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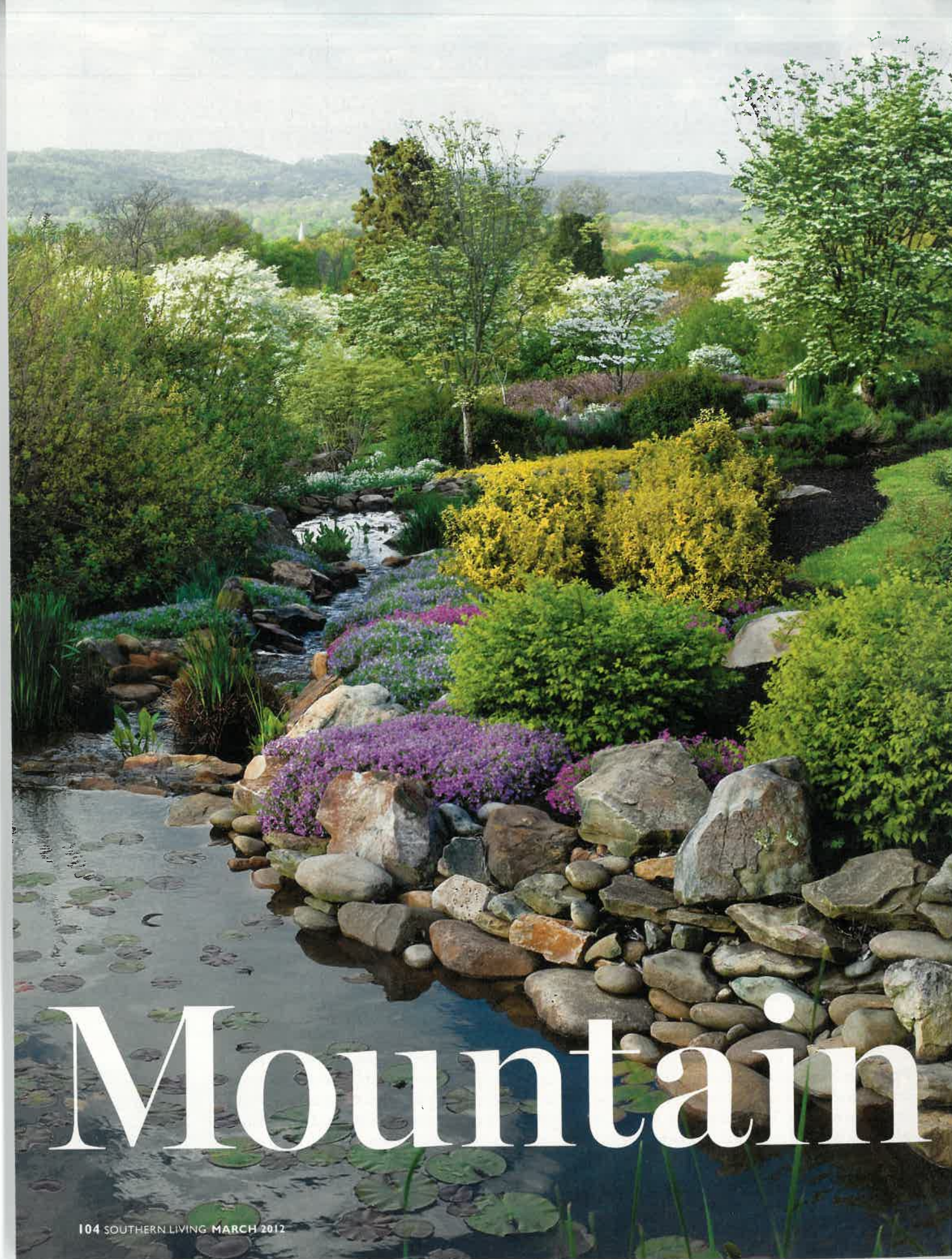
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# Mountain

104 SOUTHERN LIVING MARCH 2012



## the OWNERS

Knoxville businessman Bill Baxter and his wife, Ginger, bought their mountaintop property in 1977 and gradually expanded the garden as land became available. For inspiration, Bill went to Biltmore Estate and studied landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted's philosophy of preserving naturalized and pastoral landscapes.

# High

As the mercury just begins to soar, this Tennessee garden, overlooking a lush valley, always keeps its cool

by TOVAH MARTIN produced by REBECCA BULL REED photographs by ROGER FOLEY



# B

**BILL BAXTER WAS** no stranger to the hills near Knoxville, Tennessee, when he purchased his property in 1977. Earlier, as a teenager, Bill mowed and hayed the fields, bringing Ginger (his high school sweetheart) to park on a ridge overlooking the Smoky Mountains. "She lived on one side of the ridge, I lived on the other, and we met halfway," he recalls. Apparently, the view worked its magic. After Bill and Ginger got married, glorifying the majestic matchmaker became a priority.

And who could blame Bill for making the crest his Everest? Throughout the year, the view is bewitching; but framed in a froth of spring redbud and dogwood blossoms, the postcard panorama of the Smoky Mountains is the stuff of fantasies. Anyone with a love for the land would want to bring the summit up a notch and make it into a destination rather than just a viewing point. The only obstacle Bill faced was finding tough plants to adorn the overlook that started it all.

Rather than struggle against the elements, he went alpine. He turned to rugged rock-garden plants

and herbs that would thumb their noses at the challenge. Plants that laugh at seasonal droughts and love gritty soil were just the ticket. Another important qualification was that, while enduring the stress test, green applicants for the position had to look ravishing—with fresh and colorful blooms ensconced in vivid, bold foliage.

