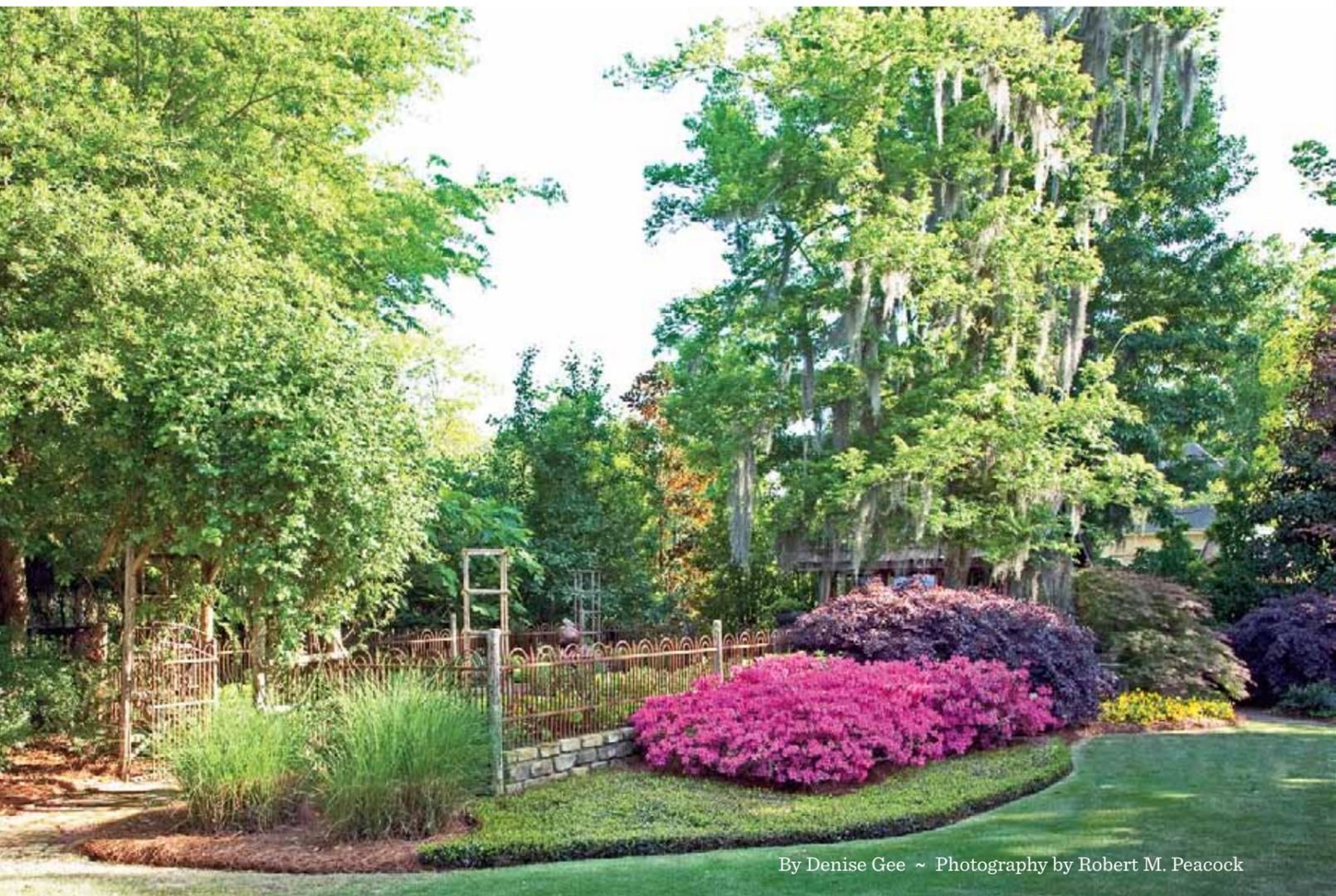


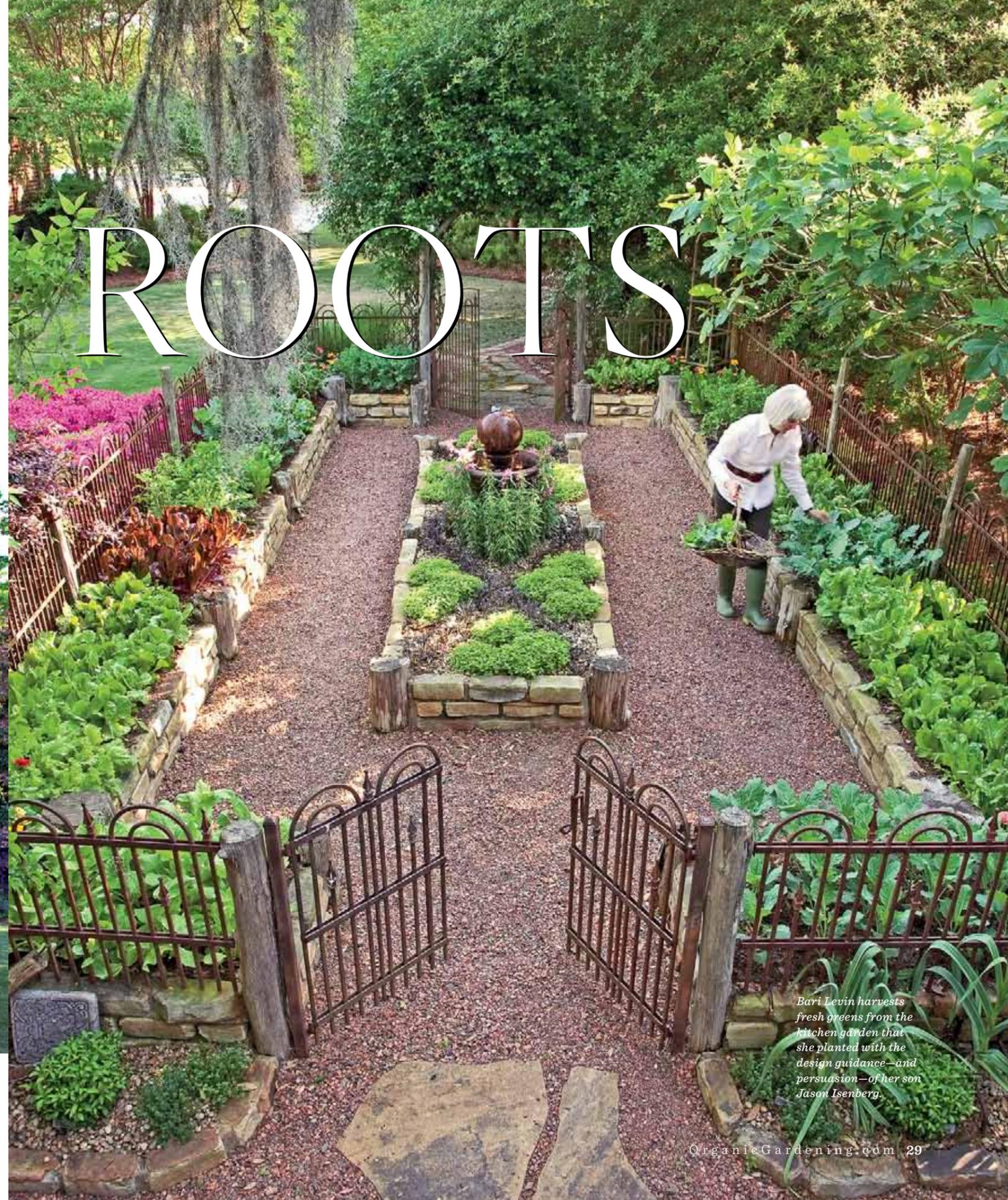
A mother knowing best led to a son knowing even better—
