





PLACE

A tapestry of forest plants
on an Albemarle hillside

BY ERIKA HOWSARE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIRGINIA HAMRICK

Even though Cole Burrell has lived and gardened at Bird Hill, his wooded Free Union property, for 17 years, there are still visible signs of the previous owners written into the garden.

"I want to honor the place and how it was used by the people who lived here before," says Burrell, a garden designer and author. Yet everything has evolved to support Burrell's vision of a woodland garden threaded with pathways. So, for example, a simple wooden archway, which used to lead to a treehouse beloved by the previous owners' children, still stands; but now it opens onto a stone walk that curves downhill. And an old sledding route survives as the primary path between the house and the sunny lawn.

Even the bones of the garden—a series of promontories that step down from the house—are inspired by the house itself, a 1980 structure clad in natural wood. Its windows and porches are like lookout points from which to survey the woods as they slope downward toward the creek.

"That's how the garden began to develop," says Burrell. The first "promontory" that he established is on the site of a former sandbox.

Under a canopy of mature poplar trees, beds full of ferns, hellebores, trilliums and many other shade-loving species carpet the ground. Stone steps and gravel paths thread through the foliage, with circular "nodes" at the intersections: repurposed millstones and whetstones set into the paths. Set among a natural cathedral of large trees, the first promontory has a large millstone in its center, glass marbles strewn among the gravel and a view of a large pignut hickory across the lawn.

"That's the venerable tree in the garden," says Burrell. "It's just spectacular"—especially in the fall when it turns golden yellow.

Burrell has tried to respect the trees he inherited, carefully pruning out windows so that patches of sky will be visible from the house and rear deck. The verticality of their trunks would be compromised by too much shrubbery, so Burrell has largely avoided planting evergreen shrubs.

Having literally written the book on hellebores (it's called *Hellebores: A Comprehensive Guide*), Burrell has unsurprisingly strewn these hardy, early-blooming perennials throughout his planting beds. Other favorites include phloxes, peonies, ferns, primroses, native azaleas, *disporum* ("They're tough as nails, and they look good all the time") and daffodils ("the smaller, more wild ones").

A stone walk leads downhill below the deck, a lighthearted homage to Jefferson's serpentine walks. This version is made of mossy fieldstone, and it ends with a zigzagging section inspired by Japanese garden traditions.

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Stone steps and gravel paths thread through the foliage, which includes phlox and Solomon's seal.

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how a gold hosta brings a touch of brightness to an especially shady corner of the garden. Even tropical plants like cannas and elephant ear have a place in this palette. In winter, species like daphnes and witch hazel add interest, and early spring blooms (like snowdrops and quince) are a priority.

Rustic salvaged items lend cultural interest here and there: an antique pot where Burrell is now raising wood frog tadpoles, or a series of rusted tire irons, like oversized metal Xs, that surround a container.

Burrell jokes that his is a “lazy approach” to gardening—clearly not the case when one con-

siders the scope of this landscape. Still, the garden does reflect a willingness to cede control in some cases, and to work with what plants themselves want to do.

“I emphasize things that are free-seeding, that will come up wherever they get a chance,” says Burrell. Wildflowers like wild geranium and Virginia bluebells fit the bill. Shrubs that proliferate on their own are welcome too: “Anything that makes a big thicket I just love.”

In the newer garden above the house, things are evolving after the loss of a large oak tree and some diseased Virginia pines, whose absence has allowed some smaller plants to thrive in the newly sunny areas. “I planted trilliums and ca-

mellias,” says Burrell. “And the dogwoods and redbuds are blooming more.”

The bones of the garden are, he says, a response to the trees. “The thing I enjoy is having a really strong design, but not looking strongly designed,” he says.

A wooded hillside is not always an easy place to garden. Burrell installed a deer fence, but moles and voles still wreak havoc. But he’s mindful of the big picture. “The birds and reptiles and amphibians are as important as the plants,” he says. “I don’t poison voles, because it goes up the food chain.”

Gardening mostly in shade is what he prefers: “It’s the plants I love and the environment I love. I want to hear wood thrushes.”