

# **2026 MGHC Garden Tour**

**Saturday, June 13 from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.**

**Sunday, June 14 from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.**

**Apison, Collegedale, McDonald & Ooltewah**

Take a “reading tour” of our five home gardens and one public arboretum to enhance your enjoyment of this year’s Garden Tour.

We look forward to seeing you there!

NOTE: The two home gardens on Bear Stone Drive are side by side and count as one location.

## Private Homes

### Catherine and Mark Midkiff's Garden at 7902 Bear Stone Drive in Ooltewah



When my husband and I purchased our home in 2023, a 50-by-150-foot natural gas easement covered much of our backyard. This significantly limited our landscaping options. To make things worse, the land is irregular, cannot be leveled for a traditional lawn, and includes a drainage ditch running through it.

During the first year, I edged the easement with native rocks that I had collected from around the property during construction. The sheer volume of rock was overwhelming and gave me a new appreciation for the University of Tennessee's fight song, "Rocky Top." I also repurposed flatter rocks as steppingstones, making it easier to navigate through my pollinator garden.

While I've made significant progress transforming our yard, the battle with weeds—especially the relentless trumpet vine—continues. During the winter months, I've

experimented with cover crops such as Sorghum-Sudangrass and Crimson Clover to enrich the soil, suppress weeds, and prevent erosion. I had never heard of using cover crops in a home garden until I took the Hamilton County Master Gardener course, which is an extension of the University of Tennessee.

Having once lived in London, I drew inspiration from English gardens that I love. I knew I wanted a similar look, so in the summer of 2024 I scattered wildflower seed mixes along with annuals and perennials, such as zinnias and cosmos, in my backyard. Then, I observed what thrived in the poor soil alongside hungry local wildlife. I liked the zinnias but found them susceptible to powdery mildew, which led me to experiment with more resistant varieties such as the Zahara series. In addition to native species such as coneflowers and bee balm, I also love the airy, impressionistic look of cosmos, though their height caused them to flop, prompting me to try more compact, dwarf varieties.

Various types of sage have become favorites of mine for their drought tolerance and resistance to deer and rabbits. I tend to gravitate toward cool colors in summer and was delighted when blue sage (*Salvia farinacea* or mealycup sage), a tender perennial, returned the following year. Its vibrant blue blooms last from late spring to late fall, attracting bees I've come to appreciate as they work peacefully alongside me. The garden has become a haven for pollinators, including honeybees, bumblebees, hummingbirds, and a wide variety of butterflies.

My other garden beds include many varieties of hydrangeas, which I love but find somewhat challenging in Tennessee's heat. Among my most reliable annuals are Supertunias® and vinca, which I also arrange in terra-cotta pots that I purchased in Greece while living there 25 years ago.

Though not a gardener himself, my husband Mark has been an essential partner—hauling countless loads of topsoil, mulch, and rock, and supporting my vision every step of the way.

## Diane and John Nivens' Garden at 7903 Bear Stone Drive in Ooltewah



In our yard, my husband John and I started with a blank slate. When we moved to our new house in 2023, our yard did not even have any grass. At first, we thought that this was an ideal situation; we could start from nothing and make it our own. However, little did we know that living at the base of White Oak Mountain would involve a variety of challenges. While we had planted gardens together in Illinois and Florida, we were not prepared for what it would take to create the gardens of our dreams here in Tennessee.

Our main challenge was the rocky, clay soil. Our yard had more rocks than soil, so it was time to get creative with the truckload of rocks that we eventually dug up. We chose to use many of them as borders for the flower beds and were happy with the outcome as the rocks add some eye-catching definition to the property.

Over the past two years, our gardens have evolved, but there was never any master plan. The shape of the gardens reflects my view of nature. Nature rarely creates straight lines, so I follow Mother Nature's lead by creating flower beds with curvy borders.

In our gardens, you will find all kinds of plants and colors. You will find roses scattered throughout the garden. You will also find old favorites like hydrangeas, peonies, daylilies, coneflowers, sage, ornamental grasses and many more varieties of perennials. You will also find many varieties of annuals. I love to add annuals for a pop of long-lasting color. Petunias, impatiens, geraniums, daisies, marigolds, and carnations are among my favorites.

Between our neighbor Catherine's and our efforts to improve the landscape, we are seeing worms in the soil—they were not there before—as well as bees and more birds. As our soil improves and I add more plants, we cannot wait to see what other kinds of wildlife will come to visit our yard.

None of the improvements in our yard would be possible without the assistance of John. Thank you John for being my partner in this ambitious project.

We hope you enjoy visiting our gardens as much as we enjoy this being our new and improved backyard.

## Catherine and Diane's Joint Project on Bear Stone Drive



Diane and Catherine became friends and neighbors when they each moved into their new homes in 2023. Sharing a love for gardening, they quickly agreed they wanted to hide—or at least distract from—the utility boxes that were an eyesore between their front yards.

