

## The Story of Blue Briar Cottage & Gardens

Blue Briar Cottage and Gardens are in Asheville, NC, on Sunset Mountain, 1.5 miles northeast of downtown Asheville. The cottage was built in 1906 and is an example of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century rock construction that was also used when building the Grove Park Inn. Blue Briar was built seven years prior to the Grove Park Inn and while smaller, the construction methods for the fireplaces, chimneys and heart of pine floors are identical to these same features at the Inn. There is no confirmation of the architect or builder of Blue Briar, however Dr. E.W. Grove's son-in-law, Mr. Seeley lived in Asheville in 1906 and is widely assumed to have been the architect or primary designer.

The original owner of Blue Briar Cottage was William Randolph, a pioneer in public education. He sold the house in 1911 to E.W. Grove, owner/builder of Grove Park Inn and The Grove Arcade. In 1914, William Jennings Bryan lived at Blue Briar and later built a home in town. In 1928, Sarah Johnston Berger purchased the property. Local lore has it that the house remained empty and during Prohibition, one thousand cases of liquor were found on the property.

In 1930, the son of President Hoover leased Blue Briar for the 'mountain air' to aid in the treatment of his tuberculosis. When President Hoover and his wife would visit, the print media would refer to Blue Briar as 'The Little White House.' Secret Service agents accompanied the President and stayed in a small cabin located near the main house. Originally, a veranda spanned the entire front of the house. At Hoover's request, one side of the veranda was enclosed. The flagpole on the property was erected during the Hoovers stay and a 48-star American flag was given to the house. The flag is too large to fly now due to the location of the pole and size of the trees nearby.

In 1952, the Demmons purchased Blue Briar. Dr. Demmons was a forester for the US Government and was stationed in China. When Mao Zedong came to power, he cut down *Metasequoias* for fuel as part of his Great Leap Forward. Dr. Demmons was forced to leave China but brought with him two hundred *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, 'Dawn Redwood' seedlings in pots and over two pounds of seed from these trees. These seedlings and seeds were planted at Blue Briar and other locations, including Boston's Arnold Arboretum, and at other arboreta. In 2000, a senior scientist from Nanjing University in China visited Blue Briar and noted that the two Dawn Redwoods on the property could be among the largest in the world. Seeds from these Dawn Redwoods have been returned to China for replanting.

The original approach to the house was a carriage road that began at the lower edge of property where the property ran along Sunset Road. A spring-fed watering trough for the horses was built into one of the terrace walls along the carriage road; it is still functioning and is used by animals visiting the gardens. The original property included the main house, a garage, and a spring house. Much of the original house remains. From the front room upstairs, the Dawn Redwoods perfectly frame Mount Pisgah. The garage and spring house are constructed entirely of stone and are built into the hillside. The small cabin, used by the secret service, is still present on the property.

In 1971, the current owners purchased the house from Mrs. Demmons and began the task of enlarging, renovating, and caring for the gardens on this amazing property. The original lawn had fifteen terraces, which the owners have remade into the seven terraces that are present today. The first tree they planted was a Copper Beech, *Fagus sylvatica f. purpurea*. It serves as a reminder of the Connecticut home town

of one of the owners. It was planted near the top of the driveway, where, fifty plus years later, it still lives. See Photo 01.

In the early years, the owners worked to rebuild terrace walls using existing rock and redefine garden beds. Pieces of ceramic tile led to the discovery of an overgrown pond that was most likely original to the landscape. They remade the pond, channeling an existing spring to feed it and installing a rock bridge to cross between the two sections. Water lilies thrive in the pond; a small bog garden with primroses borders it on one side while lilies, dahlias and irises grow on the other side. Marsh marigolds, Cardinal flowers and spring bulbs add additional color to the area around the pond. The garage is now called the studio and is used for storage, overwintering plants, and a kitty hide-away. They have also added a large greenhouse, multiple cold frames, a toolshed, a woodworking shop, a gazebo, plus seating areas at various elevations to enjoy sunrises and sunsets.

Mrs. Demmons was the originator of the wildflower garden. The entrance is noted with a wooden arbor and plaque bearing her name. This garden is filled with purple phacelia, black cohosh, blue cohosh, trout lilies, toad lilies, mertensia, tiarella, iris cristata, violets, gingers, lily of the valley, woodland poppies and numerous varieties of trilliums and ferns. It is at its peak in the early spring when it is a profusion of ephemerals and is especially popular with garden tours.

