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backyard BOUNTY

The Thomasons have found ways to incorporate their Southern traditions, tastes and the rural charms of country life into town living in La Plata



Above: Spring arrives in an explosion of color when the azaleas begin to bloom in Joe and Judy Thomason's backyard. *Right:* Joe and Judy Thomason sit in front of their piano. *Opposite:* Taking the garden to a different level; dozens of herbs and vegetables grow steps from the kitchen on this multipurpose deck.



Courtesy of the Thomasons



Courtesy of the Thomasons

WRITER: L. BETH BONIFANT

They say you can take the girl off the farm, but you can't take the farm out of the girl.

When Judy Thomason moved to Quailwood subdivision in La Plata, with her husband Joe 25 years ago, the couple thought it would be temporary. He already owned the handsome, brick ranch-style house built in 1986, but they had dreams of buying a small farm.

Born and raised on her parents' farm in Willard, N.C., Judy explains in her sweet Southern sound, "My father had acres and acres of tobacco, strawberries and sweet potatoes. There were five girls and no boys, we all worked the farm, and it was a great life." Judy and her surviving siblings still own the property, a cousin manages corn and soybean crops for her now, and a sister lives in the house they grew up in.

These days every summer the entire family, including kids and grandkids, meet in Topsail,

N.C., for beach vacations near the farm. Judy always brings jars of strawberry freezer jam she makes in Maryland, for the huge sheet pans of hot, homemade biscuits she serves to lucky guests. "My mother was a wonderful cook," she says, and Judy is carrying on her Southern traditions.

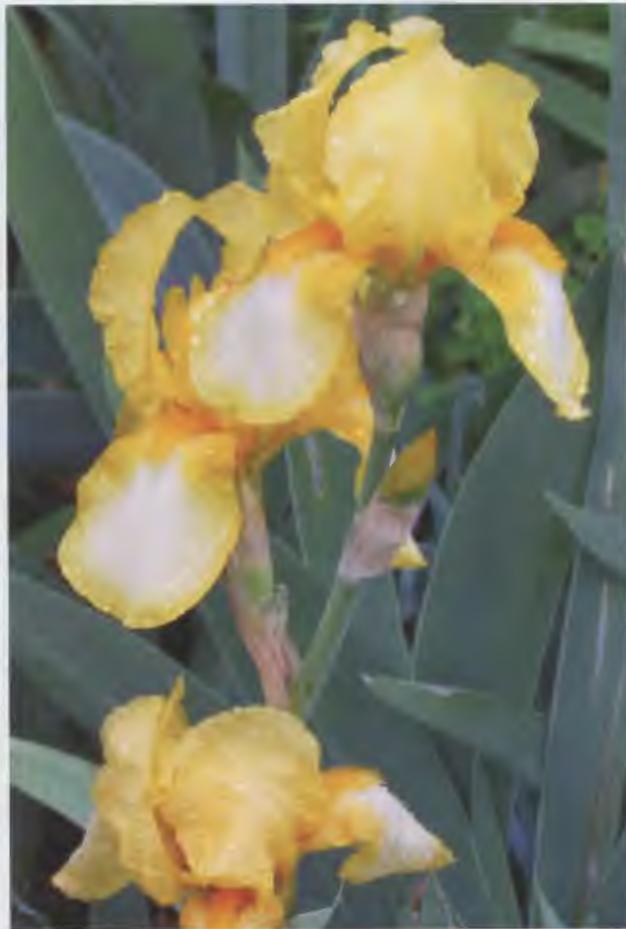
Both halves of this couple hail from the South. Joe's folks originally lived in Mississippi, then later moved to Memphis, Tenn., two blocks from Elvis' "Graceland" mansion. During a final visit to the house before its sale, they dug some of his mother's irises to bring back. The flowers bloom each year in fond remembrance, but nothing makes a Southerner feel more at home than camellias. The Thomasons began collecting them more than two decades ago. Now, under a high canopy of mature hardwood trees, dozens



Courtesy of the Thomasons



Courtesy of the Thomassons



Courtesy of the Thomassons

Top left: Concord grapes result in a beautiful lavender-colored filling for North Carolina favorite, grape hull pie. **Top right:** A sentimental symbol; iris transplanted from a mother's Tennessee garden. **Middle left:** Camellias in all colors and size surround the yard, making this Southern couple always feel at home. **Middle right:** Figs ripen in the warm late summer sun. **Bottom:** Fresh produce is ordered from Amish growers... or picked in their own yard. **Opposite left:** Judy displays her pantry with pride, while exhibiting some of the ribbons she's collected at the Charles County Fair. **Opposite center:** Neat stacks of frosty fruit and vegetables are a superior supplement to store-bought frozen foods. **Opposite top right:** A sister's star still shines brightly in the quilt completed by Judy. **Opposite bottom right:** Buggy parking only. Amish doctor's buggy makes an unusual yard feature with changing seasonal displays.



Courtesy of the Thomassons



Courtesy of the Thomassons



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Courtesy of the Thomasons



Courtesy of the Thomasons



L. Beth Bonnaffons

of the towering, flowering evergreen shrubs surround the back and sides of their yard.

Green thumbs are not just for growing flowers. There are several varieties of mouth-watering fig bushes and an arbor supporting white muscadine and Concord grape vines; all perfect for the preserves, jams and jellies Judy makes. However, her specialty is grape hull pie, a unique North Carolina Southern classic, made from grape skins and pulp.

