

AFTER A HUGE EF4 TORNADO DEMOLISHED AN ALABAMA TOWN, SARITA COX DID THE ONLY THING SHE COULD THINK OF TO START OVER. SHE PLANTED A TREE

BY SHAELYN SMITH



ERIN O'CONNELL/GETTY IMAGES. FACING PAGE: CARY NORTON



Cox's vision for the Alberta City Orchard Project (facing page) has gradually morphed into reality.

EVERYTHING SEEMED TO BE IN A DIFFERENT PLACE THAN IT HAD BEEN: POWER LINES, PARTS OF HOUSES, SKY

Sarita Cox holds out a handful of broken glass. She and her friend Mark had been bolting up a fence around the dog yard, digging trenches, when she excavated the shards. She doesn't know their exact provenance, but they're not a surprising find. Because of what happened in Tuscaloosa five years ago, she says, she finds stuff like this every time she digs in the dirt.

She wears camouflage cargo pants, an orange vest, rubber gardening shoes, and a bandanna in her curly brown hair, which is striated with silvers and grays. Cox is in her late 40s but looks much younger. Her grin is huge, and she's bubbly as she walks around the property. Inside the garage that has become her home, she picks up something she finds even more remarkable. "Look at this," she says. "A miracle gift."

Cox holds aloft an ornately crafted wooden bowl with a long-handled lid. The pattern spirals in a multicolored vortex. She calls it a dizzy bowl. Jim, the carpenter she's working with to renovate her office, made it from a hundred or so scraps of woodshop leftovers—maple, walnut, cherry, pine—and a tornado-felled tree.

It's a beautiful little object. But the dizzy bowl also appeals to Cox because of the way that it hints at a larger question: When a life is splintered into shards, how do we piece it back together?

Late in the afternoon on April 27, 2011, sirens sounded from the direction of the nearby Bryant-Denny Stadium at the University of Alabama. Northern Alabama is a place of rolling hills, freshwater lakes, and ripe humidity, and it's a meeting point for warm air from the Gulf of Mexico

and chilly winds from the Tennessee Valley, which can create tornado conditions. Cox's mother, Nancy, and stepfather, Richard, live in a log cabin, and Cox joined them in their daylight basement—a place where, despite the name, little sun squeezed through a surrounding old-growth forest. They hunkered down and listened. They'd heard many sirens in the past, but this time they heard different noises too. Cox had heard that a tornado sounded like a train. "But I always thought that meant the *whistle* of a train," she says.

This noise was the clacking of metal on metal. She heard things crashing into each other, then the deafening cacophony of trees snapping throughout their property. Four huge trunks toppled onto the cabin.

When silence finally returned, Cox at first didn't want to leave the basement. When the family finally crept up, everything seemed to be in a different place than it had been: power lines, parts of houses, sky. The EF4 tornado, which brought winds up to 200 MPH, had been 1½ miles across at its widest, and it decimated much of Alberta City, their neighborhood on the east side of Tuscaloosa. President Obama, walking through the wreckage, declared he had never seen devastation like it. Looters vultured about, casting the area into a haze of fear and anxiety. Cox and her fam-

ily took stock. They were alive, and they had shelter in the parts of their homes that were still standing, which left them better off than much of the area. Nancy had bought the property near the iconic Moon Winx Lodge in 1987, and the land had a history. She and her husband decided to rebuild.

Cox was less clear about her next move. She suffered from insomnia, and certain odors triggered panic: a whiff of gas, a snuffed-out candle, the smell of smoke. She sought therapy, but it was ineffective. "It didn't help my healing to go there again, to remember it in any way," she says.

Cox grew up about 100 miles to the north, in Tuscumbia. After college, her travels eventually took her to Portland, Oregon, to earn her master's degree in oriental medicine and her doctorate in naturopathic medicine. But she wanted to return to Alabama, to offer acupuncture and alternative healing practices, methodologies largely unavailable there. In 2006, she opened a small practice in downtown Tuscaloosa. Her clientele and her life back in the South were steadily building when the tornado hit. She had converted a garage on a small piece of land adjacent to her mother's property into a house. After the storm, she replaced its roof and cleaned up as much debris as she could. As soon as it felt safe, about two months later, she moved into a friend's basement nearby, where she tried to put the broken fragments of herself back together.

The Alberta City residents who stuck around faced a long, grueling rebuilding process. The Moon Winx sign was among the few landmarks that remained. When Cox returned six months later, she wondered what she could do in the face of such destruction. From her window, she could see a native persimmon stretching its limbs, one of the few surviving trees.



The 2011 tornado carved a nearly 6-mile-long path of devastation through Tuscaloosa.

