

Lessons from Hobbits

How to make the most garden out of a small space

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CARLA BURGESS

Its name might suggest a landscape peopled by decorative gnomes in a forest of bonsai trees, but the Hobbit Garden, a 2-acre private garden on the outskirts of Raleigh, is anything but. Open to the public by appointment, it is not a cutesy, quaint tourist attraction. It's a serious garden, filled with dozens of species of rare, unusual ornamental plants and guided by nature's blueprint.

Certainly visitors will see dwarf trees and shrubs, but those plants adopt this form naturally, without being forced into submission. Here, people can learn how to make the most of a small space, or to make larger spaces more manageable and intriguing by creating garden "rooms." Its beauty and charm notwithstanding, this is a teaching garden.

Meet Willie Pilkington, the full-time caretaker and plant specialist, and John Dilley, the design guru. The Hobbit Garden's first incarnation was a 50-by-80 foot garden on a tiny lot in downtown Raleigh. During neighborhood garden tours, visitors would queue up for blocks to get a glimpse of a plant collector's paradise. When they moved to a large lot that was virtually a blank canvas, Pilkington and Dilley took their own style of small-scale gardening with them rather than create sprawling perennial beds bordering a manicured lawn.

The look of the garden is inspired by a love for the forest and an appreciation of natural habitats, an ethic that was obvious in author J.R.R. Tolkien's verdant, utopian landscape of the fictional "Shire." When their space demanded a proper name, says Pilkington, "The Hobbit Garden" sprang readily to mind.

In the garden, neatly swept, sandy pathways wind through outdoor rooms that flow gracefully into one another. If you wander all the way through and then return from a different direction, you may swear you haven't been in that spot before. Surprisingly, the sheltered spaces feel quite open.



A low-sweeping Juniperus horizontalis 'Blue Rug' (at ground level, front), diminutive Pinus densiflora (left) and Cryptomeria japonica 'Yellow Twig' (right) frame a view of one of the garden's interior "rooms."

"Most homeowners have a tendency to go around the perimeter and plant rows of everything," says Dilley. "By using islands and creating curtains of green hedges, it actually creates the illusion of more space."

Dilley suggests using broad-leaf evergreens, most of which can withstand severe pruning, as screeners. The majority of narrowleaf evergreens, such as Leyland cypress, are intolerant of heavy cutting, he says, with exceptions being yews in the genus *Taxus*. He is particularly fond of Carolina cherry laurel (*Prunus caroliniana*) as a hedging plant. 'Bright 'N Tight' is a tightly branched, compact and pyramidal form.

Today, says Pilkington, people can bring the forest into a garden without physically overwhelming it. Virtually every native species of tree and shrub has likely produced a seedling or offshoot that has some variations, often uniquely ornamental, from the parent

plant. Once someone discovers such a specimen, that lucky horticulturist can cultivate it, see if the desirable characteristic can be retained and eventually make the new variety available.

Sometimes a variety occurs that is comparatively shorter than the species, maintaining a compact, or dwarf, form. Other times a variety may assume a more narrow overall shape than its parent, with branches that grow close to the trunk in a more vertical direction. The latter form is often referred to as "slender profile." Such is true of the columnar sweetgum, 'Slender Silhouette', which may grow 60 feet tall but only 6 feet wide.

"If you're on a small property, miniature, dwarf or slender profile is the way to go, especially if you're a collector," says Pilkington. "It will not outgrow its space, generally speaking, and will not intrude on your neighbor's property." This means that plants are allowed to reach their full potential, remaining "untortured," he says with an ironic smile. "If you

can get out of what is the so-called standard for residential planting, which is: ‘Prune, prune, prune’, ‘Shape, shape, shape’, you start to realize what you enjoy about the forest—the natural shape of things and how they grow together.”

Pilkington says the guiding philosophy in the Hobbit Garden is low-maintenance. They prefer plants that can hold their own against the slings and arrows of the local climate. “In nature, no one is raking, no one is spraying, no one is mulching, no one is watering,” he says.

The Hobbit Garden is at 9400 Sauls Road in Raleigh and open for individual or group tours, by appointment only, 8 a.m.–6 p.m. Contact the garden by e-mail: hobbitgarden@att.net. Cost is \$10 per person.

JOHN’S DESIGN TIPS & TRICKS

↪ When selecting a tree for a site, don’t overlook the subterranean element. People tend to focus on how wide the canopy spreads or how tall a shrub or tree grows, overlooking the issue of root spread. Traveling roots can encroach on house foundations and neighboring properties, and interfere with underground water, sewer or gas lines. They may also compete for food and moisture with other plants you’d like to include in your design.

↪ Choose combinations of plants that make the garden inviting through all four seasons. A marriage of deciduous and evergreen trees in the landscape adds balance and year-round interest. Consider the texture, color, size, fragrance and shape of all the plant’s parts.

↪ If you’ve just moved to a new property, “live with it for a while” before launching a wholesale installation of plants or redesign. Notice, over time, what areas tend to retain moisture and which are drought-sensitive. Pay attention to the areas that have greatest exposure to wind, sun and shade.

↪ Use a large plant to open up a small space and serve as a focal point, rather than completely packing a small space with small plants.

↪ Use contrast. For example, include delicate plants in front of a large stone wall. Or plant a fine-leaved groundcover around the trunk of a massive old tree.

↪ Incorporate something of visual interest beyond your property line into your design. This might include a steeple, wall, hillside or tree line.

WILLIE’S QUICK PICKS FOR CONIFERS

↪ Japanese plum yew (*Cephalotaxus harringtonia*). Tolerant of full sun and partial shade and generally slow-growing. ‘Fastigiata’ and ‘Korean Gold’ are excellent upright growth forms.

↪ Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*). Very tough, tolerating a wide variety of environmental conditions. Many commercial varieties are suitable for small gardens.

↪ Norway spruce (*Picea abies*). Tolerant of full sun or shade. A variety of dwarf, slender-profile and miniature growth forms are available.

↪ Eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*). A hardy native, growing large in the wild. Has gnarled, gray trunks that are architecturally interesting. ‘Grey Owl’ is a low spreader. ‘Pendula’ is a tall, weeping form. 📍



*TOP: The perennial St. John’s wort, *Hypericum androsaemum* ‘Albury purple’, provides interest well after flowering with its purplish leaves and berries.*

*MIDDLE: The Hobbit Garden is screened from the road by a diverse collection of evergreens. Dawn redwood towers above a row of Chinese junipers, skirted by low-growing shrubs like *Abelia*, boxwood, nandinas, holly and Japanese barberry.*

*BOTTOM: This *Camellia sasanqua* is part of a vast Hobbit Garden collection of camellia species and varieties in bloom from October through April.*