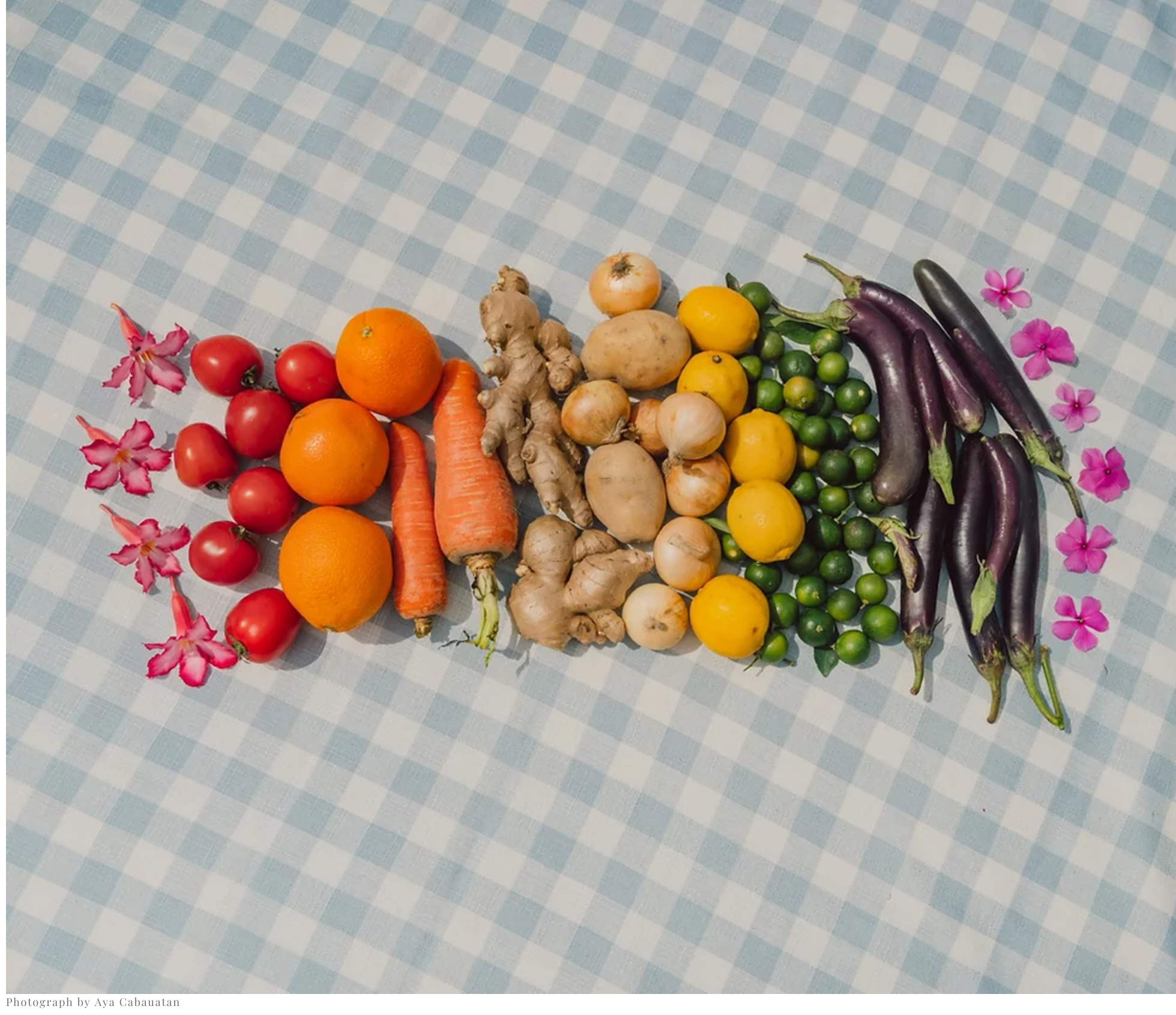


LIFESTYLE

Aya's Garden

ALTERATION

Words by Nina Unlay | Photography by Aya Cabautan



Photograph by Aya Cabautan

Once Aya Cabautan ceremoniously lays down the cloth on her kitchen table, she knows her hands are going to stretch out for the camera. The first time she did it in the past few months, after a month-long slump, she was convinced by the color of the mangoes ("they're always in season!" she exclaims). This she patterned against her family's staples, calamansi ("our sauce for everything") and okra; all produce they reap fresh from the garden.

