

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH

Cheating the seasons, embracing wildlife, and creating beauty at 8,000 feet. *By Johanna Silver*

*Homeowner Isa Catto
in her Colorado garden
with her dog, Luna*



Mixed perennials surround Catto's mountain home.

ARTIST ISA CATTO has a hard time staying focused in summer. She should be in her studio, painting watercolors, but she only wants to be “out in the garden, ogling seedlings,” she says. “I used to freak out about it, until I decided to count it as my studio practice—it’s professional development.”

There’s every reason for her to bolt outdoors during the summer months in Woody Creek, Colorado. That’s when large swaths of lupines and poppies burst into bloom in Catto’s garden, for a landscape that looks like it’s been painted in brushstrokes.

It’s a scene that was almost impossible for Catto to imagine when she moved onto the property after relocating from Manhattan with her husband and child in 2004. Back then, the property was 17 acres of wild, untamed plants and unworkable hardpan clay soil. A longtime gardener, Catto studied up on soil science, then dug in, amending the ground over several years rather than excavating it (a more sustainable move because it prevents the dirt from ending up in a landfill). “I can bore anyone to tears with my obsession with compost,” she says.

As she started thinking about the design, Catto realized she needed a pro’s eye. Working with landscape architect Sheri Sanzone of

Bluegreen (bluegreenaspen.com), Catto created an outdoor dining patio, a children’s play area, and a giant vegetable garden.

But it’s the painterly landscape weaving around the property that demands attention. The beds are chock-full of native plants that are at home in the Rockies, as well as flowers with personal meaning. The delphiniums, painted daisies, and Oriental poppies all came from seeds Catto collected from her mother’s yard after her mother passed away in 2009. The artist also planted daffodils and tulips in honor of her late sister.

It’s a labor of love in more ways than one. Maintaining a sprawling landscape at 8,000 feet, after all, requires a special kind of commitment. “Gardening at this elevation is like being under a magnifying glass,” says Sanzone. “Everything, from the animals to the sunlight, is that much more intense.” Catto goes to extensive lengths—from finding creative ways to deal with wildlife to starting seeds indoors—to make it work (see page 54 for her strategies).

In the summer, though, Catto can most often be found crawling around her garden with a macro lens popped onto her iPhone. “I’m always trying to get the perfect angle of the perfect flower to paint,” she says. That is, if she ever makes it inside. —>

LESSONS FROM THE LANDSCAPE

CHOOSE NATIVE

Plants endemic to the region thrive at elevation. Catto's garden boasts many, including aspen, columbine, *Liatris*, lupine, *Monarda*, Rocky Mountain penstemon, and a wild rose hedge. To supplement the straight natives, Sanzone used cultivars of each, extending the bloom season and color choices.

WELCOME WILDLIFE

Because Catto's yard abuts federal land and doesn't have fences, it gets its share of wild visitors. The hummingbirds, bees, and owls are a sheer joy. Other wildlife get put to work: While most gardeners might trim back the perennials and shrubs at the end of the growing season, Catto delegates that job to the elk. "They come down like clockwork and raze the garden for me," she says.

