

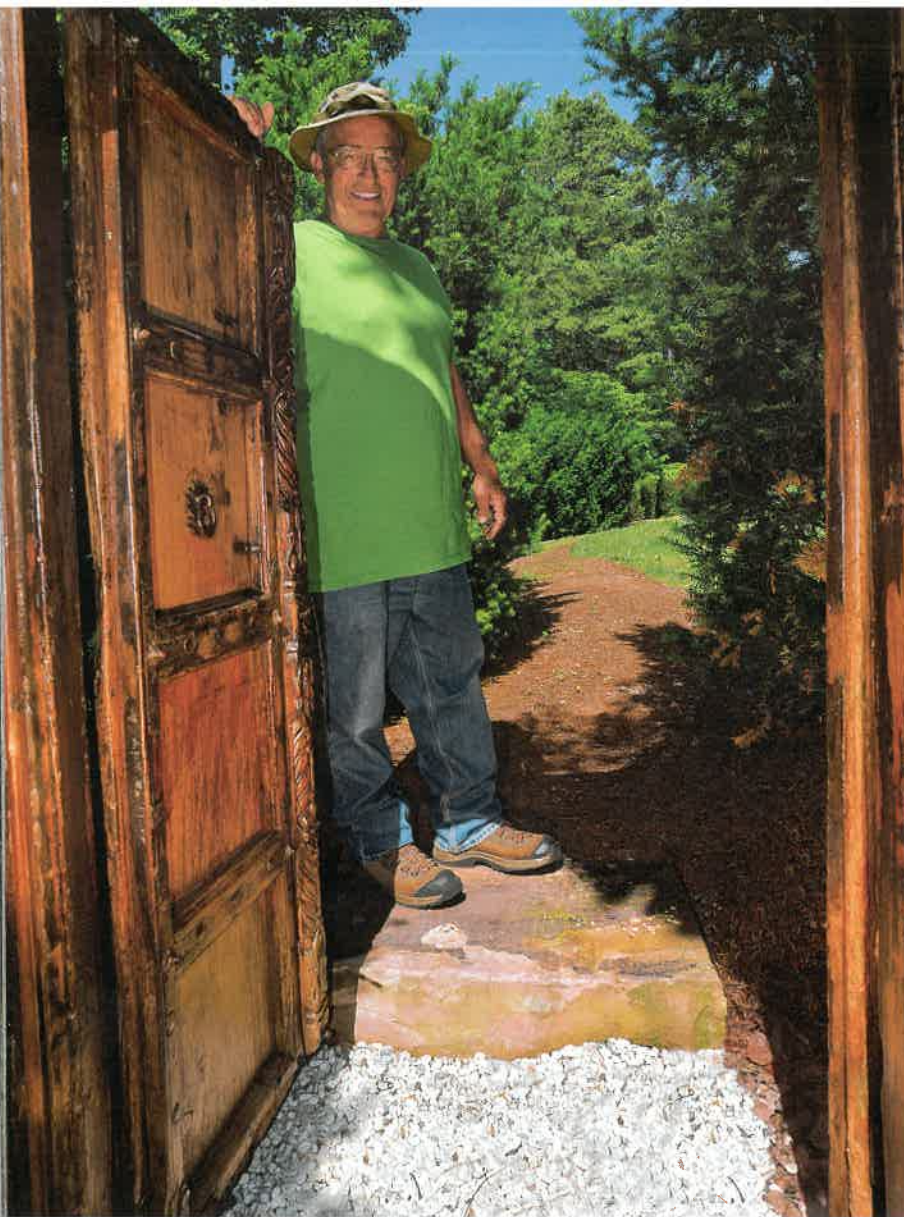
SPECIAL GET GROWING ISSUE: MASTERS OF GARDENING

# HOMESTEAD

MARCH 2015 • PUBLISHED BY JOHN DEERE

GARDEN  
THERAPY

BLOOM BONANZA / TOMATO'S TRAVELS



**Above:** Groundskeeper Marty Everett says working at the Baxter property is fun every day — “A hoot.”

“When I put in something new and say this is the last one, Ginger laughs at me. She knows I’ll be at it here until I’m dead. I’m not artistic, but landscape design is an artistic outlet for me,” Bill says.

“When we begin a new project, we have to envision what’s going to happen when these trees or plants mature. We have to envision 20 years from now. That’s what gets tricky. What we’re doing is not about instant gratification. It’s for the future.”

A plaque here reads, “To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.” Another says, “The meaning of life is to plant a tree in whose shade you’ll never sit.” That defines the Baxters’ approach in a few words. Getting to this point, though, wasn’t so simple and took lots of planning and effort.

They took ideas from other gardens including the Biltmore Estate at Asheville, North Carolina, and Colonial Williamsburg, as well as from gardens in England. When Bill served as Tennessee’s commissioner for economic development, he spent time in Japan and became fascinated with gardens there.



**Above:** Paths along the stream give visitors a place to walk and enjoy the property on foot. **Right:** Dogwoods form the heart of the Baxter property, with 30 different types growing.

“Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of American landscape architecture, advocated a naturalized landscape adapted to the existing topography. That’s always what I’ve thought, too,” Bill says.

“I’m looking for what works here. If something doesn’t do well, I surrender and dig it up and throw it away. Japan and Tennessee are at exactly the same latitude. Just about anything that grows there will grow here. That’s one reason I’m so interested in Asian gardens and what the Japanese do.”

**Gardens on view.** On nice spring days, lots of people become very interested in the Baxters’ place. For several years, it’s been a stop on the Knoxville Dogwood Festival’s trail system. Visitors drive through, or just saunter along the walkways.