Outside Aya's family home in Las Piñas is a patch of green, with the calamansi tree that has steadily provided alongside other leafy plants slowly making their way up the intricate white fences that mark the plot of land. She sends us a clip of an easy wind caressing the leaves into a dance, as the small white shells that line the gate tinkle softly.

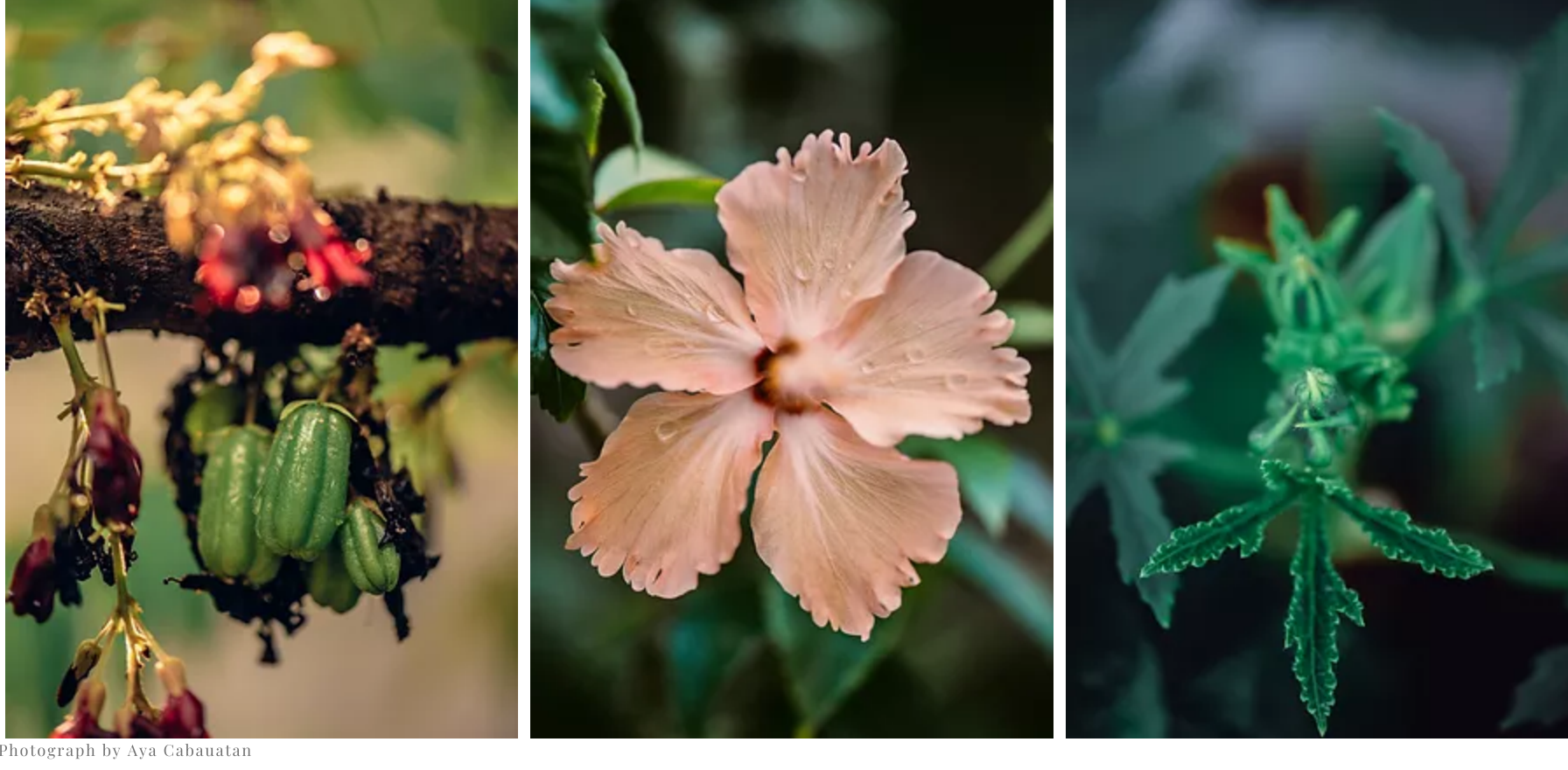


Photograph by Aya Cabautan

"It's a humble-sized garden," Aya says. "We have several random lots which we harvest. It was mostly because of my mom. She's a pescatarian and she's been growing her own food for about 10 years now. So, we're really into eating healthy at home. It's only recently that I've become more interested in it. A friend and I just had this conversation about how the future is agriculture. We're going back to growing whatever we can at home."

Aya has been shooting for roughly seven years now, usually gravitating toward scenes of movement or natural textures and lighting. Her work often plays with color—pastel skies that flow from warm to cool, flower fields saturated by the sun, faces softened with makeup like paint.

But vegetables of her own harvest have been Aya's subject of choice for the past few months. For a long time, the garden was her mother's land—but in the solitude of quarantine, the plants acquainted themselves with her when she badly needed something to change.



Photograph by Aya Cabautan

"The garden to me before the pandemic was just...space. A pretty space. I didn't really pay attention to what was where. I didn't know this plant needed shade or that one needed sunlight," she says. "I still get amazed every day. I didn't know we could grow so many things in our own space. This garden just keeps on giving. You just give it a little bit of love or sunlight." She pauses to laugh. "It sounds really cheesy! But it's wonderful. It's a really transformative experience."

