



# Into the woods

A layered landscape smooths the way from house to forest

BY ERIKA HOWSARE PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIRGINIA HAMRICK

When you're building a new house on a wooded hilltop—a house whose design prioritizes views of the outdoors—the landscape is a crucial piece of the puzzle. From within Ron Harris' Fluvanna County house, the woodsy surroundings are a constant presence, especially through the south wall, which is made almost entirely of glass.

Finished in 2007, the house construction resulted in the clearing of the hilltop, leaving a barren swath of ground around the new home. Harris wanted to install a landscape right away, and hired designer Joan Albiston to help realize his vision of a lovely transition between the house and its setting.

"I said to Joan, 'I want gardens, but I want them to feel rustic and natural, so that the house sits in a natural garden in the woods,'" says Harris.

One key to making this happen was the installation of a deer fence, enclosing about three acres around the house. It's set far enough back in the woods that it becomes invisible, but it allows the planting of many species that would otherwise suffer damage.

Albiston also designed simple hardscaping to create definition in key areas. On the east side of the house, for example, a slope is subtly terraced via the two bluestone walls that cut across its width. "Joan designed the retaining walls so that it looks like we meant it," says Harris—avoiding, in other words, the harsh appearance of a steep, unbroken slope.

The walls have a utilitarian function too, optimizing drainage. Plantings in this area focus on perennials that shine in springtime.

On the west end, large faux boulders ("They're not fake rocks; they're real art," says Harris) create a layered boundary around the patio, where plantings grow among and soften the rocks. In this area, Albiston relied more heavily on native species. "This is the transition from the house to the woods," says Harris. A path made of honey quartzite winds among the planting beds.

"Ron's landscape also has several major elements that provided atypical challenges," says Albiston. One of those was the garage. Located nearly 200' from the house, it is built into the hillside so that it's invisible from the home—thus preserving the eastern-facing vista from the master bedroom. "The winter sunrises are spectacular," says Harris, who nixed a planned second story on the garage to keep it low-profile.

A green roof on the garage was the obvious way to hide it from view. Typically, that would mean a shallow layer of soil capable of supporting only a few kinds of plants, like sedums and succulents. In this case, a deeper bed allows shrubs, grasses and perennials to thrive.

"I didn't want to create a planting that would say, 'What's behind here?'" says Albiston. She

CONTINUED ON PAGE 33





Terrace steps lined with Virginia creeper lead to the lawn at the south side of the house; another terrace gets a clear view into the woods, while a deeper bed of shrubs, grasses and perennials helps hide one of the property's biggest challenges—a garage built into the hillside—from view; Radon's Favorite aster and Arkansas blue star brighten up a corner of the lawn; a mulched path leads guests through the woods from the parking area to the house.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

used uneven plant heights and “wide, soft arcs” to define planting beds in a way that truly disguises the garage.

Another unusual challenge of the property was the substantial distance between the guest parking and the front door. In warm months, when guests park at the end of the driveway, they can get only a glimpse of the home among the trees, and must traverse a curving gravel walk through the woods to reach the front lawn. From there, bluestone stepping stones lead through the grass.

Albiston planted a few trees around the edge of the lawn: rotundiloba sweetgum, black gum

and fast-growing willow oak. Paperbark maple provides texture with its cinnamon-colored exfoliating bark.

Year-round color was a priority. Deciduous sparkleberry holly holds onto its bright red berries through the chilly months, the fiery color offset by darkened rudbeckia stems and ethereal puffs of tawny muhly grass (which, in summer, is a delicious pink). Winter-blooming jasmine cascades its tiny yellow blooms over a retaining wall.

Grasses, both native and nonnative, include Shenandoah switchgrass and Dallas blues panicum. Evergreen osmanthus, nandina and na-

tive itea shrubs help anchor planting beds, while color bursts from irises, rudbeckia and coneflower.

The landscape requires ongoing attention (and drip irrigation to keep plants happy into late summer). Some plants originally specified in Albiston's design have been replaced as she, Harris and gardener Vicki Cordell have learned over time which species will thrive in particular spots.

For Harris, the landscape is a crucial piece that completes the design of the house itself. After all, he says, “Wherever you look, you’re looking at the gardens.”