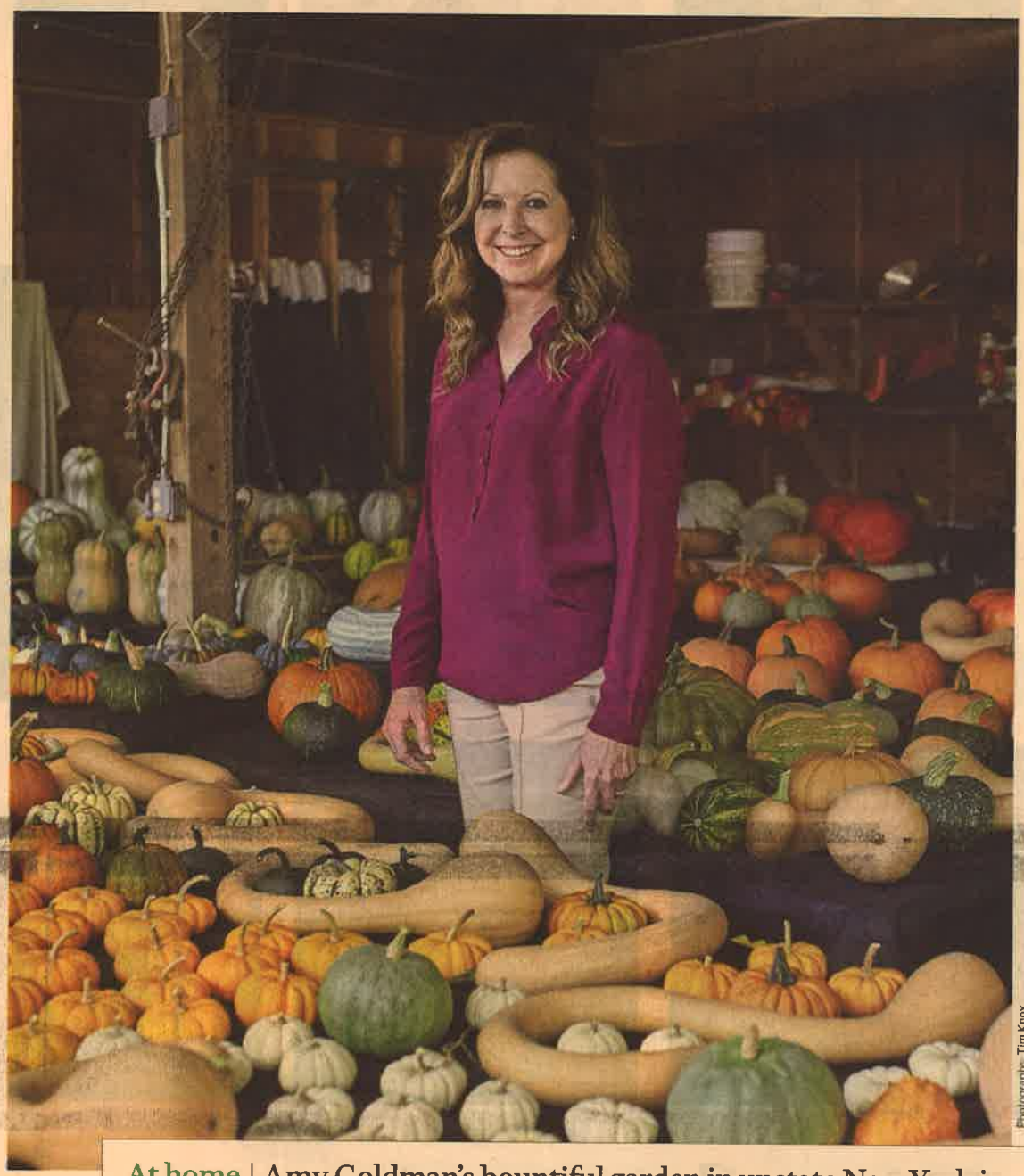

Photographs: Tim Knox

At home | Amy Goldman's bountiful garden in upstate New York is evidence of 25 years spent growing heirloom vegetables, from an array of squash to terrifyingly hot chilli peppers. By *Matthew Wilson*