The gardens include a wide variety of styles and shapes and are layered with woodland natives, many cultivars of Japanese maples, ferns, evergreen and deciduous shrubs, groundcovers, exotic conifers, fruit trees, vegetables, herbs, grasses and a continuous supply of blooming perennials and annuals. The woodland areas hold hundreds of native plants and an ever-growing collection of trilliums, including grandiflorum, luteum, cuneatum, erectum, vasei and sulcatum. High shade covers most of the garden areas, allowing dappled light and a wide choice of plant material for the beds, much of which was grown from cuttings or seed in the greenhouse. Throughout the years, guests and growers from other regions and gardens have brought plants to share.

Yard debris is kept onsite and composted. There are numerous 'habitat piles' to encourage insects and small animals. Rocks are collected and become garden borders, terrace walls, focal points, or cairns in the gardens and along paths; stumps and tree sections are used for firewood, accents, borders, handrails, and steps. A well supplies water for the gardens and the greenhouse. Walkways and steps through the garden are made with combinations of found field stone, logs, and crushed gravel. There are three distinct grass lawns and several large mossy areas and paths. Leaves are mulched and added to the garden beds for overwintering or composted. Metal, wood, and ceramic art can be found throughout the property.

The nursery is a small but active business. Plants grown here are sold or shared with other nurserymen, friends, and neighbors; they are also sold at plant sales to help raise scholarship funds for local horticultural and conservation students. New varieties of daylilies, chrysanthemums, hostas, hellebores, poppies have been developed by deliberately crossing standard varieties. Close to one hundred varieties of boxwoods have been propagated here. Workshops on seed gathering, grafting, propagation and pruning have been taught here.

Acreage has been added throughout the years and the property now includes almost fifteen acres. The elevation change from top to bottom of the property is almost two hundred feet. The driveway descends sixty-five feet from the main road (Blue Briar Road) down to the driveway turnaround and parking area. A maintenance road runs through the upper portion of the property and is often used by walkers, bike

riders and an occasional car. This road is bordered by a bamboo grove and is dotted with stacked stone sculptures that are often remade by passers-by after local bears have had a chance to check for insects beneath the rocks. A fairy garden created at the base of an old tree trunk is ever-changing with the seasons and holidays. No one is quite sure of the participants in this evolving creation.

The garden is currently home to sister cats who chase snakes, lizards, butterflies, and chipmunks. The pond is inhabited by frogs and Koi and is loved by the bears. Through the years, Blue Briar has been home to many family dogs and cats. Regular visitors to the garden include bears, turkeys, a pet crow along with gray squirrels, white squirrels, and birds too numerous to count.

Blue Briars 'owners' have designed, managed, and grown these gardens mostly by themselves for the last 52 years, utilizing occasional help when needed. Their children were toddlers when the property was purchased; they grew up playing and working in the gardens. These gardens have been toured and photographed by thousands of students, gardeners, garden enthusiasts, professionals, retirees, neighbors, and visitors from all over the world. It contains the largest 'lawn' in the mountainside neighborhood, and it is the frequent and favorite gathering place for family, neighbors, and friends – annual holiday parties are a tradition with the 4<sup>th</sup> of July the largest. Dinner parties for visiting horticulturalists, fund raisers and weddings have been held here. The Road Scholars Educational Tour company often includes this garden in their Garden Tour programs. In 2012, the Garden Bloggers Fling came for a 'garden tour' and several wrote blogs about the experience – see blogger's write ups in the supplemental folder.

An internet search for 'Blue Briar Gardens' and 'Asheville' will yield multiple stories of visits to this mountain garden. Newspaper searches from the 1930's will yield articles regarding the Hoover's stay and President Hoover's visits to Blue Briar.

Anna Lockwood & Ruth Goodridge  
Garden History & Design Committee  
The French Broad River Garden Club Foundation, Inc.  
Asheville, NC  
January 2024

*A footnote:*

The property owner has authored many articles over the years about life at Blue Briar, including his gardening tips and philosophies. Several of these articles are included with this submission. For the last 10 years, he has written a quarterly newsletter for his wife's garden club, The French Broad River Garden Club. The newsletters are affectionately written under his pseudonym 'Dr. Sapp.'