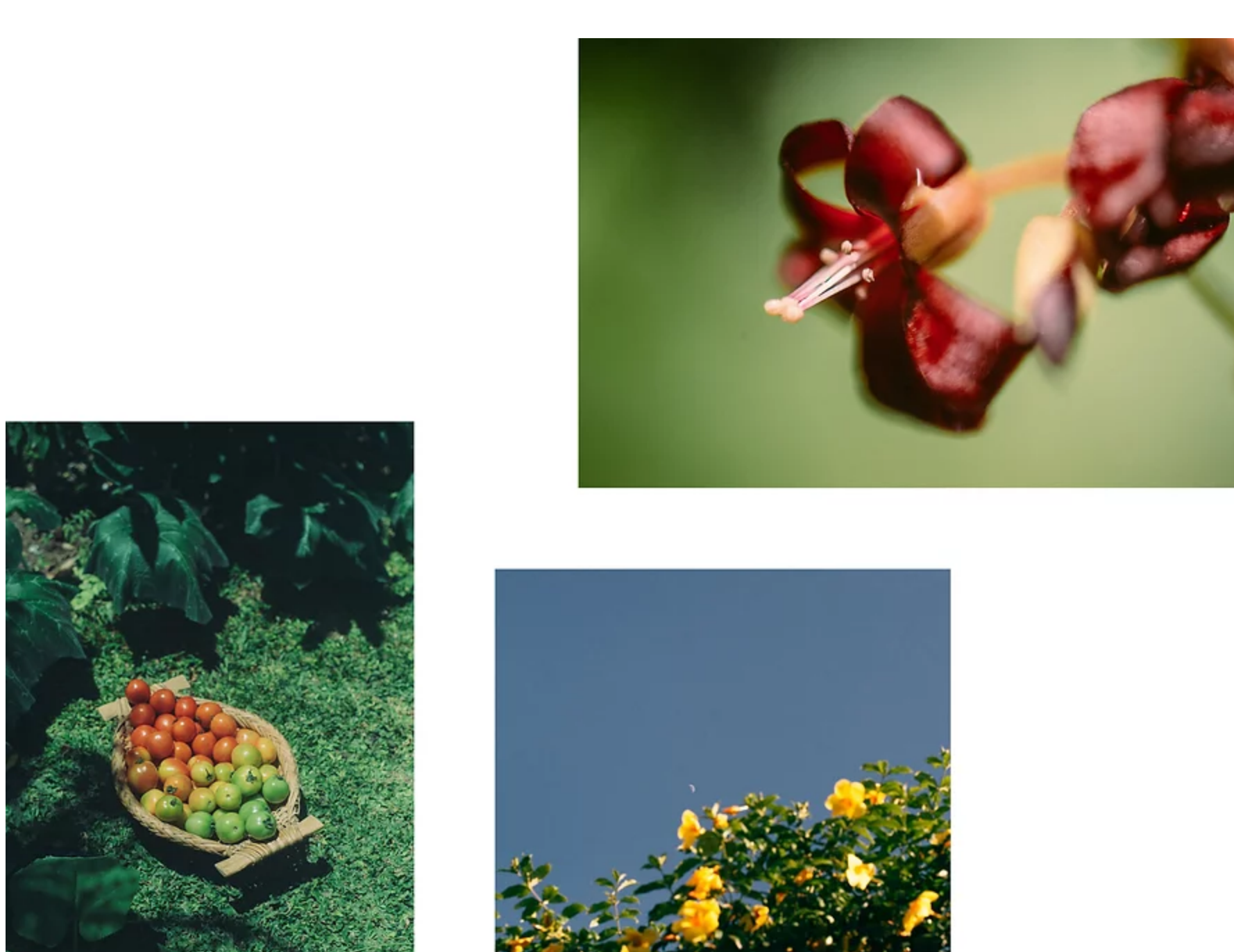
Now Aya goes out to water the garden every other day, like a healing walk. I ask if she talks to her plants and she jokes it off, saying that a simple ("greetings" or "good morning") usually does the trick; no need for an extended conversation.



