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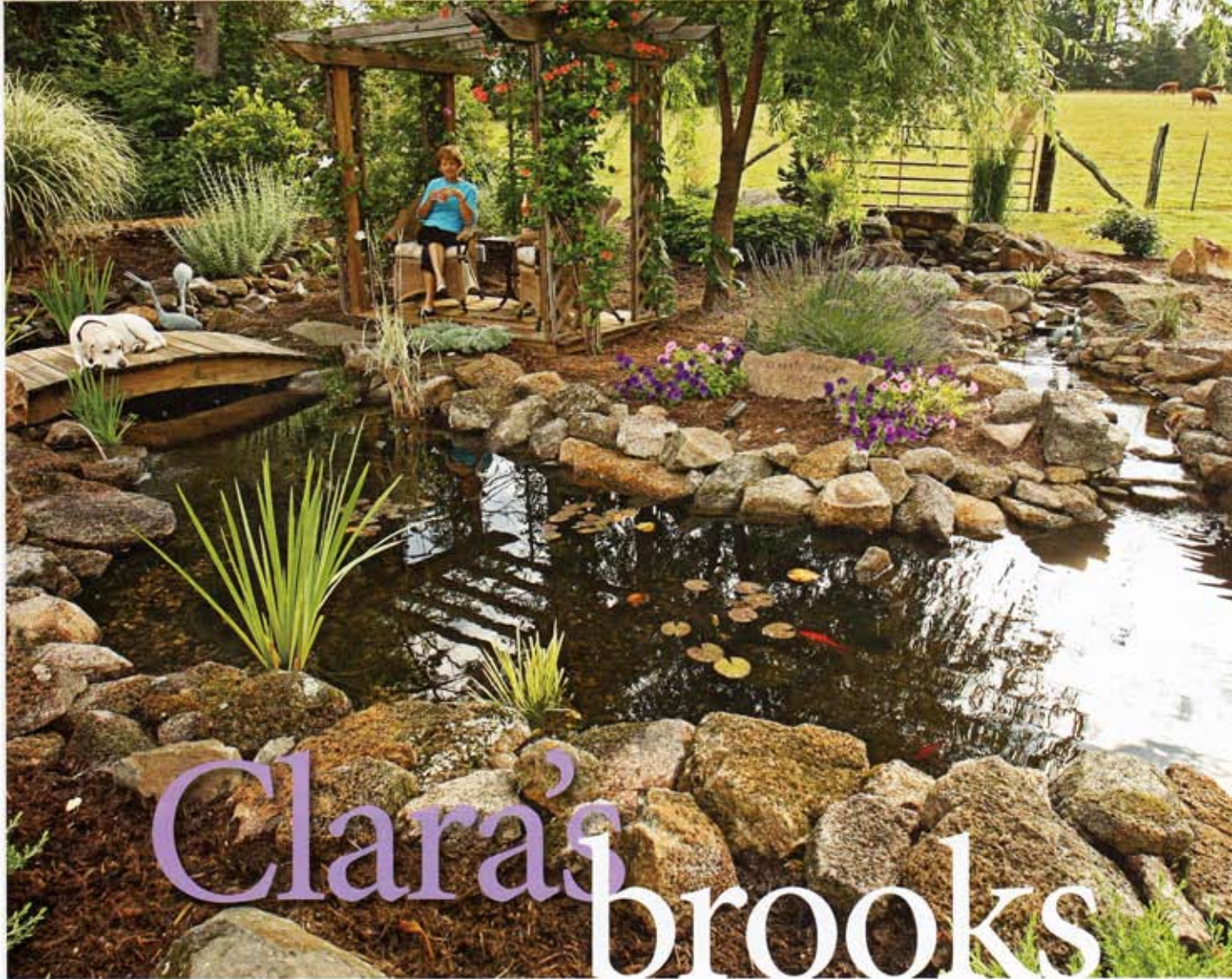
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# Clara's brooks

**This couple turned eroded land on their acreage into a water paradise.** By Mitch Kezar

**above:** Vikki Tomlinson enjoys the sounds of cascading waters under an arbor covered with climbing Lady Banks rose and trumpet vine. Boomer, her yellow Labrador retriever, relaxes nearby.

**A**fter Michael and Vikki Tomlinson built their home in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke, Virginia, Vikki looked at the rugged ground surrounding the house and wondered how she could turn the landscape into something beautiful. She decided that the former cow pasture, eroded from years of rain runoff, would be ideal for cascading waterfalls, bubbling brooks, and peaceful ponds.

Norman Tharpe, a water garden designer, was hired to help the Tomlinsons turn their cascading stream concept into reality. He smelled the soil and felt the contours of the land, then toiled and fussed with rocks, dirt, plants, and furniture working with the couple to get the garden and stream to fit the contour of the land. It became a natural, albeit enhanced, extension of the eroded hills.

"It took a lot of hard work to get it right," says Vikki. "Especially to get the water recirculating from the bottom of the seep back to the top of the stream." The rocky 170-foot-long cascading stream is the signature element of the backyard and a thing of beauty. A friend told Vikki, "You didn't take lemons and make lemonade, you took lemons and made champagne!"

The laughing brooks were named "Clara's Brooks" to honor Michael's deceased mother. The flower garden nearby reflects Clara's personality and her favorites: sunflowers for her sunny disposition, roses for their beauty, gardenias for their sweet smell, and magnolias for strength of character.

**right:** A Master Gardener, Vikki enjoys tending the many fragrant and lovely plantings surrounding the brooks.

**far right:** New York blue stones form a meandering walkway connecting the upper pond to this inviting patio, complete with a gas log fire pit.



Vikki keeps a journal about her backyard, noting what plants are blooming, when birds show up, and more. All that water attracts multitudes of birds. At first, Vikki had no idea what type of birds they were, so she made up names like upside-down birds (nuthatches), Batman birds (Cedar waxwings), mini roadrunners (brown thrashers), and calico birds (towhees). She finally bought a bird book and is now an avid birder.

One bird even caused modification to the landscaping design. When the work was nearly done, there was only a slow trickle of water where there could have been more. Vikki told designer Tharpe, "We're getting a complaint." Stunned, he asked what it could be. "Our cardinals would



like to have their showerhead adjusted a little!" Tharpe made the minor adjustment.

When the stream project was complete, "It was a very emotional time for Michael and for me," Vikki says. The project was dedicated to Michael's mother. Totally out of season, a magnolia sprung into bloom. Tharpe saw the out-of-character winter blossom and said, "Clara is happy!" ■

**above:** Designed to delight one's sensibilities of sight and sound, this cascade, one of seven along the brooks, is a focal point from the fire pit patio.

**left:** The blue heron statuary once graced Clara's garden and serves as a reminder of her love of nature.

**bottom right:** A hummingbird, Clara's favorite, was used in place of an apostrophe on the stone dedicating this remarkable space.



**Learn More** Vikki and Michael Tomlinson  
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