

PINNACLE LIVING
MOUNTAIN HOMES
SOUTHERN • STYLE

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TO FIND YOUR
DREAM HOME

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REBORN BARN &
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31 SECRETS

OF GREAT LANDSCAPE DESIGN

WHEN GREEN MEETS BLUE:

HOW COMMUNITIES GUARD THE LAND





Many elements come together in this striking design by Roanoke landscape architect David Hill: terraced levels, colorful plants, an interesting water feature and most notable, the use of rocks, the area's "native material."

SECRETS OF GREAT LANDSCAPE DESIGN

HOW EXPERTS MAKE US BEAUTIFUL

Stretching from Maryland to Georgia, the Appalachian Mountains offer unique challenges to landscapers who want to impose their designs on nature. The problems include steep terrain. Changeable weather. Rocky or clay-heavy soil. Professionals must know the area to be successful. And when they do, they can accomplish miracles.

BY SARAH THOMAS

Perhaps the first landscape architect to run up against a client who wanted something unsuited to the Appalachians was the man known as the father of landscape architecture – Frederick Law Olmsted.

When New York millionaire George Vanderbilt hired Olmsted to design his 120,000-acre property in Western North Carolina, Vanderbilt wanted to transform the rough terrain into an English-style country estate with parks and gardens. Olmsted knew the over-farmed, nearly deforested land was not suited to those plans.

Instead, in a letter dated January 20, 1891, Olmsted wrote, "My advice

would be to make a small park into which to look from your house; make a small pleasure ground and garden, farm your river bottom chiefly to keep and fatten livestock with a view to manure; and make the rest a forest, improving the existing woods and planting the old fields."

Vanderbilt agreed and so began the long and illustrious history of landscape architects meeting the special needs and challenges of the Appalachian Mountains.

Today, regional landscapers have a great deal to offer the modern homeowner who is looking to beautify something less than Vanderbilt's 120,000 acres.

DAVID HILL, ASLA, HILL STUDIO, ROANOKE, VA.

Hill doesn't look at a landscape and see the steep hillside, too many rocks, inadequate water or any of the other problems that are often obvious. He sees the gifts nature has already placed there.

He maintains there are two ways to create a landscape – by starting with an empty space and bringing elements in, or by carving something out of what already exists.

"We have a remarkable history in the Appalachian landscape," he says. "There are often road traces and old foundations to provide a great source of inspiration. Incorporating existing

elements into a landscape gives it an authenticity easily lost once the bulldozers move in."

Hill recommends seeking out local craftspeople, such as masons and timber framers, to transform a landscape since they know the materials that work best and are most readily available. Finding local plantsmen and nurserymen is also important.

"Someone who lives and works nearby will have a much better grasp of what works well than a large supplier in another state," he notes. "A certified arborist is also valuable in determining which trees should stay and which can go."

THE YEAR-ROUND LOOK

Hill advises homeowners to be sure to consider changing seasons when planning a landscape. Virginia's four distinct seasons allow designers to create an ever-changing view, and Hill found a favorite seasonal success was a fountain designed as a summertime feature that looked even better frozen over in winter.

He suggests homeowners look at creative ways of using one of the region's most prolific elements – stone.

"You've got to use rocks," he insists. "They're the native material." Common uses include walls, pools, fountains and paving. A more trendy application is in outdoor kitchens with stone counters and granite-topped cabinets.

Hill likes native stone.

"It can really complement a design," he says, "when stone is used to create columns for pergolas and trellises. We've got a lot of great things going for us in the mountains. There's the climate, topography and a remarkable array of natural resources on site. When you put those together, you get an instant variety of possibilities that you don't find in any other parts of the U.S."

To contact Hill: 540-342-5263 or www.hillsudio.com.

ANDY WHITE, OWNER/ DESIGNER, WAYSIDE LANDSCAPE SERVICES INC., ASHEVILLE, N.C.

Buncombe County, N.C. has seen something of a population explosion in the past decade. With more people come more houses and more building sites. Increasingly, those sites climb higher and higher up the region's mountains.

