

THE PLANT ISSUE: AGAVE TO ZAMIA

GARDEN DESIGN



EARLY SPRING 2015

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PATHS TO PERFECTION

Problem: Beautiful vales and hillsides that were just too difficult to access

Solution: A series of paths lined with colorful groundcovers and trees connect each area

BY TOVAH MARTIN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER FOLEY

Riding the crown of a ridge in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains—elevation 1,300 feet—a south-facing hillcrest in Knoxville, Tennessee, was inaccessible and covered with a dense layer of impenetrable scrub. But given the history of the property, Bill Baxter, who worked for the previous owner as a boy and later married his wife Ginger there, had to have it when it became available.

“It was all woods when we purchased the land,” Baxter recalls of the overgrown ridge. “So we cleared it, saving what we could—the mature dogwoods, redbuds, and

Phlox subulata ‘Emerald Blue’ makes a wonderful groundcover in the Baxter garden, with masses of blooms.

large eastern red cedars.” About 100 trees could be preserved, and Baxter planted an additional 300 (mainly dogwoods and redbuds), primarily downhill from the ridge. The colorful display of trees is enticing with blooms that start in March and continue into April and May. All Baxter needed was a way to get there from the house.

Baxter called upon Garry Mendez, landscape architect and associate professor at the University of Tennessee, to design access to the entire property through a series of pathways that Baxter could highlight with blankets of color. To start, they created a long, pea-stone-based trail that weaves its way from the house and more formal gardens to the lower area of the property, where Baxter later created a dogwood ramble, gazebo garden, and butterfly garden.

On this trail they opted for planting swaths of drought-tolerant groundcovers because their bright blooms are undaunted by the heat and difficult soils in this

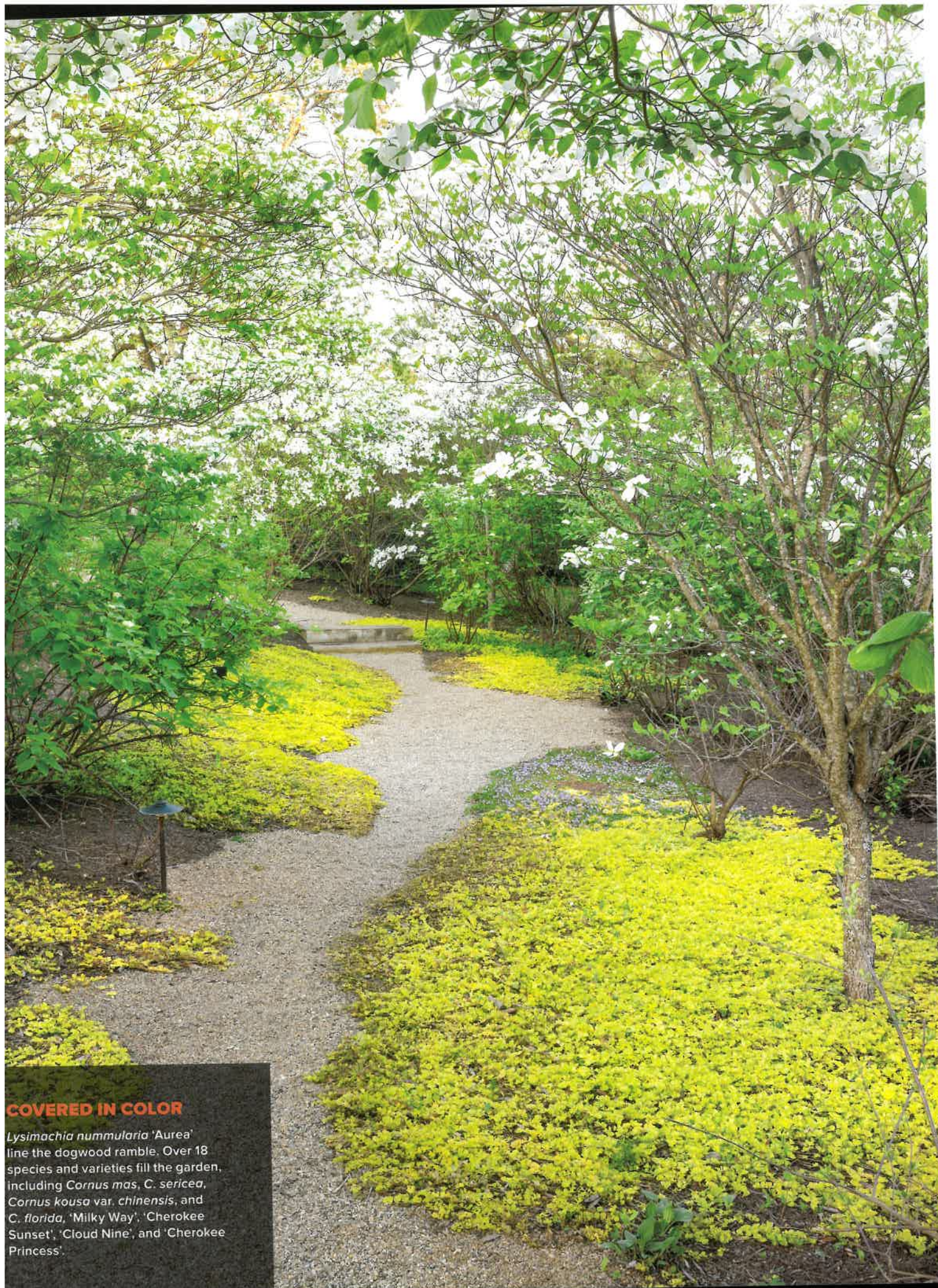
area of the garden. The low-growing plant palette also kept the view unobstructed. “We didn’t want to violate the genius of the place,” says Baxter, “we just wanted to augment it.” By planting *Sedum*, *Calluna vulgaris*, *Phlox subulata*, *Dianthus gratianopolitanus* ‘Firewitch’, *Mazus reptans*, *Thymus praecox*, and *Stachys byzantina*, they hit upon a combination that would carpet the ground, require little maintenance, and perform vigorously throughout the growing season.

