

## BROWN HILL GARDENS

Brown Hill Gardens have been developing for over 40 years. The Browns own 17 acres of rich native mountain land that runs from the bottom of the Merrills Cove gently up a ridge. They manage approximately 2 acres of cultivated gardens while caring for the remaining 15 acres of native woods. The home ornamental garden radiates out from the house and into the native woods. The view of the garden from windows inside the home is as valuable to them as the views when walking in the garden. They have incorporated paths and rooms to invite you to stroll, benches to have quiet time, and diverse plant material for Elizabeth's relentless appetite for plants. They also have a large vegetable garden and fruit orchard that provides produce almost year-round.

The Browns fell in love with this property in 1982, originally 7½ acres, off a dusty gravel road in southern Buncombe County, 15-20 minutes from their jobs and from downtown Asheville. The location was perfect for the Browns in so many ways: beautiful and quiet cove, woods filled with beautiful native trees and wildflowers, rich moist soils and a southeast exposure for both gardening and passive solar. Within the large stands of native *Rhododendron* on the sloping property, the Browns found a knoll, marked by a stately White Oak, in the middle of the property to site their house.

The first year the Browns carefully planned and coordinated with a skillful bulldozer operator to install their 1000' driveway/approach road to wind through the woods and the beautiful native *Rhododendrons*. Elizabeth surveyed the property for native wildflowers, shrubs, and tree species. Wildflowers such as Yellow Lady Slippers, Trillium, Trailing Arbutus, Black Cohosh, Crested Iris, Monkshood, Trout Lilies, and Jack in the Pulpits were identified and protected during construction. The extensiveness of the native *Rhododendron maximum* was also noted. The Browns were intent on trying to cause as little damage as possible to the native landscape.

When the house was completed in 1983, a local landscaper installed foundation plantings and railroad tie walls and steps. The shade loving shrubs planted such as Hollies, Leucothoe, Yews, and Pieris were small but have grown into tall proud shrubs today. One specimen shrub, *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Gracilis' was planted at the front door and would become their sentry for many years.

The Browns spent 1983-1987 cleaning up and repairing the land from the construction process. The disturbed soils were amended with organic matter. Rock Phosphate was also added as most of the clay soils in the south are very low in Phosphorous. *Rhododendrons*, Laurels and ferns were moved from the native woods and other shrubs and perennials were added here and there to tweak the landscape. Annuals were moved to fill in large spaces in the landscape. The coldest winter temperature on record in Asheville, -16 F, occurred in January 1985 and they were pleased at how their plants withstood the cold.

The first significant change to the original landscape came in 1987 when dirt was moved in to make a flat area in the backyard. Kemper made a sandbox for their young children and suddenly Elizabeth had a slope of dirt. She would design her first perennial bed to plant and work in while her children played nearby. She concentrated on having

as many natives as possible with shade perennials such as Creeping Phlox, Cardinal Flower, Columbines, Astilbes, Ferns and Hostas.

As their family grew, the Browns decided to begin a vegetable/fruit area. In 1989, they cleared land in the southeast corner of the property. After a season of soil preparation adding phosphorous, potassium and lime, they planted their first fruit in 1990: apples, peaches, blueberries, raspberries, grapes and strawberries. They planted Asparagus and their first season of annual vegetables. 1990 was also significant because Merrills Cove Road was paved thereby incentivizing the Browns to pave their gravel driveway.

During the 90's, the Browns were still working with the original areas – the perennial bed, backyard, front door foundation bed, and the vegetable/fruit area. They built a multi-use barn over by the vegetable garden and Kemper bought a Kubota tractor. The Browns began to develop the area between the driveway and backyard and moved away from only mulch to a grassed backyard.

By 2000, as Elizabeth became busier with her children's activities and working parttime, she decided to move away from tending so many perennials, which are neither perennial nor well behaved. She realized she needed more bones in the garden and wanted more year-round interest. Hence the Browns entered a new phase of gardening.

They developed the area below the house and deck, a gently sloped area that had not been disturbed. There was a lot of native plant material including Trillium, Bellworts, and Black Cohosh. They thinned out a few of the native trees but kept a Hawthorne tree, dogwoods, sourwoods and the mature Poplar and Oaks. They began to limb up the remaining native trees to allow light and create a beautiful green cathedral ceiling. Specimen conifers, shrubs and trees were added as were mulch paths to stroll. The view from the deck and porch down on this area was greatly enhanced and still is enjoyed today.

One of Elizabeth's greatest challenges in gardening on their property has always been one of her greatest blessings: How to integrate what God put on the beautiful property with what she wanted to plant on it. In this area of the garden, there are still many native wildflowers today. Trilliums and Black Cohosh are everywhere. Jack in the Pulpits are almost weeds.