Andy White has been in operation throughout the recent boom. A top problem he encounters in the area is the typical "bench" homeowners carve out of mountainsides on which to perch their homes. Sites are often built on steep slopes by removing dirt from above and piling it below to create a flat area for construction.

According to White, this can cause two problems.

"Designers are faced with a steep bank behind the home that has been cut down to the subsoil or in some cases, bedrock," he points out. "It's virtually impossible to grow anything in such unforgiving soil." His solution: building a retaining wall far enough out from the slope to backfill with topsoil

and create a more forgiving incline that will sustain healthy plantings. In addition, he notes, designers need to plant something on that loose, front slope to prevent erosion. Here, the good news is that the front slope is typically covered in the good topsoil from behind the house, so most things will grow. Again, retaining walls and terraces can be used for usable space on these steep home sites. The best solution to a steep site, however, is to avoid many of the problems to begin with.

THE RIGHT LOCATION

"Get a topographical survey done first," says



COURTESY OF MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE COMPANY/CHRISTINA BONDARCO



COURTESY OF WATKINS LANDSCAPE SERVICES, INC.

Charm is the highlight of this lower-level patio by Andy White of Asheville, N.C. who believes in retaining walls and erosion-preventive planting to make steep lots workable.



More accent on water and rocks, the experts at Acadia Landscape Co. in Knoxville, Tenn. advise owners to drive mountain roads and see what grows in the area naturally.

White. "A good designer can take that and determine the best location for the house."

White cautions homeowners to be ready to compromise. Often, sites are located on steep slopes for other reasons than the lack of available flat land.

"Most people want a view," he points out, "and that isn't necessarily the best place for a house." Bringing in a landscaper before the bulldozers allows homeowners to pinpoint what should be saved and what will be sacrificed. White recommends fencing off areas to keep equipment out, and for those elements close to the home site, he suggest laying down a thick layer of mulch, adding geogrid (a sort of plastic mesh that stabilizes loose material) and another layer of mulch to distribute the weight of machinery. The designer can then salvage existing materials before the site is cleared.

"The hardest thing we can do from a planting point of view," White says, "is to put material back and make it look natural." While landscapers can create a lush, inviting landscape, it will never mimic the look of towering rhododendrons, mountain laurel and hardwoods that have been growing for a century



COURTESY OF TORIAN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

Mary Palmer Dargan of Cashiers, N.C. hates unnecessary paving, instead favors driveways featuring grass centers.

or so. "The only way to get that back," White says, "is to wait a century or two."

Finally, he cautions homeowners to be careful of construction waste. Chemicals can sometimes be poured out or buried nearby. When the landscape goes in, homeowners will be faced with either the cost of dead plants or removing contaminated soil.

To reach Andy White: 828-298-4599 or www.waysidelandscape.com

PHIL BONIFACIO, OWNER, AND JULIE COOPER, DESIGNER, ACADIA LANDSCAPE CO., KNOXVILLE, TENN.

Acadia designer Julie Cooper, is a proponent of native landscapes. "Try and keep true to the stewardship of the land," she says. "Follow the natural succession."

She explains that while city landscapes are often more formalized, in the mountains the surrounding land is often lovely and the views become focal points. Landscape in such an environment should blend with its surroundings. While the plantings immedi-

ately surrounding a home might be somewhat formal, they should become wilder and more natural as they extend into the existing landscape.

Cooper's best advice is to look around when planning a landscape. Drive the mountain roads and see what grows in the area naturally. Typically, east Tennessee has mixed hardwood and conifer forests with understory plants such as hydrangeas, viburnums and dogwoods.

Of course, often the natural landscape is the problem. Like other Appalachian landscapers, Acadia owner Phil Bonifacio is quick to pinpoint the mountain topography as a challenge for those designing in east Tennessee, specifically

those steep hillside home sites.

Closely tied to topography is the problem of soil.

