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# Nancy Goodwin

Noted writer, garden designer, and plantswoman Nancy Goodwin has created a masterful legacy at Montrose, her North Carolina home and garden.

BY ANNE RAVER

**W**HEN NANCY and Craufurd Goodwin bought Montrose, a historic estate in Hillsborough, North Carolina, more than 35 years ago, it wasn't just a matter of finding a gracious 1890s house on 61 acres of rolling land with magnificent trees. "It was the beginning of the greatest adventure of my life," Goodwin, 77, wrote in her lyrical 2005 memoir, *Montrose: Life in a Garden* (see "Resources," page 36).

Renowned for her sense of color and design, as well as her extraordinary ability to grow plants, Goodwin has turned Montrose, which already had good bones, into a timeless, living work of art and a

worthy destination for traveling plant lovers. For a time in the 1980s and '90s, it was also home to her mail-order nursery, which specialized in uncommon plants for discriminating gardeners.

"I put Nancy in a very rare league among the gardening community in North America," says Dan Hinkley, co-founder of the former Heronswood Nursery and now a consultant for Monrovia nursery. "A serious plantswoman and strict gardener, smart but elegant, with the savvy and energy to run a nursery—which, in the case of Montrose, turned out to have been one of the best mail-order sources for rarities for several years." The template for Montrose

was repeatedly used for nurseries that followed, including Heronswood.

Goodwin has come to be associated with hardy cyclamen, which she grows in great numbers at Montrose. She has also introduced a number of stellar plants, most notably *Heuchera* 'Montrose Ruby'.

"I think of Nancy every time I walk past 'Montrose Ruby,'" says Allen Bush. A longtime horticulturist with Jelitto Perennial Seeds, Bush, who gardens in Louisville, Kentucky, calls 'Montrose Ruby'—a cross between 'Palace Purple' and *H. americana* 'Dale's Strain'—his "best landscape coral bell, bar none. I've got it planted all over the place," he says.





Opposite: In summer, Montrose's tropical garden area is a colorful blend of bananas, yuccas, and tender perennials. Above: Hardy cyclamen and other small bulbs carpet the woodland in winter. Right: Nancy Goodwin grows plants from seeds and cuttings for sale at the garden's open days.

In addition to creating a horticultural gem at Montrose, Goodwin has spread her passion for plants in her books and many articles for magazines. She also co-edited, with Allen Lacy, *A Rock Garden in the South* (Duke University Press, 1990), the posthumous book by an earlier Southern gardening icon, Elizabeth Lawrence.

## A GARDENER'S GARDEN

Montrose is captivating in all seasons, but Goodwin especially loves the little bulbs of winter. "I walk the paths and can no longer count the number of cyclamen," she says.

Tens of thousands of the cyclamen, snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.), primroses, and many other species she started from seed have naturalized beneath the oaks and dawn redwoods (*Metasequoia glyp-*



*tostrobooides*) and crept across the front yard; they run like little rivers through the woodland behind the house.

In summer, the gardens behind the big white two-story house are ablaze with bright colors and ebullient bloomers lounging over a geometry of paths. The lath house, which replaced the old grape arbor south of the house, not only provides a shady respite—underplanted with

ferns, hostas, polygonatum, and pulmonarias—but also adds a powerful vertical sculpture, and a constant to the ever-changing surrounding gardens, which are ordered by seasons or color (to see a map of Montrose, click on the link to this article on the AHS website).

"I never knew what I would see at Montrose," says Allen Lacy, the gardener and writer whose long-running corre-



spendence with Goodwin was published in *A Year in Our Gardens* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Lacy compares the development of Goodwin's gardens at Montrose to symphonies by Austrian composer Gustav Mahler. "Huge crescendos and big effects," he says, "with little intimate duets and trios."

Their friendship got off to a rocky start in 1985, sparked by a column Lacy had written about hardy cyclamen for the *Wall Street Journal*. He had mused about "exotic bulbs coming across the Sahara by camel," he recalls. "She wrote me and said, 'These are collected in the wild. You are contributing to their demise. Please come and see me.'"

Goodwin had been alluding to the illegal trade of wild-collected bulbs from Turkey and the Middle East that were then turning up in American nurseries. Montrose Nursery—the mail-order nursery she started in 1984 by sending out a mimeographed list of cyclamen and other plants grown from seed or cuttings—was in part intended as a way to offer rare plants without depleting wild colonies.

