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Small Miracles

By Kate Reynolds

Photos By Rimas Zailskas

Sometimes you have to look beyond the obvious to enjoy nature's gifts. They hide in unexpected places, waiting for the patient observer to discover them. Take Leslie Henry's backyard, for example. From the sidewalk, her tidy contemporary house at the end of a cul-de-sac in Brevard doesn't seem the type to harbor secrets. But walk around to the back and you enter into another world: a tranquil sanctuary where every step is cushioned by a deep, verdant carpet of living green. Welcome to the moss garden.

Tucked at the base of a steep hillside and set beside a lyrical mountain stream, Leslie's little bit of heaven is a tapestry of textures and hues. Shaded by tall trees and bordered by stands of ferns, it engenders a sense of shelter and peace. The ambiance is hushed and ancient.

The garden is fairly young, however, set in place not by decades of slow growth but in the past year by the magic touch of Annie Martin, better known as "Mossin' Annie," a local champion and collector of bryophytes—native mosses. "It was designed to create the effect of a miniature landscape using varieties from more than 450 types of indigenous bryophytes that we have in Western North Carolina," Annie says proudly.

Indeed, the effect of looking over Leslie's moss "lawn" recalls viewing the countryside from the window of an airplane: hills and valleys, an expanse of forest. There's a rock garden that stands in for a mountain range. It is a world in microcosm, presided over by a placid seated Buddha statue whose benign countenance reflects the abiding spirit of the place.

Leslie has a sense of connection to the orient—her father grew up in China, where his father worked for the YMCA. Many treasured pieces of eastern art grace the interior of her home, and eastern philosophies inform her worldview.

"I do study and practice Buddhism," she explains, "and my original idea was for a Zen garden. There was moss here to begin with and because of the mountain it doesn't get much sun. I've always loved moss and it seemed like the perfect thing to make it all go together and create an attractive space."

Mossin' Annie was the ideal partner in manifesting this vision. Petite and impish, with a penchant for dressing in various shades of purple, Annie has the air of a charming woodland sprite but is, nonetheless, a very determined woman when it comes to her beloved bryophytes. Her passion is the preservation of native mosses.

"We have plenty of opportunities to collect and rescue mosses in Western North Carolina," she says. "There's considerable development that continues to occur. We work with green developers, the Department of Transportation and people who are environmentally conscious. They contact us when they're going to build houses, roads and golf courses and we go in and rescue the mosses first. The goal is to use them in public or private gardens or, ideally, to reintroduce them into the community once it's completed."

Leslie's garden is an amalgam of rescued and resident mosses. "Some of the moss was introduced, but in other areas I took advantage of what was naturally occurring," Annie explains. "She inherited some good bones from the previous homeowners, but the rock garden was almost invisible—it was overwhelmed with hostas." Carefully edited plantings now punctuate the beds, set amid the moss hummocks and lichens, like 'British Soldiers,' which were added "for extra accents of delight."



"Mosses are great companions with every plant," Annie says. "They're green year-round, so when the other annuals and perennials die back, you still have color. They provide a contrast for bright plants and they're a great alternative to wood mulch. They don't leach nutrients from the soil and they help to retain the moisture and provide insulation from the cold."

Resilient and low maintenance, mosses literally live on air and water. "The leaf of the plant is only one cell layer thick," explains Annie. "It absorbs all of the water. It has no vascular system—it doesn't have any roots to absorb water or nutrients. It lives solely on rainfall and dust particles. So it's extremely tolerant to all kinds of conditions."

"According to the botanists, mosses are 400 million years older than vascular plants like herbs, so before there was just about anything else, there were mosses—and they'll probably outlive all of us."

For Leslie, mosses' sturdy character makes tending to her retreat a fairly simple task. "I do occasional weeding," she says, "and [the moss] doesn't like to have leaves on it, so I pick them up or blow them off. It needs to be watered fairly often, but it takes very little water. I can just mist it with the hose and you can see how the green just picks right up."



Even the mischief of a local skunk, which attempted to rearrange the moss beds one night, was easily repaired. Uprooted patches were simply put back into place and pressed down firmly underfoot. "In fact," says Annie, "the last phase of the moss planting process, after you've watered it, is to step on it, and keep stepping on it. That helps it set itself. And you can sit on it any time you like—you just might get a wet bottom."

Annie would certainly encourage everyone to sit down and engage the moss up close. It's there that these wondrous plants truly reveal themselves. "You need to take a closer look at mosses," she urges, and offers the loupe that hangs around her neck like an amulet. The magnified plants are exquisitely detailed: some resembling miniature ferns, others like tiny green starbursts.

"The immediate impact of the moss garden is the expanse of green," she says, "but there is another element of color that only comes during the sporophytic stage." Sure enough, at closer inspection, some of the small mounds are surrounded by halos of spores; a miniature fireworks display, just inches from the ground.

This just goes to show that sometimes you find amazing gifts in unexpected places, like a compact backyard on an ordinary street where ancient plants invite you to experience the hush and share in the mystery of the complex world beneath our feet.

"You don't have to be a Zen Buddhist in a garden in Kyoto, Japan, to enjoy mosses," says Mossin' Annie with a smile. "You can be right here in Western North Carolina and love them too."

Mossin' Annie offers workshops, presentations, on-site bryophyte identification and moss rescue, along with moss garden design. For more information, visit www.mountainmossenterprises.com or call 828-577-1321.



TWO CHIC URBAN HAMLETS

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