



# water world

## LANDSCAPE DESIGNER

Jeff Minnich is a master of disguise. Approaching his house in Lee Heights—which he refers to as the “Woodland Cottage”—you’d never know that it conceals a lush landscape full of surprises. The first clue comes as you cross from street to front yard by passing under a lovely arch of Portuguese laurel. Then, the full effect of this densely planted wonderland becomes clear, with mature trees and an under-

story of bushes and flowering plants. It looks more like a botanical garden than a suburban front yard.

Turn the corner onto Jeff’s side yard, which slopes downward, and another pleasure awaits. There, a small pool of water, ringed with fieldstones, trickles into a thin stream. Step down a few stairs, and the stream widens into a waterfall, pouring over a fieldstone edge into a larger pool below. Down at the patio level, the accous-

tics are completely different—louder, rushing—but you’d never have known it standing on top, where the grade change and plantings absorb the sound. A patio table and chairs sit at the foot of the waterfall, where Jeff and his partner, Steve Grimsley, like to have meals and drinks with friends.

A naturalistic waterfall may be more ambitious than a garden-store fountain or a small pond, but it’s still an option within reach of most home-

owners, Jeff contends—especially if you can take advantage of an existing elevation change. When the designer purchased his 1928 Spanish bungalow, the hill was held up by an old, railroad-tie retaining wall and planted with pachysandra, a common ground cover. “The site begged for a water feature,” he says.

The yard’s organic sense of progression and the reveal from top to bottom are, of course, by design. “I like to walk under things,” he adds. “I like to turn corners. I like when there is a change in the feeling of a space.”

Jeff has worked in horticulture and landscape design since he was a teenager, first for the well-known Alexandria landscaping firm Campbell & Ferrara, and then, for the past 15 years, as the principal in his own firm. He bought his house around the same time he launched his company, knowing he wanted to create a dreamscape that was both a proving ground for his craft and a retreat from workday stress.

Although Jeff grew up in Alexandria, family roots in the Deep South have influenced his design sensibilities. His kitchen drips with Dixie nostalgia, including a collection of antique “mammy” figurines and Scarlett O’Hara refrigerator magnets. Outside, the garden includes several plant species that are better-suited to climates farther south, Jeff concedes, but he has planted them here anyway. “I’m in zone denial,” he says with a laugh.

One of those species is the Lady Banks Rose, a Southern belle of a flower, which, despite being at its northern limit in this area, was heavy with flowers when it bloomed this spring. He is particularly drawn to plants and flowers with a variety of colors, scents, and textures, such as the Carolina allspice, also known as “spicebush” because of its distinctive spicy smell; and the money plant, which blooms with bright purple flowers. When he says his yard feels



like a cathedral, he’s right.

Humor is another central element. Lined up near the waterfall is a collection of heads of garden statues—just the heads—that Jeff collects from various places like nurseries or antique marts. “I feel sorry for statues,” he says. “So I adopt the heads. It reminds me that we’re all not perfect or complete.”

Many evenings, Jeff can be found in a rocking chair on the patio, which he likens to a classic Southern veranda. He enjoys watching the stars twinkling above the woodland paradise he’s created. “Gardens grow along with your life,” he says. “Every single day is different. It’s a never-ending fascination.”

## Landscape Lessons

- Invoke the element of surprise using water features, grade changes and hidden vignettes.
- Create a garden for all the senses—particularly touch, smell and sound.
- Don’t be afraid to plant something that doesn’t typically work in this area; you might be surprised by how well it adapts.