Together, they designed a new garden layout and called 811 to have the utilities marked before beginning any work. Catherine used her pickup truck to haul in topsoil, helping to amend the existing clay and gravel while also raising the new planting bed.

They chose an irregular shape for the garden, extending the same flowing curves into both of their yards to mimic the natural lines found in nature. To disguise the round water valve lids, they incorporated matching flower filled pots as decorative covers. For the plants around the boxes, they selected broadleaf evergreens with contrasting winter color, ensuring the space maintains visual interest throughout the colder months.

## Randall and Jeanie Meyer's Garden at 8920 Finney Point Drive in Ooltewah



Our Gardens were created shovelful by shovelful. For 39 years, season by season, the trunk of the car brought home trees, shrubs, perennials, and compost. The garden spaces evolved and began to host butterflies, bees and birds!

Jeanie was inspired by the concept of creating 'Garden Rooms.' In the front side yard, this concept was created in the White Garden, a space where grass wouldn't grow. The brick walls were built by Randall and his brother; a water feature was added with the statue to create a focal point; then lots of compost and years of planting created the ever-changing monochromatic palette of white flowers.

In the back yard, creating a series of garden spaces took more time...and a small tractor!

The backyard was terraced to prevent erosion. The upper level by the house was originally planted with sun perennials along a beautiful white arching picket fence. Twenty years later, the fence was replaced by a boxwood hedge which required less maintenance. The lower backyard was developed around a croquet lawn and was a private 'secret garden' prior to the English Laurel hedge dieback. Coordinating the flow of the different backyard levels was challenging due to large trees such as dogwood clumps in the wrong place. An 'ah-ha' moment came while watching the movie *Pride and Prejudice* and observing a stone circle with steps leading in and out on 4 directions. It was the answer to the upper hydrangea borders transitioning to the levels of the lower yard.

The circular theme frames stretches of grass and creates small areas of interest and functionality. These include: The Imagination Garden Circle for grandchildren, the Stone and Yew Circle, the Firepit Circle, the Water Feature & Fountain Circle, and the Pergola Circle. Recently, these areas provided gathering spaces for an intimate family wedding.

Adaption to change has probably been the modus operandi over the years. Post Oak trees grew over 30 years and developed a canopy of shade. Hosta, Lenten Roses, Heuchera, and foxglove replaced the leggy sun perennials. In 2020, a tornado destroyed some of the maple and dogwood trees in the front yard. This brought opportunity for more sunlight and partial-sun-loving shrubs (Encore and Bloom-a-thon Azaleas; BoBo and Little Lime Panicle Hydrangeas).

Through the years, the garden has been a constant friend, teaching lessons in patience (the foxglove seeds will bloom next year), endurance (sturdy plants uphold the vines), and how the songs of the birds and the dirt under my fingernails can provide peace and calm, amid a busy world. Our hope is that you too may be inspired by nature and that your love for gardening is as perennial as the seasons!

## Sidney and Mark Czynski's Garden at 1864 Holden Farm Place in Ooltewah



1864 Holden Farm Place is the idyllic home of the Czynskis. Mark is a retired international pilot and his lovely wife Sidney, a former flight attendant and gardening enthusiast. The property is nestled in the Whisper Creek enclave of the larger Windstone gated community in Ooltewah.

The couple moved from the Chicago area to this home approximately four years ago and went to work soon after on their new garden. They were downsizing from a much larger yard and garden in Illinois.

They recently had Dream Gardens Landscape Design and Installation (a sponsor of the 2026 Garden Tour) create a bermed back border with evergreens to screen off their small back yard for privacy and beauty. Sidney also requested the inclusion of many striking perennials to add needed yearlong color and food for pollinators. They include but are not limited to Nepeta, Echinacea, Sedum, Penstemon, Hardy Geranium, Siberian Iris.

Newly planted Serviceberry, Sweetbay Magnolia, and Vitex Trees were added on the sides for additional deciduous screening, seasonal beauty and wildlife benefits.

**Jane and George Diamantis' Garden at 6508 White Oak Valley Circle in McDonald**



Welcome to Whiteoak!

Whiteoak is a property located just minutes from Interstate 75 North Ooltewah exit #11. We have planted on several acres an English style cottage garden that reflects our passion for the horticultural world.

Please enjoy a stroll through the grounds and visit the folly with its accompanying koi pond. Saunter in the shade gardens to the rear near our bee hives. Statues of Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, the Winged Victory of Samothrace, and two lions, Atalanta and Melanion, are awaiting a photo opportunity with you!

## Ana Gonçalves and Daniel Lima's Garden at 10984 Prairie Lake Drive in Apison



When we moved to our property in 2015, we didn't have any gardening experience but had one clear conviction: we wanted to live close to nature. We had both grown up in the city, and what we knew about gardens was about as knowledgeable as the back of a seed packet. What we had instead was curiosity, willingness to learn, and a shared dream of a space that would feel alive.