and a glorious garden collaboration in Montgomery, Alabama.

FAMILY

ROOTS



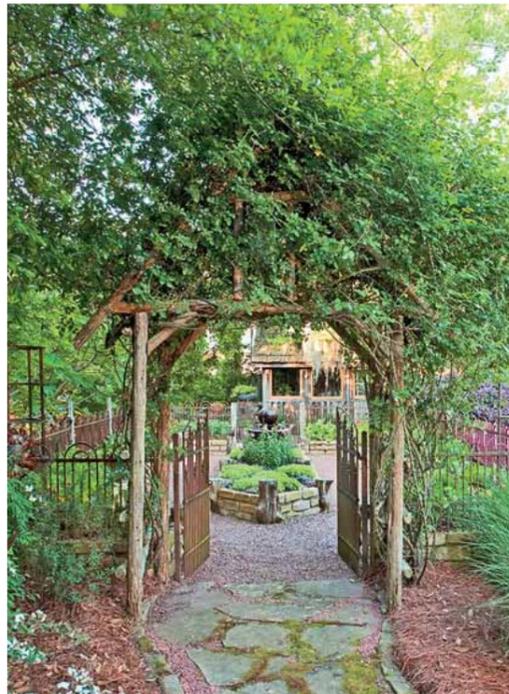
By Denise Gee ~ Photography by Robert M. Peacock



