

This scaled-down English garden
graces Donna Hackman's
Virginia home

words & photographs by CHARLES MANN

AN AMERICAN ESTATE

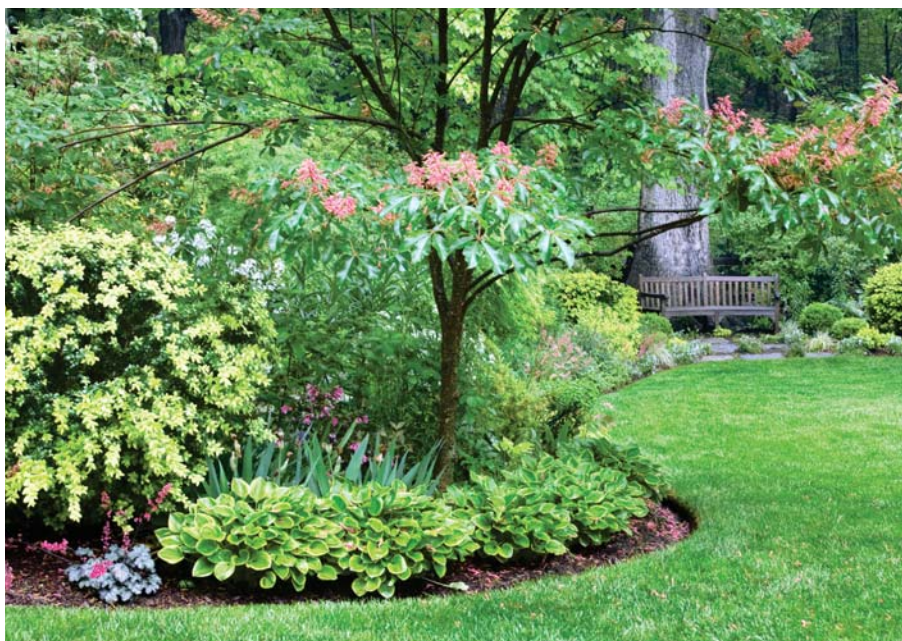


Above: Donna Hackman has brought the English spirit home to Middleburg, Virginia, with her deft touch in the garden she's named Highland Spring. Left: This double-bordered expanse offers both visual and olfactory treats from ground level to overhead. Below: A rustic bench offers a quiet spot for rest and reflection.





Designing the garden while her and her husband's home was being built, Hackman has created spaces both lusciously spilling over their boundaries (above) and carefully contained within their borders (right). Her plan to fill Highland Spring with a mystery that invites the visitor ever deeper into the garden is achieved by giving each garden room its own personality and unique features.



The rolling hills of Middleburg, Virginia, west of Manassas, are sometimes called “horse country” for a reason. Hardwood forests and rolling pastures bridge the gap between the Blue Ridge Mountains to the west and the flood plains farther east. The vistas are measured in miles; grand homes occupy commanding spots over verdant fields punctuated by split-rail fences, ponds and, yes, horses. It all has an English sensibility, sprung from colonial times.

Jim Hackman was born here. He still takes care of the family estate and oversees his stable of racehorses when he is not busy designing and building beautiful houses. However, it is Jim’s wife, Donna, whose passion and relentless energy for gardening has brought the English spirit home to Middleburg, with her unique and spectacular garden.

During the past 20 years, Donna has created a vision of the “romantic, tranquil refuge” that was first inspired by the British garden of Sissinghurst and by Penelope Hobhouse’s work at Hadspen House. “Hadspen House has gorgeous borders with beautifully coordinated colors, and I fell in love with the rose- and clematis-covered walls of Sissinghurst,” she confesses. “I found things I love in all the English gardens I saw and I have incorporated my favorite parts into my garden.” She dubbed her transplanted bit of England Highland Spring.

Hackman’s refuge is an exercise in condensing big-scale estate gardening down to something more intimate and personal. “As the house was being built, I laid out the main gardens,” she explains. “One thing I knew I wanted was a room with deep and long double borders ending in a pergola.” Today, it is still her favorite part of the garden. “It is classically English in style with roses and wisteria covering the pergola and, best of all, it is our view from our bedroom and sunroom.”