"Part of the reason the topsoil is often so poor is that it's washed down into the creeks and river," he says. "Erosion control is crucial to hold that good topsoil."

Frequently, when land is cleared, native plant materials that keep soil in place are destroyed. Bonifacio has two solutions: plants for erosion control and retaining walls.

NOTING WHAT WORKS FAST

Cooper offers practical advice for keeping soil where it belongs: Look at what the state department of transportation is using along highways. It will be something with quick coverage that's low maintenance, i.e., throw in a wildflower mix that suits the planting zone and a difficult hillside will be lush and lovely in short order.

Vinca, also known as creeping myrtle or periwinkle, is a great choice for shadier areas. It has a nice spring bloom and is evergreen, offering year-round cover. Pachysandra (also called spurge), a fast-

growing groundcover, does well even in deep shade, while Mondo grass and ivy are also common choices.

Bonifacio points out that retaining walls are another great solution, not only because they keep soil in place, but to create more usable space. A client faced with a steep yard brought Acadia in to create a large-scale entertaining area. Bonifacio and Cooper's solution: a series of patios and terraces complete with water features that turned an unusable hillside into an entertainer's paradise.

As for the problem of soil that's already eroded and too poor to nurture a lush landscape, Cooper is a fan of finding plants that can tolerate the soil conditions and will slowly bring back the land. She contends that a common misperception is that soil should be amended prior to planting trees and shrubs. Digging a hole and filling it with good soil before planting a tree often means that the tree simply won't extend its roots into the poor soil.

"The key is drainage, rather than amendment," she says. "Breaking up soil allows proper drainage, which in turn allows native trees and shrubs to do well without lots of expensive topsoil."

For more, call 865-693-3411 or visit www.acadialandscape.com

MARY PALMER DARGAN, ASLA, DARGAN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, CASHIERS, N.C. AND ATLANTA, GA.

Mary Palmer Dargan doesn't believe in covering up a landscape with lots of paving. She likes to give rain and runoff room to soak into the soil.

"The more opportunities you have to let water seep into the ground the better," she says. "Banish unnecessary paving." Her designs reflect that belief with driveways consisting of two strips of pavement with grass growing in between and pathways that play hopscotch with moss.

Dargan says she attempts to duplicate nature whenever possible in her designs.

"I try to use native material," she says, "that looks as if it walked out of the forest." She recommends a native buffer zone around homes to deal with

challenging weather conditions. They can be windy, stormy and, on sunlit slopes, hot. Dargan suggests adding a native mixture of hardwoods and conifers on the west side of a home to filter winds that often come from the northwest and southwest. In addition to insulating the home to shield it from cold winter winds, the trees provide welcome shade on a typically hot side in summer.

When building a new home, Dargan emphasizes the importance of preserving existing trees for shade, wind protection and erosion control. She advises homeowners to protect any trees within 20 feet of the home site with at least six inches of mulch to reduce compaction from construction equipment. A heavily compacted tree is likely to die slowly over the course of about five years.

Like so many other landscapers in the Appalachians, Dargan cites the lay of the land as a significant challenge. She likes to use retaining walls that are no higher than five feet high. If she has an eight-foot rise, she'll create three-foot and five-foot terraces so the landscape will look more natural, with surrounding plantings softening the hardscape and walls and terrace that include some shape.

"I try to repeat the topography and curves of nature," she says.

Dargan also recommends using landscape challenges to add diversity to a property, i.e., if there's a problem with poor drainage in one area, add a pond that will attract wildlife.

"The more diversity you have," she says, "the richer your experience will be as a steward of the land."

Finally, she stresses the importance of having a master plan. Start with structures, then sketch in lines to show travel routes through the landscape—to the car, the hammock and even the trash bin. Before adding plantings, the homeowner will be able to grasp how a landscape will be used over time.

Dargan feels so passionately about having a master plan, she's written a book titled, "Timeless Landscape Designs: The Four Part Master Plan," which debuted in September.

To reach her: 404-231-3889 or www.dargan.com 