"There was nothing high falutin' about the catalog, but there were always lots of precious gems and interesting stories behind the gems," says Allen Bush.

## EAGER BEGINNINGS

Goodwin's need to garden not only springs from her environment, but is also rooted in her own gene pool. Her father, an English professor at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, loved to grow vegetables. Her mother, a fourth-grade teacher, adored flowers, especially wild ones.

In *Montrose: Life in a Garden*, she recalls childhood experiences of following her parents as they looked for wild yellow lady slippers in Durham County, one time fleeing under gun fire when they got too close to a moonshine still. After a 13-hour drive to Tennessee or Georgia to visit grandparents, they would crawl out of the old Studebaker and head straight for the gardens. "We

didn't wait a minute longer to see the newest plant in bloom," she wrote.

As young newlyweds, Craufurd and Nancy Goodwin bought a house in Durham, where Nancy wanted to plant everything. After three years, they ran out of space, prompting them to find their way to Montrose. The first fall, Goodwin learned an important rule about stewarding an old garden. She had dug a load of bulbs from her former garden in Durham, and began to plant them

burned—twice, in fact—first in the 1860s, and later in the 1890s.

When the Goodwins arrived in 1977, rumpled boxwoods were a sea of green around the early 19th-century house. They could see beyond the green fern wallpaper to the light streaming through its big windows and the elegant proportions of its rooms. They loved the old trees, the grape arbor, kitchen garden, and the 20 acres of woods that ran down to the Enos River.



In winter, the dried stems of Formosa lilies grace the walkway to Montrose's 19th-century house.

beneath the old trees in the front yard. "But every time I dug, I hit a bulb," she says. "I didn't know what was here. So I stopped." After that, she and Craufurd began watching and waiting.

Montrose had been the home of William Alexander Graham, a North Carolina senator, governor, and secretary of the navy, who lived there with his family from 1842 to the 1860s. His wife Susan laid out the gardens. Their descendants carried on, rebuilding the main house when it

"The previous owners had pastured their cows in the woods," says Goodwin, "so there was almost nothing." But, she knew, from the tall straight poplars, and the beech and birch trees, what a perfect place it would be for woodland bulbs.

She and Craufurd walked through the office behind the house—two buildings joined together, where Governor Graham had practiced law—"and I fell in love," wrote Goodwin. "I could teach here and never disrupt the business of the house."

An accomplished pianist and harpsichordist with a degree in music, Goodwin moved her grand piano into the space. She planted her favorite bulbs outside the windows so she could see them blooming, even while inside teaching music to her students. She also would read and write in peaceful silence there, without the music

## Visiting Montrose

For information about tours by appointment and dates of open days, send an e-mail to Nancy Goodwin at [montrosegdn@embarqmail.com](mailto:montrosegdn@embarqmail.com).



## THE WINTER GARDEN AT MONTROSE

One of Nancy Goodwin's accomplishments at Montrose has been the creation of a garden that offers tremendous interest even in winter. Her love for the "small bulbs"—the fall- and spring-flowering crocuses and colchicums, reticulated irises, snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.), and hardy cyclamen—is legendary.

She is most fond of the winter-blooming species, like *Iris reticulata*, whose gray-green spears poke through the oak leaves in the rock garden and *Iris unguicularis*, which produces a little purple flower with darker slender lines, blooming as early as December during warm winters. Last year, the first wave of giant snowdrops blanketed the woods by Thanksgiving, and the first hardy cyclamens bloomed in early December, with aconites opening by Christmas.

Winter is the season for little bulbs, when Goodwin gets down on her hands and knees beneath the dawn redwoods to observe the differences in leaf patterns and shades of color, from white to magenta, of the *Cyclamen coum* she has started



Above: Among the little bulbs that Goodwin admires is *Iris unguicularis*, which blooms in late winter. Left: Goodwin's winter garden includes a textured tapestry of conifers, trees with attractive bark, and winter-blooming shrubs.

from seed. These butterflylike flowers now bloom throughout the woods. Snowdrops that Goodwin first started from seed now also flourish in successive generations. She collects seeds from unusual bloomers—a *Galanthus nivalis*, for instance, which is more chartreuse, even yellow than green inside—to plant in pots and select the best forms to put out again in the woods.