In the lap of the gourds

It doesn't take long for the secrets of Amy Goldman's upstate New York farm to be revealed. Located on an upland plateau in the Hudson Valley near Rhinebeck, the property is reached via a winding road that cuts through woods of sugar maple, oak and shagbark hickory. A few yards along the farm drive is a handsome, timber-framed barn that for most of the year serves as a workshop and tool store. By autumn, however, it becomes altogether more decorative. Inside, trestle tables covered in black cloths are laden with the most extraordinary array of squashes, carefully arranged so the shapes and colours contrast or complement one another.

The visual impact of this display of cucurbits is almost matched by their gloriously evocative names: Green Striped Cushaw Squash, Mammoth White Bush Scallop Squash and Warty Orange Hardhead Gourd. Some are tiny, such as the Nest Egg Gourd – traditionally grown as a decoy hen's egg to help improve laying – while others look like the product of a mad scientist let loose on a pumpkin patch; a Japanese variety called Futtsu is warty, squat, deeply ribbed and charcoal black.

The contents of Goldman's squash barn are the result of more than 25 years of growing and experimentation with heirloom vegetables on the 200-acre farm, chronicled in her latest book, *Heirloom Harvest*. Heirloom or heritage varieties are plants that grow true to type from seed, as opposed to F1 hybrids, which do not produce viable "true" seed. Some heirloom varieties have been grown by generations of gardeners for decades, or even centuries, not for their ability to ripen in a cold store or stay fresh on a supermarket shelf, but primarily for flavour.

'I have a three-part test for peppers: sniff, lick and taste – I've never gone beyond "lick" with the Reaper'

Goldman, 61, and her then husband, Larry Arno, bought the property – a white-painted clapboard farmhouse with Hudson Valley blue shutters – in 1989. The original structure, built in 1788 by Abraham Traver, was a simple four-room home. Traver's family had arrived in the area in 1710 as part of the Palatine migration from Germany. By 1989, the place was no longer a working farm, the fields had become overgrown and shrubby and the livestock and barns long gone.

Goldman set about extending the house, building a new wing that included a large kitchen and pantry and a basement that was dynamited out of the bedrock beneath. To the front of the property a lake that had reverted to marshland was drained and dredged then allowed to fill with rainwater once more. Goldman "staked a claim" to a parcel of land close to the house in an open, sunny spot and set about making her vegetable plot, the Near Garden.

Goldman's interest in gardening started in her late teens when her family moved from New York City to Mill Neck, New York. The garden was home to an old, dilapidated glasshouse where the family's Italian gardener taught her how to start seeds and grow melons.

There was a family connection to growing vegetables, too. Her father, Sol Goldman, had grown up around his parents' grocery business and Goldman describes how her father had "a child-like glee about vegetables – he taught me to appreciate the fruits of the earth". Aged 16, during the Great Depression, Sol Goldman bought his first property with money raised from neighbours. By the 1980s he was the biggest non-institutional real estate developer in New York City, with a portfolio of about 1,900 properties. These included, at one time, the Chrysler Building. Goldman's mother, Lillian, had an interest in horticulture, too, and was involved in the New York Botanical Garden for many years, a role her philanthropist daughter has continued as a member of NYBG's board and horticulture committee since 1999.

Favourite place

"The squash barn, aka 'squash central', is where harvested fruits go for cleaning, grading, sorting, curing and the occasional primping and preening for the camera," says Goldman. "For me, it's a magical place. I love being surrounded by the fruits of the earth — what a bounteous and beautiful goodness! And so ephemeral. These are Mother Nature's marvels."