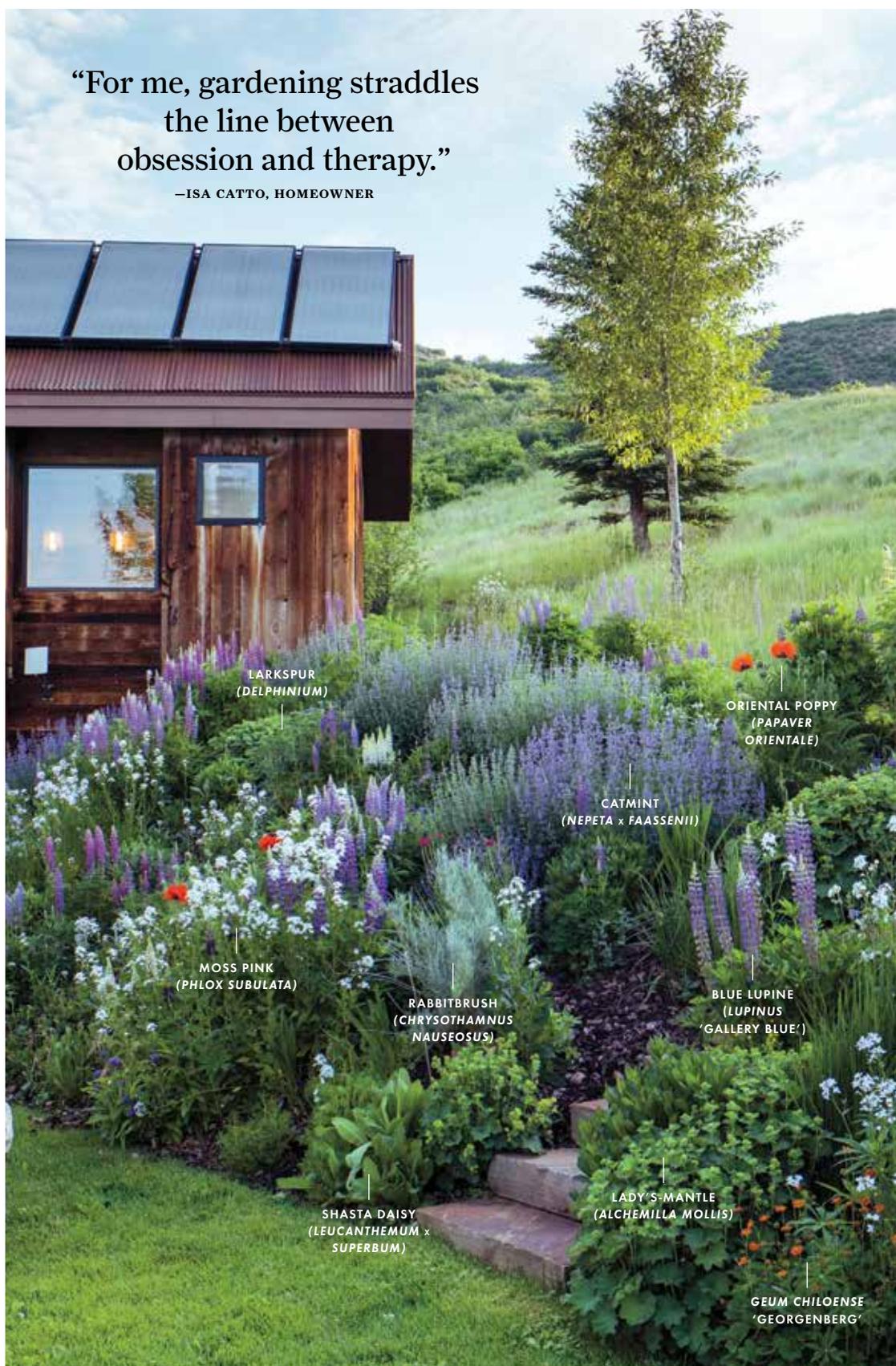
WORK AROUND THE SEASONS

Catto incubates perennials during the winter with an extra-thick layer of leaf mulch, and gets a jump on spring by starting seeds indoors. In fall, she tucks spring-blooming bulbs into the landscape and covers vegetables with a homemade hoop house to extend the harvest. 🌱

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"For me, gardening straddles the line between obsession and therapy."

—ISA CATTO, HOMEOWNER



LARKSPUR
(DELPHINIUM)

ORIENTAL POPPY
(PAPAVER ORIENTALE)

CATMINT
(NEPETA x FAASSENII)

MOSS PINK
(PHLOX SUBULATA)

RABBITBRUSH
(CHRYSOTHAMNUS NAUSEOSUS)

BLUE LUPINE
(LUPINUS 'GALLERY BLUE')

SHASTA DAISY
(LEUCANTHEMUM x SUPERBUM)

LADY'S-MANTLE
(ALCHEMILLA MOLLIS)

GEUM CHILOENSE
'GEORGENBERG'