



hidden

in the Blue Ridge

Come with us as we explore this undiscovered
village in the mountains of Virginia.

BY CASSANDRA M. VANHOOSER / PHOTOGRAPHY MARK SANDLIN





They call it God's thumbprint. This fertile Virginia valley, encircled completely by a single mountain, stretches some 10 miles in length and 5 miles in width. Nearly 300 lucky souls dwell within the reassuring embrace of these rounded peaks. Silos, barns, and houses punctuate the rolling rhythm of the verdant farmland. Thick clumps of bluegrass blanket the pastures, and wild hawthorn bushes embroider the hillsides with glistening white blossoms.

Indeed, from high above, the gentle oval of Burke's Garden looks as if the Lord Himself might have laid His hand upon Virginia's Blue Ridge and created this Eden for His own divine pleasure.

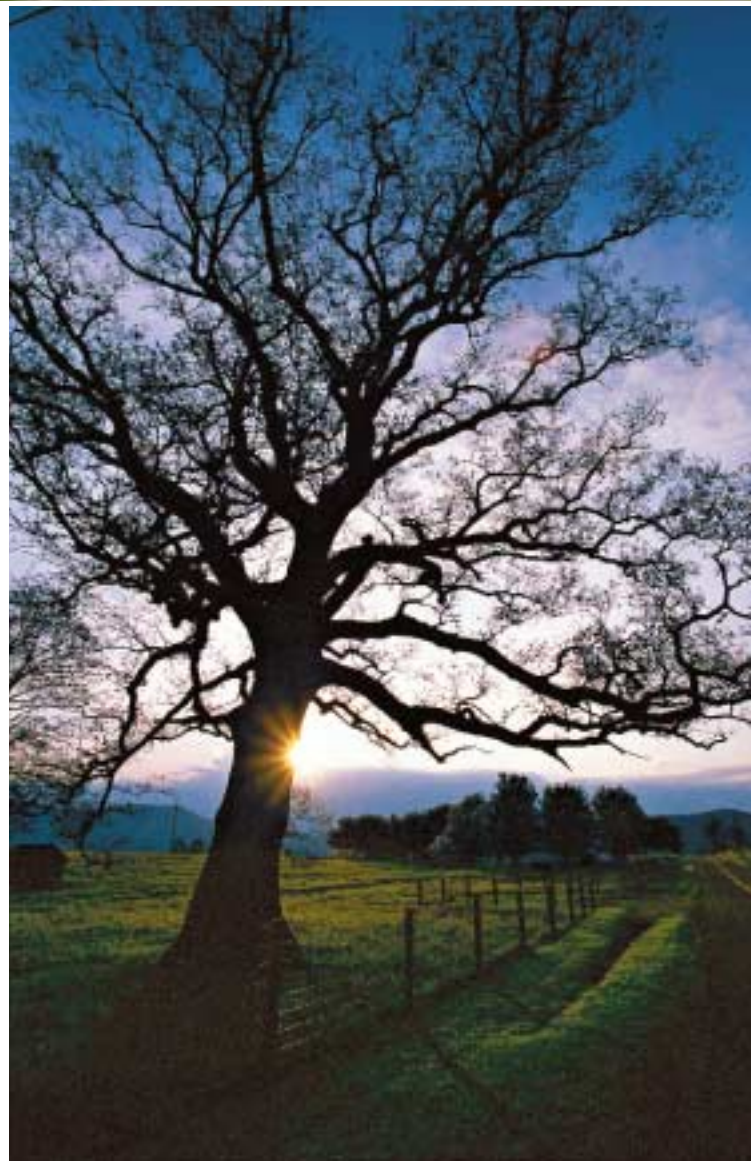
The Making of a Garden

Lifelong resident John Rhudy stands atop the pinnacle of Briary Knob, one foot propped on a fallen log, surveying the community of Burke's Garden below. He studied the earth—first as a farm kid, then in college—and he understands the mighty forces that formed this geological wonder he calls home.

"It's not a volcano," John explains. "It's not a meteor crater. It's not an ancient lake bed. At one time, this was all one mountain. We're sitting in the guts of it now."

The land lay largely undisturbed and uninhabited until James Burke happened upon it in 1748. Some believe he was chasing a wounded elk. Others say he was simply tracking the valley's abundant wildlife to feed a hungry hunting party. Yet when Burke crossed the mountain—no matter his mission—he discovered a paradise.

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At one point during the trip, Burke buried potato peels around his fire. When another group came upon his campsite later that fall, they found that a crop of potatoes had taken root. Here was Burke's Garden.

John pauses, watching silently as the brooding clouds of a spring squall roll across a ridge far in the distance. The valley, the story, the unfailing beauty—these things never cease to stir his soul. "This is the most beautiful place I've ever been," the 32-year-old farm manager confesses. "I may be a little biased, but it really is.



above, far left: A dairy farmer herds his cows across the road for the morning milking. **above, left:** "We knew the minute we came here that this is where we wanted to be," says Winston-Salem, North Carolina, native Gordon Whitted, with wife Charlotte and daughters Emily and Anna. **above:** Colleen Cox does more than run the Burke's Garden post office. She's also a genealogist, local historian, and weather observer. **left:** The congregation of Burke's Garden Lutheran Church celebrates its 175th anniversary this year.

Everywhere I go, I compare to Burke's Garden. This place has got a hold on me. I can't deny that."

Living in a Garden

Over the years, Burke's Garden has proven powerfully seductive to those who crave the beauty of the natural world. That was certainly true for newcomers Gordon and Charlotte Whitted, who moved here in 1999.

While traveling, the couple had come to love the South Island of New Zealand. Burke's Garden so resembled that faraway land that they were smitten from the beginning. "When we drove over that mountain and saw Burke's Garden, we thought, 'Why bother going to look anywhere else?'" Charlotte recalls.