Squash and gourds in the kitchen

It was the influence of two books that focused Goldman's attention on the importance of heirloom varieties. *Cooking from the Garden* (1988) by Rosalind Creasy "opened my eyes to the splendour and diversity of heirlooms," she explains in *Heirloom Harvest*, while *Shattering: Food, Politics and the Loss of Genetic Diversity* (1990) by Cary Fowler and Pat Mooney "alerted me to the dangers of crop uniformity and the staggering and mounting losses of genetic diversity in agriculture". As a consequence, Goldman joined the Seed Savers Exchange, eventually serving as chair of the board. Through Seed Savers she got to meet the agriculturalist Cary Fowler, one of the authors of *Shattering* and a former executive director of the Global Crop Diversity Trust. In 2012, having worked together on various projects for many years, Goldman and Fowler married.

The annual cycle of the farm begins and ends at harvest time, the moment the bounty from the vegetable plots – the original Near Garden, the Far Garden (close to the squash barn) and a more recent hillside plot – is cropped.

On this hillside plot, above the farm herd of red poll cattle and with views of the blue-grey Catskill Mountains on one side and Housatonic hills on the other, Goldman shows me some of her pepper crop. Among the more benign varieties is the arrestingly named Brain Strain Yellow (scoring a huge 1m on the Scoville scale, the measurement of chilli heat) and the even more terrifying Smokin' Ed's Carolina Reaper. This

Perennial gardens and Alitex glasshouses

Grass peas drying on the dining table

Bowl of apples and pears

The farmhouse's original 1788 parlour

evil-looking pepper, equipped with an angry claw-like barb at its base, scores 2m on the Scoville scale. To put that into context, Tabasco sauce scores 50,000. "I have a three-part taste test for peppers," says Goldman. "Sniff, lick and taste. I've never gone beyond 'lick' with the Reaper."

Back at the farmhouse, Goldman, Fowler and I eat heirloom tomatoes and mozzarella on the veranda overlooking the lake. There are three varieties of tomatoes, each one fat, juicy and meaty, the antithesis of watery, homogenous supermarket fare.

The extension to the house has been deftly interwoven with Traver's original, the only real clue being the skull-cracking ceiling height in the old quarters. The kitchen is clearly the heart of the home and harvest produce is everywhere, with gourds displayed on shelves and propped against the walls. Among them are some of Goldman's cast-bronze vegetables, part of her "Rare Forms" series of botanical sculptures.

Favourite thing

"It changes with the seasons, but right now it's an heirloom pepper called Fish Eye," says Goldman. "Grown in a pot it makes a neat decorative mound studded with tiny, round, yellow pods. It's beautiful as a table centrepiece. But when grown outside in the open it's wildly exuberant — I've counted over 3,000 pods on one plant."

They are beautiful and made to last for ever, although, as she explains, the harvested gourds can keep for decades too.

Here and there are copies of Jerry Spagnoli's modern daguerreotypes, the glistening, silvered images featured in *Heirloom Harvest*. Spagnoli and Goldman worked together for 15 years to produce the book, and she admits to finding it hard to accept that the work is now done and Spagnoli won't be dropping by to take more shots.

Outside the farmhouse, passing by piles of watermelons on the porch, is a series of beautifully presented gardens maintained by gardener Lisa Cady. The herb garden is planted for medicinal and culinary herbs, a late-summer standout being clumps of purple-flowered Vitex agnus-castis. Used as a herbal remedy to balance hormones during the menopause, it was also taken by nuns and monks to "suppress their urges". A large Alitex glasshouse is the powerhouse of the garden, where seeds are "launched" in spring and horticultural treasures overwintered.

There are rose gardens, rock gardens and new plantings of apples where Fowler is raising more than 100 varieties using the spindle-bush technique, the trees trained upright against wires. Here are more heritage varieties with evocative names: Pomme Gris, Virginia Crab and Puget Spice. At every turn the impression is of endless bounty, and of generous, studious, and, above all, thoughtful custodianship.

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'Heirloom Harvest' (2015)
by Amy Goldman and Jerry Spagnoli,
Bloomsbury, £36