The garden grew the way gardens grow; slowly, imperfectly, and one project at a time. First came a flower bed, something simple but that got our minds going. Then came the patio, built with the help of friends over the course of a month that gave us a place to sit and dream. Then, beds surrounding the patio and a corner border along the back. Our latest addition was creating the spa area and a vegetable garden. Each year we looked at what was missing. For us, it was to invite the insects, the bees, and the birds into our creation. Our greatest inspiration came from Monty Don and his philosophy that a garden should be a living ecosystem, not just a beautiful view.

Today the space unfolds as a series of rooms, designed to be discovered from the patio outward. A corridor of tall arborvitae leads you in, their dark columnar forms giving way to flower beds on either side; foxgloves reaching skyward, peonies in deep pink, salvias, bee

balm, nepeta, and lilies lining the path to the patio. To the right, the circular patio has its stone firepit that invites you to slow down. Against the brick wall, a clematis climbs a trellis beside the dining table, its magenta flowers opening above a pot of deep purple heuchera. The flower beds wrap around the seating area in layers of color and texture. One wall is devoted entirely to strawberries, grown in a hand built three-column vertical structure with a drip system running through the wall itself. The entire garden runs on drip irrigation, though whenever the rain barrel allows, we prefer to use collected rainwater, particularly for the vegetable beds.

Continuing along the path, the spa area opens onto a gravel garden with views of the lake that invoke a sense of calm. Hibiscus and container plantings surround the spa deck, with coral honeysuckle on the wall making it feel serene. Beyond lies the vegetable garden, Mediterranean in spirit with corrugated metal raised beds arranged around a gravel path, planted with tomatoes, peppers, beetroot, onions, lettuces, chives, strawberries, marigolds, and nasturtiums growing together as companions. Oregano, mint, chives, and alliums keep pests at bay naturally. A Meyer lemon tree, two new fig trees, blueberries of several varieties, and a black raspberry complete the edible garden.

Along the boundary, a grouping of dappled willows provides privacy, their golden-tipped branches sheltering a hand-built insect hotel of logs, bamboo, and stones beneath. A bird feeder stands nearby, and two water stations: one for pollinators, one for birds, and any other visitors that might want to pass by. Finally, there is a newly expanded pollinator bed, grown over two seasons, sits in its quiet corner behind blueberry bushes, ready to be pollinated.

What we have learned, more than any plant name or pruning technique, is that a garden is a conversation; with the soil, with the seasons, but most importantly, with each other. We have planted things that died and things that surprised us. We have changed our minds, moved plants, started over. This garden has been one of the great collaborations of our lives together, and it is nowhere near finished.

We hope that when you walk through it, you feel what we feel every time we sit on that patio as the bees go about their business; that you do not need much space, or much experience, to make something that matters. Just the willingness to begin. Please, find a seat, take your time, and let the garden do the rest.

# Public Venue

## The Southern Arboretum at Southern Adventist University



The Southern Arboretum is more than a beautiful landscape—it is a dynamic, living classroom that blends horticulture, education, and technology. Spanning the campus of Southern Adventist University, the arboretum showcases more than 1,200 documented trees and woody plants representing 91 species, including a significant number native to Tennessee.

What sets the arboretum apart is its innovative approach to interpretation and learning. Each tagged tree is part of an interactive system that allows visitors to engage with the landscape in a deeper way. Using geolocation technology, guests can follow a live digital map across campus; as they approach a tree, they can access audio recordings that share botanical details, ecological significance, and even historical context. Each specimen tells its own story, creating a personalized and immersive experience with every visit.

The arboretum also emphasizes the connection between people and place. Memorial and celebration trees throughout the grounds honor individuals and families, weaving personal histories into the landscape itself. This thoughtful integration of storytelling adds a meaningful human element to the scientific collection.

Decades of careful planning and stewardship have shaped the arboretum into what it is today. Thanks to the Director of Landscaping, Mark Antone, the campus landscape reflects over 40 years of vision and dedication. Under the supervision of the Director of Southern Arboretum, Dr. Ben Thornton, more recent efforts have focused on documenting and expanding the collection through student-led research and engagement. Students play an active role in maintaining the arboretum, developing educational content, and contributing to its ongoing growth—ensuring that it remains both a learning resource and a living legacy.

As an accredited arboretum with a strong digital presence, it continues to evolve through advancements such as detailed plant photography, online resources, and the development of individual tree videos. Whether explored in person or virtually, the Southern Arboretum offers a unique opportunity to experience the intersection of nature, education, and innovation.

Visitors are invited to walk the campus, engage with the stories behind each tree, and discover how this remarkable space continues to grow—rooted in both tradition and forward-thinking design.

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