There are typically as many as 25 herbs, including multiple varieties of thyme and oregano, various small peppers and even larger plants, like heirloom tomatoes and eggplant - all grown in containers over summers on the backyard deck. Their elevated location eliminates deer concerns, and creates a convenient "kitchen garden" to harvest the herbs and peppers used for cooking and making vinegars and oils.

Canning and freezing fresh, in-season fruits and vegetables is an annual ritual and family affair. There are two extra stand-up freezers in the garage, neatly stacked with frosty bags. The Thomasons coordinated with Kurtz Cabinet Shop in Mechanicsville, to create efficient storage for

canned produce. A tall oak pantry with bifold doors was finished to match Joe's rolltop desk

Pints and quarts line up in colorful precision, on shelves designed for exact proportions. Forty-four quarts fit on one shelf, when jars are placed 4 deep and 11 wide. A tall bottom shelf is reserved for gallon-size crocks and tall bottles. A volunteer during Charles County Fair days in the canned and baked goods division, Judy laments waning interest; "Each year there are fewer entries; it's become a dying art."

The Thomasons order large quantities of tomatoes, green beans, okra, peaches, collards from the Amish. Bringing home 12 dozen "fresh pulled" ears of corn is step one. The next tasks are to shuck, clean and blanche it on the cob in preparation for freezing, or creaming. During a visit, I received a demonstration on how to make creamed corn using her mother's "corn creamer" kitchen tool; scraping the cob against metal blades removes corn kernels, while simultaneously extracting sweet, milky liquid. This simple technique results in an all-natural food product, ready to cook or freeze. Just heat with a little butter, salt and pepper to prepare. A simple adjustment to the blade will remove whole-kernel

corn without creaming, to freeze, or use in other recipes like Judy's corn sticks; authentic corn bread cooked in old-fashioned, cast iron molds (see recipe).

Judy has an assortment of vintage metal contraptions used during the conserving process. Beloved tools of the trade; some worn and dented from years of use, like a simple hand chopper that had been her mother's too. The large, funnel-shaped colander

in her collection may look like something from another era, yet it remains quite useful. Especially when creating fresh concoctions of tomato or "Judy Juice," a blended beverage inspired by the commercial product, V8.

Quilting is another talent and activity she likes to share; picking up Amish friends and inviting garden club members to gather in her Quailwood home for quilting bees. A special quilt

features a large star in the center, sewn by her sister before she passed. Judy incorporated the star into a full-size coverlet with matching bed skirt and window jabots. For all her impressive "home ec" skills, prior to retirement Judy worked 27 years at the College of Southern Maryland as a professor and chair of the Technical Studies Department, achieving professor emeritus status.

A member and current co-president of La Plata Garden Club, she also heads the flower committee at church. Joe, an electrical engineer, has been employed at Naval Research Lab for 57 years, where he continues to work in radar systems design. Both are active in their church and community, and Judy is quick to credit her partner for "his support, encouragement and scientific mind" when working on projects together.

A doctor's buggy sits parked on the front lawn; the result of one group endeavor. Discovered through an Amish friend, Ben, who delivered the horseless carriage on a trailer. The Thomasons gave their old buggy a new coat of black paint, while Ben's mother handmade a new canvas for the folding frame top. Passersby enjoy seeing the unusual lawn feature decorated year-round, with changing seasonal and holiday touches.

And if they come close, maybe they will be lucky enough to hear the loud, happy sounds of a player piano coming from inside the house. Judy inherited the over 100-year-old instrument from her parents. Originally operated with foot pedals only, her father had a mechanical switch installed that plays music selections when your legs wear out. There are over 75 rolls of appealing songs to choose from; quaint sounding

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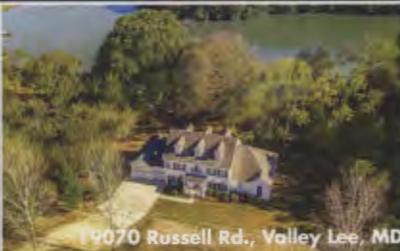
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karen.brooks@c21nm.com
Cell: 301-481-0644

Lucy Barbour:
lucy.barbour@c21nm.com
Cell: 301-904-9914
Office: 301-862-2169



tunes like "In the Good Old Summertime" conjure images of Norman Rockwell scenes. Another family treasure, a mantle from her grandparent's North Carolina home, still bears painted over scars, from a long-ago house fire.

That dream of buying a small farm has slowly faded away. Already surrounded by the family, friends and things they cherish, they cannot imagine living anywhere else. Judy says La Plata offers the best of both worlds, "We're able to go to the farmers market, visit and shop in the Amish community, or attend a show at the Kennedy Center."

While the word farm evokes pictures of pastures, rows of crops and old barns down dirt roads, the Thomasons have successfully incorporated the traditions, tastes and rural charms of country life into town living.



JUDY'S CHEESE CORN STICKS

INGREDIENTS:

1 C. sifted flour
1 T. sugar
1 1/2 tsp. salt
2 tsp. baking powder
1 egg
2 1/2 C. whole-kernel corn
1/2 C. grated cheese (your choice)
1/2 C. butter melted

PREPARATION:

Sift flour, sugar, salt and baking powder. Add corn, cheese and butter to well-beaten egg. Combine with dry ingredients. Spoon batter into hot, greased corn-stick pan sections. Bake 425° for 10-15 minutes. Makes 12 sticks.

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