In 2004, with their oldest son graduating from high school, the Browns decided to remove the sandbox and swing set to reclaim the backyard. They wanted a patio, a gathering place and a mortarless wall. They hired Kirk Alexander – a gifted landscape architect to design the patio and the surrounding landscape. This area is still a great focal point of the Brown's landscape, grounded by a Fringe tree and bordered by the original perennial border. The backyard is viewed from their home and functions as an entertainment space and a center point to walk to surrounding gardens.

Significant changes to the bones of the garden were made a few years later in 2006 when the Browns replaced the original railroad tie walls and steps around the house and replaced them with stone walls, stairs and curbing. They also added large steppingstones to the path around the house. The rockwork made a tremendous impact. By developing the hardscape, adding benches and a few pieces of art, and using conifer and evergreen trees and shrubs, the garden was becoming a more mature balanced garden with strong

bones and year-round interest.

In 2013, the Browns did their first structural addition to the house and added a fantastic room behind the garage called the potting shed. It's a beautiful, treasured space designed for tool storage, propagation, and produce processing. It's the staging area for all garden work. A grill porch that overlooks the backyard and a root/wine cellar were also added. At the entrance to the addition and the alley is a gate, designed based on the twisted arch of Rhododendron branches that you walk through on the way to the vegetable garden.

In the years following 2013 construction, Elizabeth amended the soil and created a landscape design for the disturbed areas around the addition. With additional light from tree pruning and thinning, more sun and partial-sun plants were planted to create a sunny shrub garden. Roses and Conifers were added with specimen deciduous shrubs along newly constructed mulch paths. Favorites are *Corylopsis* 'Ogon', *Fagus* 'Red Obelisk', *Cornus* 'Wolfs Eyes', and *Hamamelis* 'Diane. A treasured dwarf conifer area was also planted.

The Browns also added geothermal heating to their home in 2013 construction project, which required drilling 2 wells. This caused tremendous damage to the paved driveway that was resurfaced with a chipseal finish using brown Tennessee pea gravel.

Elizabeth feels her driveway/approach is an important aspect of her landscape design, introducing you to her woodland garden. She was first exposed to the importance of an entrance when learning about the Approach Road at the Biltmore Estate. When coming home, it welcomes you. As a visitor, it invites you. The Browns driveway comes off a county road with little fanfare, and then winds through a thick Rhododendron thicket. The winding nature of the drive with mossy shoulders is very soothing and appealing and draws you up into their home and garden. They have encouraged the native moss to grow on the shoulders and it is beautiful year-round. They maintain the healthy growing moss by always keep it clear of leaves and other debris. Elizabeth has also added some favorite shrubs and trees to the drive that offer a fun surprise when either leaving or coming in a car during colder times of the year when no one is typically walking in the garden. A beautiful Sango Kaku Japanese Maple with its coral branches, very early blooming Winter Honeysuckle, beautiful Lenten Roses, *Illicium floridenium*, and species of Witch Hazel line the drive along with the native Ericaceous plants.

The Browns took on another garden design project in 2019-2020. All the many mulched paths throughout the gardens leading to the many rooms were converted to stone with new steppers, gravel and curbing. Immediately the convenience of walking on gravel compared to damp mulch thrilled the Browns and beautifully defined the planted beds. Additionally, a part of the original Leucothoe bank above the drive was cleared and a new terrace was built above the cleared bank with a fire pit added. This provided an outdoor space for gathering safely with family and friends during the pandemic and a new area for Elizabeth to add more sun loving plants like dwarf conifers, dwarf Japanese Maples, and specimen deciduous plants. Aesthetics, livability, and practicality came together happily in these design projects.

Over the years the Browns have described developing their property as a journey, not a destination, and a big science experiment! They have had to manage the

tremendous growth of invasive plants onto their property with careful timing of sprays to get rid of Oriental Bittersweet. They have learned to live with change and loss of plant material. Their original large White Oak became weak and was then turned into mantle wood but replaced with a stunning Fort McNair Horsechestnut. Sadly their sentry *Chamaecyparis* 'Nana Gracilis' was lost when a heating oil tank had to be removed beneath it. They are on their 3<sup>rd</sup> design of the front foundation bed and the perennial garden has been renovated 4 times. Recovering from construction mess has further emphasized that there's always spring after a hard winter! Importantly, the fun and success of the journey and the processes comes when finding combinations that work, developing plant vignettes, watching the spaces fill in, and sharing these spaces with family and friends.

Brown Hill Gardens was recently described as a “tranquil woodland garden with subtle and sophisticated plantings”. It is also a place where the Browns experience art and science and living. They have discovered what the site can give them now, what it once supported, and who loved and worked the land in the past. They have collected relics from native Americans of long ago and deposited ashes of beloved pets. They have plants to remember both family members and travels. They have plants to mark important milestones in their lives. Their landscape is a living entity always full of surprises; both pleasant and disappointing. Most of all they have watched and experienced the last 40 years in their gardens with wonderment and joy.

**Elizabeth Brown**

*Garden Designer & Owner*

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Member: The French Broad River Garden Club Foundation, Inc.