Hellebores flower here too, in drifts of white, green, and deep purple. Goodwin makes her own crosses, sitting among the hellebores as they bloom and rubbing the pollen of one form against another. Primroses bring bright blue and yellow to the woodland floor; the native bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) turns it white in April.

But winter also opens up the views through these woods, from the top of the hill, down to the pond. The straight trunks of the poplars rise like cathedrals and the alligator bark of the persimmons is revealed.

In this starker world, the first fragrant apricot-pink blooms of flowering apricot (*Prunus mume*) can stop a gardener in her steps. Later, the paperbush (*Edgeworthia chrysantha*) will open its clusters of fragrant flowers.

"I think it's the promise that we love best about the winter garden," says Goodwin, who watches for the buds of her winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) to turn red. "You can bring it in then, and it will open in less than a week," she adds.

Other plants that herald winter at Montrose include the witch hazels (*Hamamelis* spp.), especially the intensely yellow cultivar 'James Wells'. In Nandinaland, a border at the curve of the driveway, clusters of deep red berries contrast with the chartreuse-yellow needles of *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Limerick'. And the coral stems of the nearby *Cornus sanguinea* 'Winter Beauty' make the conifer seem to glow even brighter.

Goodwin also revels in the spiky yuccas in the sunny parts of the gardens and the strappy wide leaves of rohdias and hardy palms in the woods. It's the contrasts, even in winter, that give a garden its edge. Dissonance, Goodwin claims, is key to any art form. Likening the garden to the watercolor paintings of English Romanticist William Turner, she says, "All these pastel colors in his seascapes—and one little spot of red that turns it into life."

—A.R.



that Craufurd, an economics professor, plays to fuel his own work in his study.

“When I got here, I wanted to grow every cyclamen I could, every geranium I could,” says Goodwin, who would concentrate on a new genus each year.

She joined the Royal Horticultural Society and got its seed list. She read and reread the books of Elizabeth Lawrence and tried to find everything Lawrence said would grow in the area. As she worked in the rock garden, finding irises and bulbs planted by previous gardeners, she plunged into the works of other garden writers such as Louise Beebe Wilder and E.A. Bowles.

In those first years, Goodwin planted perennials beneath the serpentine border of the boxwood, which, thankfully, had never been pruned out of their natural shape. She dug up the ivy that rambled over either side of the front walk, tilled in compost and gravel and planted dianthus and heat-loving succulents. The Dianthus Walk, with its grays and blues and fragrant white *Formosa* lilies that bloom on eight-foot stems in July, is one of her many masterpieces. Goodwin leaves the dry lily stems and pods as graceful silhouettes in the winter garden.

Those first years were focused as well, on the huge vegetable garden south of the house. She pruned the grapevines in winter and made juice in summer. The tomatoes were so plentiful that she and Craufurd had fresh tomato juice every morning, and tomatoes every night. Eventually, tired of so much excess produce, she started to “insinuate asters” into the vegetable beds.

## A NURSERY FOR SERIOUS GARDENERS

Spending precious sunny days teaching reluctant children how to play the piano and harpsichord was sometimes a source of frustration for Goodwin. So in 1984, she launched Montrose Nursery by converting the vegetable garden for that purpose. By then, she had plenty of extra to sell and she hoped the profits might pay her way out of the music room and back to the garden.

The nursery was also a direct line to the world’s most serious plants people, many of whom were aware of her love for cyclamen. Seed collectors from Scotland, Germany, and England sent her cyclamen seeds.

Allen Lacy first put Montrose on the map when he wrote about the gardens and the nursery for *American Horticulturist*, an earlier incarnation of *The American*

## Resources

**A Year in Our Gardens** by Nancy Goodwin and Allen Lacy. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2001.

**Montrose: Life in a Garden** by Nancy Goodwin. Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2005.

*Gardener*, in 1985. “My mailing list went from 25 to 125,” says Goodwin.

Later, as the *New York Times* garden columnist, Lacy would write about Montrose’s magnificent trees. Serious gardeners began making pilgrimages there, carrying off the plants propagated at Montrose Nursery as well as design inspiration for their own landscapes.

Goodwin remembers the visit of English gardener and author Christopher Lloyd, of Great Dixter fame, and how he glared at the forget-me-nots spreading through the rock garden.

“He said, ‘You aren’t going to leave those there are you?’ and I said, ‘Well, I sort of like them,’” she says. She went to his lecture that night in Hillsborough and heard him declare, “People in this country

don’t grow enough forget-me-nots!”