A bouquet of yellow-and-white daisies graces the Whitteds' kitchen table. Plates of bacon and sausage join jars of homemade preserves for the morning meal. The open windows catch the cool morning breeze, filling the little white farmhouse with the sweet smell of spring.

As Charlotte opens the oven door to extract a pan of biscuits, Gordon calls to daughters Emily and Anna, who shuffle sleepily to the kitchen. Talk turns to the day's chores as the platters are passed. There's the garden to plant, eggs to gather, and lambs to feed.

"This is my dream job," Gordon admits. "I'm a real outdoors person. Sitting behind a desk for five years nearly killed me. My health was poor. I had back problems. I was always looking out the window, wanting to be outside."

Gordon and Charlotte now sell pasture-fed lamb, chicken, and eggs to upscale restaurants, such as Fabian's in Winston-Salem, as well as at the Tazewell and Winston-Salem farmers markets. They named their farm Weatherbury Station—"Weatherbury" as a literary salute to Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* and "station" after the New Zealand term for "farm."

"When our friends ask what it's like living here, I say it's like the 21st-century *Waltons*," Gordon says. "I've got the satellite dish on the roof. I've got a modem for my computer. I don't lack for any modern conveniences. Time hasn't forgotten us here."

You Can Go Home Again

In any community, some people stay, and some people go. Marvin Meek is the exception. He started life in Burke's Garden more than 80 years ago, then he and wife Ella left to pursue their destinies. Along the way, they raised three daughters and spent 21 years managing John Wayne's 26

below (from left): Lifelong resident John Rhudy takes in the vistas. Eleven-year-old Calvin Hubbard loves the animals he cares for on the family farm. Picking wildflowers tops Anna Whitted's list of warm-weather pastimes. The reasonably flat roads around Burke's Garden appeal to bikers.



Bar Ranch in Arizona, a spread nearly three times as long as the entire community of Burke's Garden.

A few years ago, Marvin and Ella came home. When they returned to Burke's Garden, they had been away more than 40 years. "This little place that we live on has been in my family since 1813," Marvin says. "My roots go pretty deep here. When we bought this land off my dad in 1968, it was more or less an insurance policy for us. We knew that someday we would come back."

Marvin has no regrets. When he returned to Burke's Garden, he built a house on the old homeplace with a big picture window that lets the valley come inside. As he thoughtfully admires the view, he pushes his tattered cowboy hat back, revealing a thatch of white hair. "Most people work for money, and I didn't," he says. "If I had to do

it all over again, and I was young enough, I would. I enjoyed every day of it, but this is a good place to end up."

Living the Good Life

The residents here will tell you: They don't live in the past. Still, the pace seems easier and the pleasures a little simpler in Burke's Garden.

Traffic is blessedly sparse. Those passing will pause to let a dairyman herd his black-and-white cows across the road after the morning milking or round up a stray.

The kids are educated over the mountain now, but the old school serves as the community center. The workings of the Burke's Garden Telephone Company are located nearby, but there are no full-time employees.

Around noon most days, farmers gather on the porch of



Pepsi mural on the side, the post office opens from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on weekdays and Saturdays so people who have a Burke's Garden address can get their mail.

Colleen could mark the seasons simply by looking out the window and monitoring the neighbor's cornfield. But she takes the weather a little more seriously. Each and every day, she records the high and low temperatures, measures any precipitation, then reports the information to the National Weather Service in Charleston, West Virginia. It's one of her "free jobs," a community service she inherited from her aunt in 1958.

"People always ask me about the weather," Colleen says. "I don't know what the weather's going to do. I can tell you what it has been, but I can't tell you what it's going to be."

How Does a Garden Grow?

Despite the natural beauty and amiable rural lifestyle, Burke's Garden is not a paradise without problems. "From

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Gordon Whitted, Burke's Garden resident



the General Store to eat lunch and catch up on the local news. "I make the best hamburger in town," says Carol Leffel, who works part-time at the General Store. "Of course, it's also the only hamburger in town."

In addition to being the sole restaurant in the community, the store serves as the unofficial welcome center. Bikers and hikers stop here, as do the Sunday sightseers.

If Carol doesn't know the answers to visitors' questions, she sends them to see postmistress Colleen Cox. "The girls at the store haven't lived here as long as I have," says Colleen, whose family has been in the area since 1811. "When somebody comes in between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. and asks about people who used to live here, the girls will say, 'Go to the post office. She knows everybody.'"

Housed in a weathered gray building with a faded

the outside, Burke's Garden looks like a fantasy world," Charlotte says. "People come here expecting a sort of Brigadoon, but it's not like that. Burke's Garden is a microcosm of the rest of the world. We have all the joys and the problems that everyone else has."

Many of the young people are aching to get out, and the developers are itching to move in. Making a living is hard, and running a profitable farm is harder. In fact, what some in Burke's Garden fear most is the slap of the farm auctioneer's gavel and his cry, "Sold."

Most residents say they would like to see the agricultural heritage of Burke's Garden preserved. However, recent land-use restrictions to help save the area for farming failed to pass

when introduced at the Community Association meeting. "There is a diversity of opinion here that makes it very interesting," Charlotte says. "You can never predict what a Burke's Gardener is going to think, but the common denominator is that we're all interested in the land."

And that, says Jim Hoge, a local historian and the self-appointed mayor of Burke's Garden, is what makes this community so special. "I never get tired of looking at this land," the 87-year-old retired farmer says. "It changes every day, just like the dunes on a beach. It's got to be one of the most beautiful places on Earth."

For regional information contact the Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority at 1-888-798-2386 or www.heartofappalachia.com.