

LIFESTYLE

Force of nurture

At her house in Connecticut, FRANCES PALMER has found harmony in the pursuit of her many passions – from creating beautiful vases and tableware in her studio to gardening and beekeeping

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Lithographs by Daphne Gamble, a printmaker who is a college friend of Frances, hang on either side of a window in the sitting room. A porcelain bowl by Frances with an oxblood glaze holds an arrangement of dinnerplate dahlias from the garden, ready to be photographed. The large barn studio where Frances works is just a short walk across the garden from her house, which dates from the 19th century; the barn was built more recently using a 1790s timber frame





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Frances in the library, reading *Hamada, Potter* by Bernard Leach. Dressed in her beekeeping suit and protective headgear, Frances gives a boost to her bees with a sugar water treat. Carrying a vast roll of twine for the job, she sets out to tie back the dahlias, which are grown in raised beds. A favourite hot pink variety, *Dahlia 'Elsie Huston'*



Ceramicist Frances Palmer makes pots year-round in her airy studio barn in Weston, Connecticut, about an hour's drive north of New York City. During the New England summer she grows thousands of dazzling flowers in her two cutting gardens. Her dahlias serve as magnificent props

in the photographs she takes of her handmade pots, while her mouth-watering cakes do the same for her platters and plates. She keeps bees that pollinate the flowers; if the bees leave Frances some honey, she will use it in baking the cakes that sit on the platters. She sees her job as moving the parts of her creative ecosystem forward one day at a time, each loop connected to the next.

Every activity – whether it is turning lumps of clay into objects of functional beauty or tending her colourful dahlias – takes place in her studio or the 19th-century house and six acres that she shares with her husband Wally and their rescue dog Peter. From dawn to dusk, it is all creative tasks, with Frances taking time out only for tea breaks, lunch and exercise. She says she needs to be centred before she can create her pots, explaining that the clay can sense tension, frustration or uncertainty, 'You have to be completely calm. I meet the material part-way. It's the same with the flowers and bees.'

It is this multitasking, moving efficiently between one job and another all day long – from ceramics to flowers, photography to beekeeping and cooking – that makes up her creative existence. All intertwined, the loops making up a whole. The question she is asked most frequently? "How do I get started?" she says. 'Nobody ever has a huge chunk of time.' Frances honed her multitasking skills when her three children were little. 'I've trained myself to do many different things in small segments over the course of the day. I once had a knitwear business and, every time I got on the subway, I would try to knit a row or two. After a few days, I had the better part of a sleeve.'

Describing a typical day, she says, 'Yesterday I began by making a butternut squash cake for our meeting, then I worked on my *kintsugi*.' This is the ancient art of Japanese repair, in which broken pieces of pottery are pieced together again using lacquer, which is dusted with gold powder. 'I love the idea of not wasting something that's beautiful,' she says. 'When you put it back together, and it's repaired, it's even more beautiful.'

Frances says the *kintsugi* is a metaphor for her life. Her brother died at the age of 16, when she was just 14. 'How did I repair myself after that experience? By putting the pieces together and making them better,' she explains, adding, 'Apart from having my children, losing my brother was a defining moment for me. I learned two things – you have to be strong yourself and every day is a gift. The day is to be seized.'

Two cutting gardens yield their bounty. One is made of raised beds on a repurposed tennis court full of cracks where weeds are encouraged. 'I have discovered over time that the things we call weeds are actually great >



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Frances, Wally and their dog Peter in the garden. Frances at her wheel. A small wooden building houses her porcelain kiln. Some of the 'Alice' vases designed by Frances for a dinner for Robert Kime in New York. OPPOSITE An array of her finished pots



for pollinators.' Cracks are not a negative for Frances when they fill with blooms or make pots whole again.

'Yesterday was a beautiful day,' she continues. 'So I decided to feed the bees.' She made a sugar water of two parts sugar to one part water, donned her white beekeeping suit and out she went. Then she returned to her studio, threw some pots, glazed some others and finally took the train into Manhattan to have dinner with Wally, his sister and her husband.

A creative wonder woman who likes to work with her hands and who likes to work alone, Frances wraps every pot in newspaper and beeswax string herself with a sweet note and sends it off with love to its new home. 'I've never had a desire to own a mega-business,' she explains. 'I've always wanted something that I can manage. I just like the making.'

As a child growing up in Morristown, New Jersey, she was taught to cook, knit and sew by her mother. She studied art history at Columbia University and became fascinated with how integral vessels were to society. Frances did print making and set up a knitting business, but it was not until she and Wally moved from New York to Connecticut in the winter of 1986 with their newborn daughter Daphne that the idea of being a potter struck.

Seeing his young wife struggling with the challenges of being a new mother in a remote, rural area where she knew practically no one, Wally suggested that she try something she had always wanted to do but had never had time to explore. Frances had been reading about the Omega Workshops, a design collective founded by members of the Bloomsbury Group in London in 1913. 'I want to make pots,' she said. A ceramics class at nearby Silvermine School of Art in New Canaan was next and she fell in love with the process of letting the clay talk.

For research, she turns to her books and then to the internet, often finding inspiration in British artists and gardeners, including the 20th-century painter Cedric Morris and his bearded irises. She goes to exhibitions – and when she can't, she orders the catalogue. 'I love ▷

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receiving a book – that sense of discovery.’ Closer to home, Frances enjoys visiting the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven. A favourite exhibition there was *Mrs Delany and her Circle* in 2009, on the 18th-century British artist who created over 1,000 botanical ‘paper mosaics’ starting at the age of 72.

Another influence is architect Philip Johnson’s Glass House built in New Canaan in 1948. When it re-opened as a museum in 2007, several Connecticut-based artists were asked to make something for the shop. Frances created a bisque porcelain vase inspired by Johnson’s partner David Whitney’s succulent garden and by the works of the self-proclaimed ‘mad potter of Biloxi’, the eccentric George E Ohr. Clients also play a role. Aerin Lauder asked her to make some pots for the launch of Aerin’s ‘Aegea Blossom’ scent. In response, she made a collection of Cycladic-influenced white earthenware.

Frances’s work is both an art and a science – big on process, but open to new ideas. ‘I like structure but am not beholden to it. Each day, I know I have to do the hardest thing first. That is a discipline I try to stick with – and to have patience and go slowly.’ At the end of her day, she leaves the studio, walking over to the house – satisfied with having moved some creative parts forward and excited for the next day. Another one to be seized □

To view Frances’s work, go to francespalmerpottery.com. Her book *Life in the Studio: Inspiration and Lessons on Creativity* (Artisan, £27.99) comes out on September 29

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Frances at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven. Lunch at Terrain in Westport with her friend Anna Taylor. Outside the architect Philip Johnson’s Glass House in New Canaan, which is now a museum; Frances was one of the Connecticut-based artists asked to make a piece for its shop. Buying fresh produce from farmer Laura Mulligan at The Hickories in Ridgefield