Goodwin had started the nursery as a way to get back to the garden. But, ironically, its success pushed her back into her office, this time to ship plants and write catalogs. She didn’t even have time to walk through her gardens. In 1994, she closed the nursery, put on her kneepads, and got back to doing what she loves best.

## THE BEAUTY OF SEEDS

For Goodwin, the process of growing is a source of fascination. “The Grahams planted these two metasequoias,” Goodwin says of the 80-foot dawn redwoods that grace the front lawn. “They were probably among the original distribution.” She is referring, in that casual way of one gardener to another, to the dawn redwood seeds that an Arnold Arboretum-sponsored expedition collected in China in 1947, shortly after the coniferlike tree, long thought extinct, was found flourishing in eastern Sichuan Province. The seeds, or seedling trees grown in Boston, were sent to other arboreturns and serious gardeners, to see how they grew in different climates, and to preserve the gene pool.

It turns out that dawn redwoods, at least under Goodwin’s hand, practically



Goodwin evaluates hellebore flowers in early spring. She often hand-pollinates hellebores and other perennials, fostering the development of new and interesting flower colors or patterning.



grow like weeds here. “I grew that one from seed,” she says, of a monster next to the smokehouse. “We had tremendous germination last year, and lots of little trees.” As with any plant growing from seed, Goodwin is enchanted with the subtle differences between each one. “It’s interesting to see how they vary in shape, or in their needles,” she says. “It’s very subtle, like the great variety in cyclamens.”

She encourages visitors to get down on their hands and knees to examine the velvety carmine petals of *Cyclamen coum*, hovering like a butterfly over its heart-shaped, deep-green leaves. She collects the cyclamen seed capsules as soon as they ripen, usually at the end of May. If she is tardy, they are sometimes carried off by ants, which she takes in stride. “I think they clean the seeds, and leave them wherever, where they have a better chance of germinating,” she says.

Even though her nursery closed years ago, Goodwin sells potted seedlings and cuttings of these and other plants from her gardens during the open days she holds at Montrose each May and September.

## GARDEN PHILOSOPHY

Goodwin combines the meticulousness of a scientist with the sense of form and color of an artist. Considering her background and passions, that is just the natural course of things. For one thing, artists have to love solitude. “All of these things have to be done or thought about pretty much by one person,” Goodwin says. “And then expanded if you have people who have similar ideas or different ones that can challenge you.”

She treasures the hours she spends with the three part-time gardeners, two of whom, Cathy Dykes and Cheryl Traylor, have been with her for 12 years.

“They make up one full-time gardener,” she says of these kindred spirits who like hard physical labor and the detail work required of tending any great garden. But when everyone has gone home for the day, she and her dog, Angie, often enjoy a walk through the garden by themselves.

The art of the garden itself “is a question of form and color throughout the seasons,” she says. “Not to just aim at one period, but through every week.” She compares those fleeting moments, so hard-earned, to music. “You have a brief



Goodwin plants several large containers each year, including this Victorian cast-iron urn that sits at the center of her color gardens with the lath house in the background.

moment, and you never get it back, it’s never quite the same,” she says. “You work and work and work and you have a vision, and then, depending on the weather, and if no animal eats it, and the plants around it don’t kill it with their allelopathic compounds, you know, it’s a gamble. You’ve got this one chance every year.”

## PREPARING A LEGACY

Goodwin’s life-long adventure will never be finished. And, as she puts it, her gardening in the history of Montrose is “just a tiny little blip. Montrose was established long before we were here. And it will continue.”

To that end, the Goodwins have set up the Montrose Foundation, Inc., to which they will leave the entire property, including the buildings and their contents, which are on the National Register of Historic Places. The house is filled with paintings, art, and antiques collected from the many visits the couple has made to England.

“Basically, we want to continue to have the gardens be developed in the same spirit,” says Goodwin.

Visitors will still be able to view the house on certain open days, or by appointment. “Our goal is horticultural programs and education, rather than a place to walk the dog,” notes Goodwin. The Garden Conservancy has also partnered with Montrose as a preservation project, offering its expertise, as needed.

Who can explain falling in love—with a place or person or animal? But it happened to Goodwin at Montrose in many layers, in one fell swoop, and has lasted a lifetime. “I think being carried out feet first would be a good thing,” she says. “I can come back as fertilizer for the irises.”

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