Photograph by Aya Cabautan

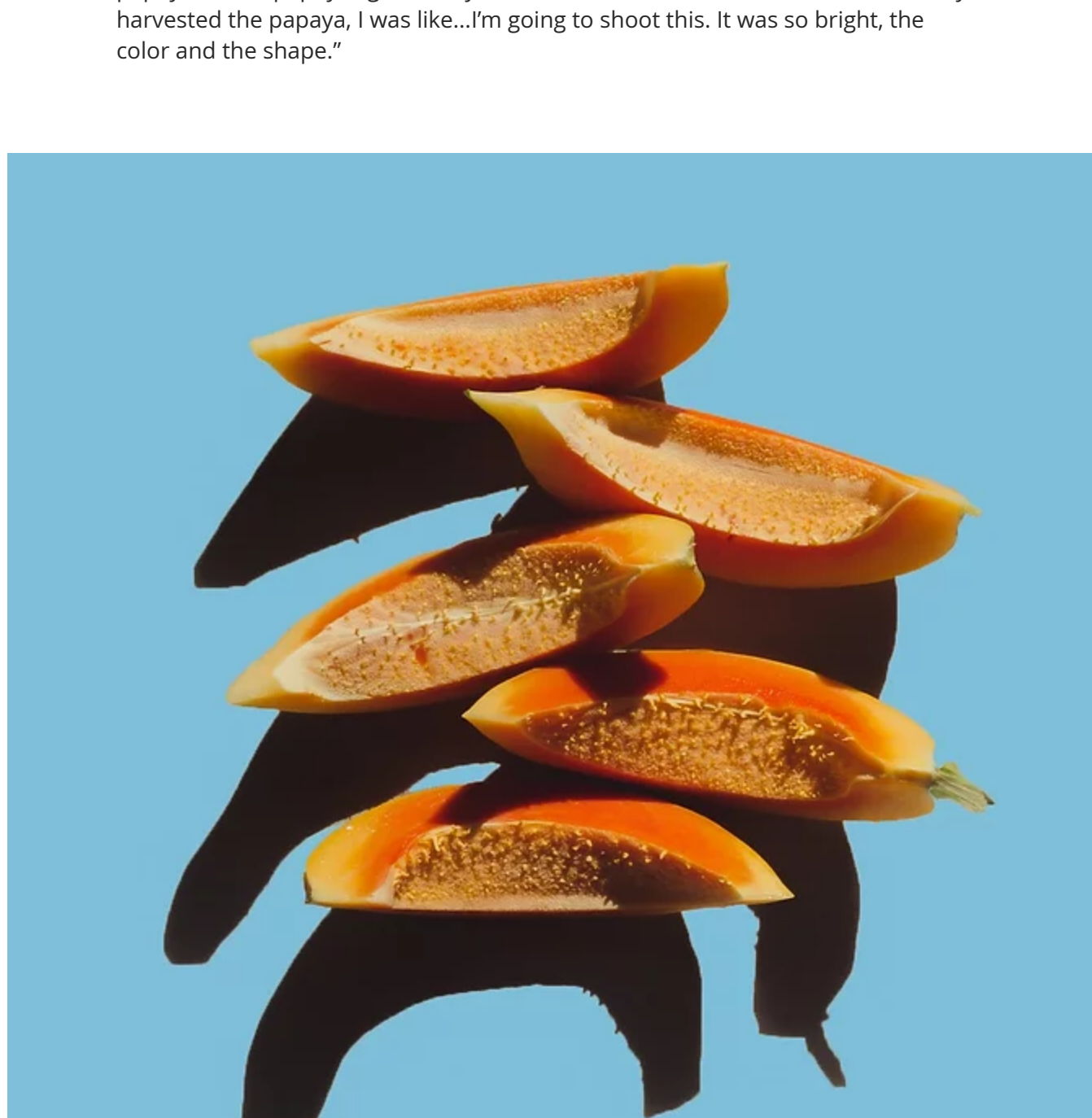
The days she shoots are usually dictated by the whims of the light. When it persuades, she gets to work on delicately laying vegetables out, moving them around while perched on the edge of the table. "I think it starts with the weather," she says. "The weather is a big factor for me because of the light. And if I look into my morning harvest and all the colors come naturally, it just starts from there."

"Whenever I harvest, I bring it in right away. It took me a while to turn it into something 'productive.' I don't want to define 'productivity' as having an output or having something to share with everyone...but it was really hard to get up and work sometimes. I wanted to take it step by step, day by day, and gathered whatever I could to shoot. Pick a color scheme for the day and lay it out so it was pleasing to the eye."



Photograph by Aya Cabautan

Through the screen, Aya pulls up a photo of the large bowl she uses when she goes out to harvest, bringing them up to the camera so she can point out the individual characteristics of this variety of okra, eggplant, and the many leafy vegetables. She lists them off easily: *Kangkong*, *kamote* tops, squash, *malunggay*, *sampalok*, basil—she chooses to linger a little longer when describing the aesthetic of the crawling vines of *alugbati*, a leafy spinach variety, weak against the call of color. "Their vines are really pink!" Asked which plant she was most excited by, she doesn't need to think: it was a papaya. "We waited a year for that papaya. When papayas grow, they come out in series. So, the first year we finally harvested the papaya, I was like...I'm going to shoot this. It was so bright, the color and the shape."



Photograph by Aya Cabautan

I ask Aya if she believes in green thumbs, and she says she has no answer for the mystery of why certain plants come alive and others don't, still someone who only recently came into the silhouette of a gardener. When I posit that gardening always seems to require a bit of magic, she laughs again. "A lot of patience, perhaps."

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