“It’s gratifying that people get enjoyment from what we’re doing. We started this and it just evolved over the years, and now here we are,” Bill says.

“The dogwood is the star here. We wanted to have a dogwood ramble. It seems to work.”

The Baxters have 32 acres of gardens with nine defined garden areas. The property covers 54 acres, in all. Their full-time head groundskeeper, Marty Everett, a self-taught landscaper after a career in the Air Force, spends his time working on the details of coaxing all this natural beauty to its utmost.

“Everything is done in a way so it looks like it’s been there forever,” Everett says. “It’s what I call kept up, not manicured. Even with all the people coming through, it’s rare to see so much as a candy wrapper lying on the ground here.”

It all looks quite natural, but getting to that point is hard work. The daffodil garden has 15,000 plants in it, established over five years, 3,000 bulbs at a time. A new iris garden requires similar effort.

“Weeds are the biggest challenge. They’re the bane of every property owner. The biggest weed



problem specifically are cattails, which try to overtake our ponds and creek. It's like eating an elephant one bite at a time to control them. We try to hit every part of the place at least once a week looking for weed problems," Everett says.

A creek meanders through the property. Walkways along it provide meditative time. It all looks so natural, but city water flows through the creek, and the Baxters designed it. It fills a couple of ponds, as well, and recirculates to save water and cost.

"The creek is 456 feet long. Every rock in it was brought in by wheelbarrow. It was dug out by shovel and machine. I'm happy to say that the creek was built and all finished a couple of years before I came to work here," Everett says, with a laugh.

"What I do is mostly just maintain what's here. I thought the Air Force was fun until I started working here. This is a hoot. I'm working here because I want to, not because I have to. That makes a huge difference in life, whatever you do."

**April glory.** The Baxters open the property to the public for the whole month of April. They provide a brochure with a garden map and a bit of history of their efforts. Students from five nearby high schools come up the hill to take prom pictures.

"It's astounding to see all those girls getting pictures taken here. It's just packed in April. People really seem to like it up here," Everett says.

He makes sure the grounds get 2-1/2 inches of water each week in spring and summer, whether it

**Right:** One of two ponds surrounded by flowers and fed by waterfalls. It's all manmade, using city water. **Below:** Azaleas make a showy display in springtime on the Baxter place.



comes from rainfall or irrigation. The property has 12 irrigation zones. Each can be irrigated three times week. An inch of water goes on in 45 minutes.

After walking paths along with creek and ponds, visitors can opt for a different experience and spend time in a yew maze. At its center they find a bench and a quiet spot for meditation. The weathered doors leading to the maze came from a Knoxville antiques shop. Baxter thinks they originated in a Chinese garden and could be quite old.

Another unique aspect of the property is the monarch butterfly habitat. Fly over it and you see that the milkweed is planted in the shape of a butterfly. Near its start, a statue of a girl holds a butterfly in its hands. Butterflies are just one of many pollinators that come here, attracted by the blooms.

**Pollinator heaven.** "Butterflies just pile into here. We get all kinds of hummingbirds, and lots of bumblebees and honeybees," Everett says.

In addition, quite a bit of wildlife finds its way here, including deer, wild turkey, and coyotes.

"We welcome it all, everything but cats. This place is cat-free. We value the songbirds too much to have cats running around," Everett says.

Even though visitors flock to the grounds in spring, the Baxters have some sort of color and interest going most of the year. In late winter, scotch heather starts filling with pink blooms. In fall, dogwood leaves turn bright before dropping to reveal red berries. Birds feed on the berries, creating an entirely different sort of feel on the ramble. ▶

**Below:** The Georgian-style home, built in 1937, provided a great place to raise a family, and to pose for prom photos, too.



*"It's gratifying that people get enjoyment from what we're doing here."—Bill Baxter*



**Above:** This big yellow iris is just one of many popping through in late spring.

When the Baxters bought the house, six acres came with it. Over time, they purchased adjoining land parcels as they came up for sale.

"I'd like to think we had a master plan. It might be more accurate to say we had a conceptual idea with landscape architecture," Bill says.

**More than a showplace.** The Baxters never considered their Georgian-style home, built in 1937, just a showplace, despite the crowds it attracts. "It's handled four kids and all the kids' activities. We've had all sorts of parties and get-togethers here. We've had an untold number of dogs. Dogs have a way of joining the family," Bill says.

"It's been a great place to live. When I was a boy and mowed the hay in the fields here and cut the grass, I didn't really think I'd be living here one day. Life turns in funny ways sometimes."

Currently, Baxter is chairman of Holston Gases, a Knoxville-based company started by his father. A decade ago, he bought and renovated the historic Wort Hotel in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.



**Top:** An Asian garden, complete with lilies, hides behind these big wooden doors. **Above:** Ginger and Bill Baxter spent years building their beautiful landscape near Knoxville, Tennessee.

"Ginger says I like to take on projects. Well, I guess I'm guilty as charged," he says.

Settling into a swing on the side patio, Ginger and Bill, with the ever-present dogs scampering by, talk about their lives in this unique spot.

"Things are always evolving. It's a project that's never finished," he says. "Things happen. We have hemlock woolly adelgid in a hedgerow of 80 to 100 hemlocks. It's killing hemlocks all over east Tennessee. We had a tree service treat for that. There's always something going on in this place."

Even though he says he has no artistic talent, it's pretty clear he does, at least with landscaping.

"This is the kind of thing where an artist touches a brush to a canvas and it makes one dot. Then the artist makes another dot and then another one and eventually there's a beautiful painting," he says. That's what the Baxters are doing, dot by dot. ■