DAVE MARTIN/AP IMAGES



KEEPING UP WITH THE #ALBERTACITYORCHARD

Top row, from left: Holy basil, cabbages, beans, and arugula; a permaculture "edge," or boundary being constructed; spring onions. **Second row:** Spinach; a fig tree, sage plants, and the kiwi arbor by Cox's office; moving a load of cypress lumber. **Third row:** A kiwi start; a harvest of carrots, butter beans, peaches, okra, berries, and cucumber; an Asian persimmon tree. **Bottom row:** Freshly harvested potatoes; a rain barrel with catchment system and medicinal mullein plant; a young Gala apple tree.

COURTESY OF DR. SARITA ELIZABETH COX @DRSARITACOX

A WELLNESS CENTER IS BEING BUILT FROM BITS AND PIECES THE TORNADO LEFT BEHIND, SCRAPS THAT WOULD OTHERWISE BE WASTED

It became a beacon for her, a suggestion that as she healed, she could heal the land.

In January 2012, she dug a hole and planted another persimmon tree. She liked both the idea and the act of doing this, so Cox found Tuscaloosa County's extension office and purchased and planted a small group of fruit trees, testing the viability of a small orchard. She felt empowered literally putting down roots. She moved ahead shovel by shovel.

Then Cox had more ideas. What if the orchard, a space of growth and renewal, also served as the site of her primary practice? She could offer health-care services in a food forest. She could expand her wellness treatments into classes, support groups, community partnerships. She could raise awareness of sustainability and environmental concerns. She created a business plan, and the Alberta City Orchard Project was born.

On a gray, chilly, and overcast winter day, forsythia is already blooming in an overflowing landscape filled with crystal balls, park benches, statues, and myriad pots—a veritable secret garden. Cox is working next door, where the garage-turned-home has been transformed into Alberta Orchard & Wellness, seeing patients for acupuncture and naturopathic care. Pivot walls can divide a treatment room into a more universal space for pop-up shops and meetings. The sunroom is now a treatment room. The next expansion will include hydrotherapy and hot and cold vitality treatments.

Cox has now planted more than four dozen fruit trees and vines: multiple varieties of apple, Asian pears, plums, citrus, kumquats, peaches, and nectarines. Rain-collection barrels stand at the corners of the center,

and the southwest side bolsters a large kiwi arbor. The north side of the property is home to muscadines, strawberries, and blackberries, all fed by natural irrigation permaculture. She walks to the two persimmon trees that started everything. All of this has happened in just a few years. "It doesn't take that long to empower ourselves with food," Cox says.

Over the past two seasons, these two trees alone have yielded more than 50 fruits. "It's almost instant gratification," she says. She planted pecan trees along a city right-of-way. There's a large composting system, and habitats for earthworms, lady beetles, bees, and bluebirds. Patients have brought her castor-oil seeds and Louisiana speckled butter beans, both now thriving. The land, still dappled with wide tree stumps, rolls with permaculture heaps of onions, garlic, and leeks blanketed with pine needles and yarrow; rows of asparagus; and beds sprinkled with blueberry bushes, celery, greens, herbs, carrots, and beets.

One way to think of the wellness center is as a kind of grand-scale dizzy bowl. It's being built from bits and pieces the tornado left

behind, scraps and parts that would otherwise be wasted, along with resources, kindnesses, and talents that might not otherwise be offered. It will be a place for community healing, built by that very community. The frosted windows flanking the front door are glass bricks Nancy and Richard gathered at the razing of Dill's Motor Court, an old Tuscaloosa motel. The bathtub, a claw-foot painted pink (a gift from a neighbor), used to live in a local law office. The staircase spiraling to the second floor was rescued from the Druid Glass factory after the tornado. Some of the wood on the new roof comes from Oklahoma—remains of a tornado from the same 2011 super-outbreak—and a refurbished barn door, from Nancy and Richard. When insulating the dog shed, Cox had no success with duct tape, so she used 2012 campaign signs for Romney and Obama.

The light still surprises Cox. Before the tornado, about 50 huge trees had shadowed her driveway, so thickly that she couldn't even see her neighbors. Twenty-seven were torn out, showing what could come next. The sky was so bright, and for the first time light flooded the basement.

Bob Patel, the owner of the Moon Winx Lodge, gardens in that sun, and he started exchanging vegetables and seeds with Cox. Bob's wife, Kanta, gives her cooking lessons, further propagating their friendship. "This is something else that is really amazing," Cox says. "Sharing gardens and food and cooking in a way we could have never done if these trees hadn't fallen."

Beauty and devastation, flip sides of the same coin. This is how she chooses to view the tornado: as a harbinger of light, a dispeller of darkness. Piece by piece, a life, and community, restored. ▀