Bari Levin harvests fresh greens from the kitchen garden that she planted with the design guidance—and persuasion—of her son Jason Isenberg.

It doesn't seem that long ago that Bari Levin was engaging her two elementary-school-age sons, Jason and Joel, in the beauty and simplicity of nature.

Clockwise from right: A rustic rose-clad arch leads to the garden. • Gravel paths keep the gardener's shoes dry. • Garden art among the azaleas.



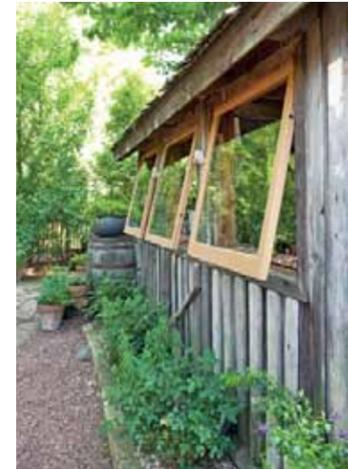
In their tiny Birmingham, Alabama, garden, they delighted in harvesting small batches of tomatoes and squash for cooking and, when the rich soil occasionally provided more than plenty, for pickling. At work, Bari was a teacher; at home, she taught her boys homespun lessons whenever and wherever she could.

For Jason Isenberg, such moments with his mother would help shape his own career in landscape design, which fittingly celebrates the earth's beauty and bounty. Three decades hence, he has become the teacher, sharing his knowledge of organic farming and sustainability with his mother and others, as well as his belief in vegetarianism, a lifestyle Bari since has adopted. Their garden collaboration, a verdant oasis in Montgomery, is firmly rooted in their mother-son bond.

A dozen years ago, the land Bari now choreographs looked quite different. That's when she and her husband, Joe, first stared down a piece of property that would harbor their dream home. The swampy lot was so dense with overgrowth that a person practically bounced off of it rather than walked into it. Undeterred, they forged ahead, aiming to carve out a place of peace. Both had high-stress jobs. Bari had graduated by then from law school and taken a position as staff attorney of the Alabama Supreme Court in Montgomery, where she met Joe, an attorney who co-founded the renowned champion of civil rights, the Southern Poverty Law Center. Bari and Joe carried the weight of other people's lives—and in some cases, fates—on their shoulders, and a meticulous attention to detail meant everything.

Jason, by this time in Tucson, Arizona, knew work meant a great deal to his mother, but he also recognized that she needed an outlet for her stress.

"He kept saying, 'Wouldn't you like to have a garden? You'd really enjoy it,'" Bari recalls. "Or he'd say, 'Be sure to leave a little space for a garden.'" That seemed all well and good, Bari says, but she'd never had the time or space to tend more than a



Clockwise from far left: Herbs in containers outside the shed. • A vintage drawer holds seed packets. • Swiss chard. • The potting shed.

small plot of vegetables. It might be more trouble than it would be worth.

Jason saw the possibilities as catharsis, not labor. "There was a rigidity in her work," he says. "I knew a garden would ease that."

Jason knows a lot about the power of good landscaping. His path from Birmingham led him to study ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Arizona and then to work as a horticultural therapist at a plant nursery in Tucson serving adults with developmental disabilities. He's now the founder of Realm, a design/build/organic maintenance firm that aims "to bring some sophistication and sex appeal to sustainability."

But Bari wasn't sold on Jason's garden project until, during the clearing of overgrowth, she imagined something that got her creative wheels turning: A vision of a small potting shed, tucked way back on their property, as if it had always been there. Maybe she would plant a garden

after all. It could be a flower garden with an arbor, like one she'd admired in a magazine, and it could have climbing roses. The whole thing could be simple and Southern.

"I began realizing maybe a garden could actually be enjoyable," Bari says. "A place where I wouldn't have to worry about work, and everything being so perfect."

