

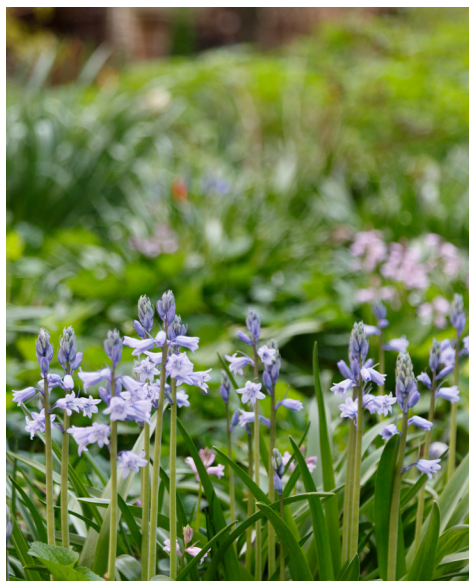


# Blooming *bountiful*

In a magical Ivy garden,  
change is a constant

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When Fran and Andrew Boninti moved into their Ivy home 36 years ago, the lot was mostly bare. Today the Ivy garden boasts an array of ornithogalum, trillium, clematis and scilla beneath an abundant tree canopy. The plantings are interrupted only by the homeowners' collection of garden décor—a wagon, a wheelbarrow, various sculptures and other pieces—which, together, create a whimsical display.



On a spring visit, daffodils, bluebells and wood poppies carpeted the ground under the poplar trees. Spring beauties provided a delicate scrim of white over the ground. Peonies were growing and deciduous azaleas were still bare, while Japanese maples—not native, of course, but beloved nonetheless—were beginning to leaf out.



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hirty-six years is long enough to watch a forest grow. And it's long enough to establish an enchanting garden beneath the tree canopy—a magical realm on what was once considered a neighborhood's least desirable property.

"It was the cheapest lot," says Fran Boninti of the two-acre place she and her husband, Andrew, bought in 1981. An Ivy cattle field was being developed for housing, and this lot—mostly bare then, and trampled by decades of cows—was priced lower because it was at the bottom of a hill. Boninti, though, could see its assets: two streams (fun for her young daughters) plus plenty of moisture for gardening.

"I knew the potential of the riparian area," she says. The house she and Andrew built looks over a graceful bowl of land, and they loved the few trees they did have—a pecan and several mature oaks.

They didn't dive right into large-scale gardening ("We were growing the girls," she says), but she did have an interest in native plants even in those days, and was involved with the Jefferson Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society. She started planting trees—tulip poplars, hemlocks, buckeye, redbud and dogwood—and small ornamental beds, and worked around the brambles and multiflora rose.

"We woke up one day and all these trees were behind the house," she says. No longer was the land a cattle field; it had become a young woods. And as their daughters became teenagers, the Bonintis found themselves beginning to garden much more ambitiously.

The guiding lights were to prioritize native plants and remove invasives, mostly by hand. Boninti's mentor Ted Scott taught her how gardening can enhance the ecological web that connects plants to bugs and birds, and she made herself a student of plant taxonomy (and Latin, to help her understand the taxonomy).

Gradually they created a grand sweep of beds and groves, filling out the borders of the slope and the flatter area at the bottom, with tall straight poplars presiding over smaller trees and shrubs. Paths divide the gardens into rooms and spill down steps made, in some cases, of chunks of salvaged concrete. They're surprisingly attractive, doing a fine imitation of flagstones in some patio-like areas. "Andrew would break them into

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Bleeding heart and Japanese forest peony add moments of color to an otherwise leafy landscape.

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big pieces and I would drag them where I wanted them,” Boninti says.

It’s a haven for native plants, with Boninti diligently rooting out interlopers and adding shredded leaves to the beds every year to build rich soil where once was red clay. “The plants propagate themselves,” she says, believing that natives can be self-sufficient as long as they aren’t outcompeted. The leaves give the beds a more natural look, too; she uses mulch only on the paths.

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Under the big pecan tree, still a focal point, a large bed is home to serviceberry, Virginia rose and

hellebores. Boninti was a longtime garden guide at Monticello, and it shows when she mentions another name for that serviceberry, shadbush, and connects it to Jefferson’s birthplace, Shadwell.

Around the property are places that feel secretive and separate from the garden at large. The “Steps to Know Where,” one of the longest-established zones in the garden, lead down through a cleft in the land, perhaps an abandoned road-bed, bordered by a row of cedars. Wildflowers amply cover the ground, spilling over low-profile walls built with salvaged stone.

A certain thriftiness is at play here, in yard-sale benches and in the old door with flaking paint that opens into a tall, skinny garden shed. Nothing seems fussy, not even the formal geometric garden that hosts Boninti’s daffodil collection and borders of boxwoods. In one spot, a remnant of barbed-wire fence is deliberately left as a reminder of the property’s agricultural past.

Yet clearly there is great effort involved in planning and caring for such extensive gardens. “We garden all winter,” says Boninti. “We prune and put leaves down.” When she has a stem or branch from a shrub—boxwood, azalea, rhododendron, fringe tree—she habitually roots it to replant or give away.

Change is a constant. As the trees have matured, the beds at ground level below have gradually transitioned to shade gardens. Some invasives are finally eradicated, while others mount new attacks. Boninti’s still learning even as she now mentors others, giving lectures through the Virginia Master Gardener Association.

And every year Boninti fine-tunes her observations about the ways her garden is connected to the larger ecology. One native deciduous azalea with orangey-yellow blooms, for example, is “probably our favorite—it’s extremely fragrant. And it opens when the hummingbirds get back.”