The entire property is linked together with a series of paths—each with its own personality—that lead you through garden spaces. The ellipse path is the most grand with its central fountain flanked by eastern red cedars. This branches off into three different directions. If you take the branch that leads west you find yourself in the white garden, which is the most formal garden on the property. The clipped hedges are filled with white-blooming plants that flower in sequence from early spring (*Colchicum*, *Crocus*, and *Narcissus*), into the height of spring (azaleas, *Cornus kousa*, *Fothergilla gardenii*), through summer (peonies, *Hydrangea quercifolia*, rose of Sharon, crape myrtles), and into autumn when white birch bark is revealed as leaves fall.

Traversing the trail that leads north takes you to the hedge maze, composed of 780 *Taxus baccata* ‘Fastigiata’ (columnar yew). “It’s a focal point where children play and excited sounds from people completing the maze fill the garden,” describes Baxter. Traveling south from the ellipse takes you on a walkway surrounded by drought-tolerant groundcovers, leading to the dogwood ramble where spring is a full floral fair. Over 18 varieties of dogwoods grace this path—their white, blush, and pink blooms fill the horizon like clouds. As you walk through the ramble the many shades of flowers that arch overhead are accented by the carpet of groundcovers that creep onto the trail—their vibrant foliage peaking in spring.



Spring begins with the early blooming *Phlox subulata* (creeping phlox) and *Calluna vulgaris* (heather) edging the path with a sea of lavender-colored flowers. This walkway provides access from the upper, more formal, gardens to the lower dogwood ramble, azalea garden, and butterfly garden.



COVERED IN COLOR

Lysimachia nummularia 'Aurea' line the dogwood ramble. Over 18 species and varieties fill the garden, including *Cornus mas*, *C. sericea*, *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis*, and *C. florida*, 'Milky Way', 'Cherokee Sunset', 'Cloud Nine', and 'Cherokee Princess'.

“ Excited sounds from people completing the maze fill the garden.”

—Bill Baxter

ENCHANTING ELLIPSE

The ellipse path is anchored by large focal points: a circular fountain with a water jet that shoots 20 feet into the air, and two eastern red cedars that flank each side. When viewed lit at night, it's a sight to behold.



CREEPING BEAUTY

Mazus reptans, a groundcover that forms mats 2 inches tall and 1 foot wide, creeps onto the edges of many of the pea-stone trails, drawing your attention to the ground with its dainty lavender-blue flowers.



FAIRY-TALE MAZE

This maze, recalling scenes from *Alice in Wonderland*, adds a sense of fantasy to the property. Here, 780 *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata' yew have been sheared meticulously to create a hedge maze the Queen of Hearts would envy.



FORMALLY WHITE

The view from the white garden path near the home is stunning in spring. Seen here, azaleas bloom in the foreground while white tulips and a white-blooming kousa dogwood start their spring show beyond.



FLORAL HORIZON

Swaths of lavender-blue creeping phlox, pink heather, *Dianthus gratianopolitanus* 'Firewitch', and dogwoods layer into the horizon. The view of the Smoky Mountains from the top of the water-wise ramble draws you into a wonderland.