The facing borders—each 60 feet long and 12 feet deep—are color synchronized, with lavender and pink shades on the east, yellows and blues on the west. The eastern border, which also features white alliums, phlox and buddleias, is backed by a tall dense yew hedge. Masses of pink-blooming beautybush (*Kolkwitzia*) and roses add volume. The western border uses purple smoketrees (*Cotinus coggygria* ‘Purpureus’), purple-leaf plum and red ‘Dortmund’ roses to plump out the beds of purple ‘Globemaster’ alliums, catmint, ‘Johnson’s Blue’ geraniums, amsonias and iris, to name but a few.

BEYOND THE BORDERS

The rest of the garden is partitioned into many rooms using yews, roses, rhododendrons, boxwood, trellises and structures built by Jim. “I knew I wanted to create mystery in the garden, so you would want to see what was through the arch or around the next corner,” she explains. “I wanted a small *allée* of crab trees, a lily pond and a garden filled with spring bloomers. My three favorite flowers are peonies, lilies and roses. They are old-fashioned and wonderfully fragrant. I planned to have flowers spilling over the edges, cascading from overhead, and at all levels, very romantic and exuberant. Fragrance is also key, with lots of fragrant trees, shrubs and plants to engage all the senses.” Hackman incorporated all that into her landscape and much more.

A gap in the formal garden’s yews is framed with an arch of ‘Pink Perpetu’ roses and purple Jackman’s clematis. It leads to a path featuring a diorama containing a pale green urn embellished with hostas, iris, geraniums and pansies; a niche occupied by an angel statue draped with sprays of white spiraea flowers; and a pool of blue-flowered scilla encircling a huge oak. From there the path diverges in several directions.

“The most beautiful element in my garden I inherited,” Hackman declares, referring to the giant trees that overarch most of the hillside. “Our magnificent white oaks truly make the garden. We planned the house and garden around them and they immediately give the garden an aura of timelessness. The garden is many layered, the oaks being the tallest and the shade they give, both deep and dappled, is important in our very hot summers.”

Hackman’s big two-acre compound has allowed her to create many different scenarios beneath the oaks. She built a pretty waterfall and stream to accommodate Japanese primulas, another favorite flower. They thrive there, crowding in among the rushes, hostas, forget-me-nots and moss with their bright hues of red and pink. The stream also resulted in an unexpected bonus. “I didn’t anticipate how the birds would congregate and use the shallow water,” she says. “It really feels like an oasis and adds a tone of tranquility.” The stream flows down the slope into a small pond, presided over by a delicate weeping katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum* f. *pendulum*), and edged with red Japanese maples and other trees.



In addition to the woodland shade garden and the big borders, Hackman also created a formal sunken and walled *parterre* garden, using boxwood, lavender, vines and small maples. The entrance steps descend under arches of snowball viburnums (*Viburnum opulus*) that induce a soft romantic note in spring with their big white flower spheres.

HOW IT GROWS

Hackman is a knowledgeable plantswoman with the keen insight that comes from years of careful observation and experimentation. She has had one helper over the years, to lend a strong back and an extra pair of hands, but, “Design, plant selection and placement, first, second and sometimes third,” she laughs, “is mine.”

“A garden’s success, no matter how fabulous the design, depends on good soil and drainage,” she says. “The biggest challenge in creating this garden was soil preparation. We have heavy clay soil and it takes a lot of organic amendments to improve it.”

Watering is a time-consuming task. She uses overhead sprinklers, but she also spends a day each week



watering with a wand. “The hand watering allows me a chance to see how the plants are doing and to reflect on improvements and ideas,” she says.

Japanese beetles, drought and deer are occasional problems. Hackman doesn’t use chemical sprays, and now has a fence to frustrate the deer.

Hackman has garnered considerable cachet herself as a garden expert. In addition to designing gardens for clients around various parts of Virginia, she also has done volunteer work at Oatlands, near Middleburg, one of the oldest botanical gardens in America. She credits her own evolution as a gardener to her friend and mentor Pamela Harper, the noted garden writer and photographer who lives about an hour away.

Hackman’s gardening philosophy offers a formula that is simple and direct: “If you have a clear vision about the look you want, with hard work and the courage to make mistakes, you can achieve your goals.”



CHARLES MANN has been a full-time freelance and stock photographer for more than 15 years. He specializes in garden imagery, New Mexico culture and southwestern scenic landscapes.



Far left: One of several spots where guests can relax and admire the garden. Left: Hackman is proud of the garden's facing borders, which she designed around color themes. The near border features purples and blues, as in the 'Globemaster' alliums. Above: The existing white oaks impart a timeless quality. Below: The lily pond contributes to the overall tranquility.

