an artist's flair.

A self-taught gardener, Monro admits she's "addicted" to plants, and learned what worked through trial and error. Experimenting with plant materials and composition, she is constantly adapting and tweaking her numerous garden beds, including her most recent gourd garden, designed around the framework of the children's old swing set. Birdhouses created from hollowed-out gourds and climbing





pumpkin along with squash and winter acorn vines, hang from weathered monkey bars. A five-foot replica of the Statue of Liberty has been repurposed as the resident scarecrow.

Employing organic gardening techniques, Monro utilizes natural materials for mulch, and composts household waste to enrich the soil. She has also opted to use many indigenous plants to encourage the wildlife: “the bees and the birds that is, but not so much the deer.” The gardens are constantly evolving and both the work and the end results bring her joy.

With three children and a dog, the Monros already have a busy household, but they were happy to add a few more feathered friends to the mix. “As my daughters went off to college, I guess I felt the need to raise things again,” says Francesca with a wry smile. It was the perfect opportunity to entice her son Ian away from computer games and outside to join her in the sunshine.

Guinea keets (baby guinea fowl) were found on Craigslist, and then baby ducks and chickens were added. Bob built a chicken coop rivaling Fort Knox to keep their fowl safe from predators. The baby fowl bonded to Francesca and now think of her as their mother. During the day the birds range freely on the property, and follow Monro around in Pied Piper fashion.

Caring for their flock and growing their own veg-







**BOHEMIAN CHIC** A vaulted ceiling adds air and light to the living room. Tag sale chairs, a second-hand rug, a refinished chest of drawers, and an oversize painting from the homeowner's Grid Series give the space a homey feel. Vintage press-back chairs surround an oval pine table set with blue and white china with a Torquay pattern. Cheerful vases of flowers from the garden are throughout the house, expertly arranged by Francesca.





#### THE ARTIST AT WORK

Inspired by her natural surroundings, painter and textile designer Francesca Monro brings the outside in to her studio. A series of colorful gouache studies and a black and white linocut created during printmaking classes at the Silvermine Art Center casually tacked up. A triangular harbor bell from Booth Bay, Maine hangs at the ready on a tree.



etables has taught the whole family valuable lessons, such as the importance of sustainability. "I like to grow stuff that the kids like to eat," says Francesca. Cucumbers, green peppers, beans, zucchini, and numerous varieties of tomato are plentiful. Last year she tried onions and beets for the first time, and after many failed attempts, her carrot crop was finally a success.

Though there are plenty of herbs and vegetables to appreciate, flowers really steal the show on the Monro property. And Francesca, an expert flower arranger, makes sure to situate vases filled with colorful blooms throughout her home. Favorites include columbine, butterfly weed, foxglove, coneflowers, and poppies. When pressed to choose a favorite, she opts for Primula (primrose) because it is the first to bloom in spring.

Living in harmony and fostering responsibility for the environment has proved to be a rewarding adventure. "We try to preserve the planet in our own small way," says Francesca. A sign in their kitchen reads, "Do more of what makes you happy." Francesca and Bob Monro are doing just that: taking pleasure in raising a family, growing vegetables, and conscientiously tending to their corner of the earth. ■