## A Bubbling Brook

Following the ridgeline is a running stream Bill designed. It trips over rocks to seem absolutely natural, accompanying the gravel path along its journey and emptying into ponds along the way. Although the alpine plants can soldier on without the moisture, the gurgling water is refreshing for anyone making the trek along the path.

But it's not only about what is underfoot. The upper crest has vertical appeal as well. Bill dotes on dogwoods; he's absolutely obsessed with them. His personal collection includes 30 different types that are scattered with redbuds, abelias, and other trees and shrubs throughout the property. So letting the dogwoods predominate on the ridge was second nature. Early in the growing season, they form clouds of lacy petals, but it's not just a spring fling. Later in summer, they are laden with berries, attracting birds. Then they blush shocking hues before dropping their leaves in fall. Below the dogwoods, ground covers spill at their feet.

## the STREAM

As a refreshing accent on the ridge, Bill engineered a natural-looking brook to spill over rocks on a thousand-foot journey between two ponds. Issuing from a pipe disguised as a berm at its upper limit, the water zigzags down to be pumped up again. A green-and-gold dialogue follows its path with creeping Jenny, 'Emerald 'n' Gold' wintercreeper euonymus, and pickerel weed escorting it along its course.





## The Scenic Route

One of Bill's goals was to extend the glory for all four seasons. Sure enough, the ground covers show off their green, gray, and chartreuse foliage throughout the entire year. Although Bill installed an irrigation system on the ridge, it's just an insurance policy. The driest drought is a cakewalk for these tough cookies. Plus, their stubborn roots hold the soil firm even in a deluge. Visually, they soften the stone and gravel like petals strewn at a wedding. But make no mistake about it, these cute little creepers are also bulletproof.

For his template, Bill used mountain meadows. But rather than a rugged, windswept look, he wanted to create a gentler, more soothing effect. That's where the heather, moss pink, candytuft, thyme, and creeping Jenny came in. Not all plants were up to the rigors. After rejecting any plant that failed the stamina test, Bill repeated his steady band of faithfuls in generous doses.

In the end, sticking with a small cast of characters made a stronger statement than fiddling with a more varied ensemble would have. Repetition was also easier on the wallet, because Bill obtained large quantities of plugs wholesale. The effect is an undulating ribbon of color, not unlike the contours of the mountain and land itself. The plants hug the ground while still making a bold statement.

①

### DOGWOOD (*CORNUS* SP.)

Depending on the species, dogwoods provide a continual spectacle all year—clouds of spring blossoms, summer fruit birds find binge-worthy, riveting fall foliage, and striking silhouettes in winter.

②

### MOSS PINK (*PHLOX SUBULATA*)

Synchronizing their calendars deftly with the dogwoods around them, moss pink blooms form a carefree carpet beside the brook and the gravel path. Their span of glory is brief but beautiful, and the mossy foliage looks perfectly smart over the long haul.

③

### SCOTCH HEATHER (*CALLUNA VULGARIS*)

From late winter through spring, heathers brandish spiky spires of tiny pink blooms. These small shrubs might be persnickety elsewhere, but they love the drainage on the ridge.

④

### PINKS (*DIANTHUS* SP.)

Throughout the year (and that means winter as well), pinks carpet the ground with tufts of silver-gray leaves. But from spring through summer, flowers are also part of the picture, adding fragrance.

⑤

### PRIVET HONEYSUCKLE (*LONICERA PILEATA*)

This low, spreading evergreen bears small, fragrant white flowers in late spring, followed by translucent, violet-purple berries. It grows about 3 feet tall and makes an excellent bank cover.



### the VIEW

On a clear day, you can see the Tennessee/North Carolina state line riding the crest of the Smoky Mountains about 70 miles from the Baxters' ridge. The genius of this design lies in framing that view in a cloud of dogwoods and further adding Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*) to screen their knees. To eliminate the guesswork and guarantee a high survival rate during droughts, native plants are the way to go.





### Walk in the Woods

Not far away is the yew maze where the Baxters' guests walk through the entryway's antique wooden doors (above) with cocktails in hand after being gently told to "get lost" until dinner is served.

Bill had been searching for something evocative of a lost kingdom when he found the doors of his dreams at a Knoxville antiques shop. Seven feet tall but mounted on a frame that brings them level with the 8-foot-tall maze hedges, the doors once led into a residential garden in China. Weathered over the centuries, seemingly armor-clad, and always ajar (fortunately, because the

door handles are 5 feet from the ground), the gateway picks up on the lotus-pond motif not far away, adding intrigue to the maze.

The design of the maze is the synthesis of all the mazes Bill has encountered from Colonial Williamsburg to Hever Castle in Kent, England. "I was fascinated by the puzzle aspect and the mental challenge of solving it by finding your way to the center," Bill explains. In this maze, the rewards at the puzzle's center are a fountain, a bench, and a secluded place for meditation. It's all part of Bill's grand scheme to turn a gravelly mountain-top into heaven with a view on the side. **SL**



### the MAZE

To make the maze, which Bill proudly calls "diabolical," he tucked together 731 columnar yews planted 2 feet apart with 4 feet between plants to form the pathways. When he installed it in 1992, he started with 18-inch plants that now tower 8 feet tall to confound anyone tempted to cheat. He devised the plan, which has two ways in and out from the center, "so you can make a mistake—but only one," he warns.