Jason was happy she'd seen the light, but a simple flowerbed didn't make complete sense to him considering Bari had begun following an organic vegetarian diet. A kitchen garden made more sense—one with Southern styling, like Bari imagined. "Most people think vegetables aren't attractive," Jason says. "What I wanted to help do was prove otherwise."

Bari bought in to the notion but wasn't sure how they could pull it off. For starters, Jason was more than 1,600 miles away. But once he had made numerous trips home to walk the space, share ideas, and collaborate on design, a plan emerged. Using materials salvaged from an old



Soft on Worms

Bari Levin uses a three-layer Can-O-Worms vermicompost bin—a holiday gift from her son Jason—to produce liquid organic fertilizer from the castings of well-fed red wigglers. This self-contained composting bin has stacking trays where the worms turn food scraps into fertilizer. Coconut fiber serves as worm bedding, and newspapers help maintain moisture. Note: Some soil scientists recommend freezing worm castings before using them as fertilizer to avoid introducing nonnative, invasive worm species to the garden.



Shelter from Frost

To extend the growing season, Bari Levin protects her vegetables with metal hoops and frost cloth, a medium-weight permeable row-cover fabric. These protective hoop houses trap warmth near the plants, giving 6 to 8 degrees of frost protection on cold nights (or a few degrees more with a double layer of fabric). They keep out wind while letting in sunlight and moisture. Bari explains how it's done:

1. Cut 10-foot lengths of "ladder" reinforcement wire (sold at building-supply stores for reinforcing concrete-block walls) in half so that each section is 5 feet long by 6 inches wide. Bend each section of wire into an arch. Bend each section of wire into an arch.
2. Place the arches 4 to 5 feet apart along the length of the bed. Insert the wire ends 4 to 6 inches into the ground for stability.
3. Cut a rectangle of frost cloth about 6 feet wide and 6 feet longer than the bed. (The cloth is also sold in large rolls, but Bari says the ease of working with smaller pieces of material far outweighs the cost savings of a bulk roll.) Drape the frost cloth over the arches, leaving sufficient material on all sides to secure it to the ground.
4. Use clothespins to clip the frost cloth to each section of wire. Hold the fabric edges snugly against the ground with wire anchor pins, stones, or lengths of pipe. Unclip and raise the frost cloth to harvest plants and when the weather conditions are more favorable.



Clockwise from top: Draped with Spanish moss, a hackberry tree shades a flagstone patio. • The backyard view. • A rusty relic.

"It really brought us closer together. It's a thread that leads us to still talk almost every day."

barn, building began on the garden shed, which was nestled under a towering tree blanketed with Spanish moss. That left only a 15-by-30-foot space for the garden, which would include three raised beds and a central fountain. Then there were neighborhood association hurdles to clear, as well as amending the dense clay soil and improving its drainage. Furthermore, what local landscaper could help her establish the realm she and Jason envisioned?

The garden would enlist locally sourced materials, water-saving techniques, and organic products. The mother-son phone calls were nonstop. "Jason kept saying, 'It'll be fine. There is a method to the madness,'" Bari recalls. To which Jason says with a laugh, "You can't imagine how fun it is doing irrigation long distance."

It's been 8 years since the garden was created, and Bari, now a master gardener, sees it as a stellar decision. "You have no idea how good these fresh greens are," she says. "The figs and tomatoes barely make it inside." Joe and Joel, an attorney himself in Birmingham, reap the benefits of her efforts and share in the fun of cooking the produce, supplemented with what Bari gets each week from the local farmers' market.

Tending the land and harvesting its bounty also has taught her a lesson: "I like things in order and always have," she says. "My careers have trained me to be that way. But gardening has helped me to relax. It's a living thing that you just can't control. I'm now more accepting that some things just happen."

Jason echoes his mother's positive sentiment. "I love that this has been something we could share," he says. "It really brought us closer together. It's a thread that leads us to still talk almost every day."

Except for one thing. Since she's become more comfortable with the garden and the ebb and flow of planting seasons, "she now has Auburn University and the Montgomery County co-op on speed dial," he says with a sly smile. "Not me." •

For more information, see Find It Here, p. 67.



Clockwise from left: A shady bower. • Jason and Bari. • The raised beds are constructed of mortared stones, punctuated by logs placed vertically.

