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MINDFUL living

*eating, traveling,
and designing
sustainably*

A NATURAL

connection

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SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS RESERVE

A 120-acre, boreal forest atop Toxaway Mountain, the Southern Highlands Reserve is a native plant arboretum and research center dedicated to sustaining the natural ecosystems of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

When we think about traversing the Appalachian Mountains, the famously challenging trail— “the A.T.”—or the Blue Ridge Parkway with its



expansive views might come to mind. For some plants and trees, the journey was a bit different. Their seeds traveled south on the spine of the Appalachians, courtesy of melting glaciers. Today, these species are thriving at the Southern Highlands Reserve.

Perched atop Toxaway Mountain (also known as Hogback Mountain to locals), the flora and fauna of the Southern Highlands Reserve resemble that found in botanical gardens in Canada or New England.

“It’s sort-of mind-blowing,” says Executive Director Kelly Holdbrooks. “The Southern Appalachian Mountains are 480 million years old, and the most recent Ice Age ended about 12,000 years ago. The glaciers came down to Pennsylvania. Our area was not glaciated, so this was the last place the species could live without going extinct, and when the glaciers receded, some stayed here because they can survive.”

The pinkshell azalea, for example, is an endemic species that grows within the Southern Highlands Reserve (SHR) but in few places outside of the area. Even mammals, such as the Carolina northern flying squirrel, migrated, survived, and stayed.

“I feel this huge sense of responsibility and honor to be a steward of land like this,” Holdbrooks says. “At

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A boreal forest set between 4,200 and 4,700 feet in elevation and bordering Panthertown Valley, the SHR is a native plant arboretum and research center dedicated to sustaining the natural ecosystems of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The 501(c)(3) organization preserves, cultivates, and displays plants native to the region, and advocates for their value through education, restoration, and research. The topography within its 120 acres varies, allowing for a large and diverse collection of plants.

But let’s back up (though not to the Ice Age this time). In 2003, Atlanta philanthropists and lifelong outdoor enthusiasts Betty and Robert Balentine finalized their partnership with the North American Land Trust to form SHR. With a deep love and connection to nature, the Balentines secured land adjacent to their mountain home and protected it through a conservation easement to prevent development. (The land had been sited for up to 22 homes.) Their vision was not only to preserve the land but to make it accessible to all. A master plan created by acclaimed American landscape architect W. Gary Smith, who designed the interactive family garden at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas, guided its development.

“We are a private garden, and I think what makes us unique is we are open to tours from the public by reservation,” Holdbrooks explains. “We want people to experience nature, and so there has to be a level of access.”



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AT SOUTHERN
HIGHLANDS RESERVE

Though the organization generates revenue from tours as well as an annual plant sale and a symposium series, the Balentines remain its primary source of funding. In 2019, it formalized its donor program, and it consistently applies for grants.

The Balentines literally get their hands dirty as part of their work with SHR. They regularly assist with planting and maintaining SHR's "garden rooms."

"It's really this family atmosphere when we're in the garden working together with Robert and Betty," says Holdbrooks.

Such activity is not a departure for Robert Balentine, a successful wealth management entrepreneur and executive who grew up exploring the mountains of North Georgia and Western North Carolina. He learned conservation as an Eagle Scout and drew inspiration from his parents' passion for gardening. A past president of Atlanta's Peachtree Garden Club,

Betty Balentine's service leadership also includes the State Botanical Garden of Georgia and the University of Georgia Press Advisory Council, through which she advocates for publications about the natural world. In 2017, the Library of American Landscape History recognized the couple with the Preservation Heroes Award for their founding of SHR and their many achievements in landscape stewardship, design, and horticulture research.

Because survival of the unique forest ecotone is fragile, a key component of the work of the SHR team (composed of three full-time staff, including Holdbrooks, with plans to hire two more) is creating and sharing a digital catalog of its species. Additionally, SHR has collected more than a decade of data on weather patterns and phenology, the study of cyclic and seasonal change in plants and animals. But the project that may be closest to Holdbrooks' heart is the restoration of red spruce forests.



Under significant threat and constant recovery from climate change, acid rain, logging, and development, spruce-fir forests are near the top of the list of most endangered ecosystems in the U.S. Holdbrooks serves on the steering committee for the Southern Appalachian Restoration Initiative (SASRI), an organization formed by several groups with the common goal of restoring spruce ecosystems across the high elevation landscapes of the Southern Blue Ridge.

"I don't know of another organization like this, to be honest," Holdbrooks says. "We work across state lines, and we all get the bigger picture. We've identified and created a restoration plan, and we've restored about 5,000 trees on public land since 2013. Our goal is to get to 10,000."

While earning a master's degree in landscape architecture (with honors) from the University of Georgia's College of Environment and Design, Holdbrooks interned with SHR. Serendipity emerged when the previous director decided to move on and Holdbrooks found herself "at the right place at the right time." She accepted the job offer from the Balentines in 2012.

Using her "varied toolkit," Holdbrooks' day could involve designing a garden space, pruning and weeding, working with the horticulturalist, raising funds, speaking to a garden club, and—of course—managing the team. During the pandemic, tour demand dramatically increased; so, she established a group of about a dozen volunteers to serve as docents.

"In 2021, we had more than 700 visitors in a six-month period. That's a lot for a private garden. But I really

wanted to meet that need for people, especially during the pandemic when there is such a great need to get out into nature. Being able to walk around a garden with moderate hiking hit certain demographics that also needed access."

SHR's work extends far beyond the ridgeline of Toxaway Mountain. The organization has an ongoing partnership with T.C. Henderson Elementary School in Lake Toxaway to supplement its environmental education curriculum. Additionally, it is working with the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust, playing a role in the design of McKinney Meadow, the triangular field across from Cashiers' iconic Cornucopia Restaurant that runs along N.C. Highway 107 South. Holdbrooks would love to see the high-visibility space tout a beautiful, photogenic meadow.

SHR's gardens are designed to elicit an emotional response and connection to nature from visitors, and Holdbrooks never tires of witnessing these moments. She is ever-mindful of the role preservation plays in the area's attractive lifestyle.

"I think it's really important for people to check in and realize why they are self-selecting to be here," she says. "There is an innate connection to the land—the air we breathe, the water we drink, the access to nature—and so the importance of maintaining its beauty and quality is unparalleled."

For more information or to donate to Southern Highlands Reserve, visit southernhighlandsreserve.org or call 828-885-2050.

