



Perennial FAVORITES

*Cultivate an air of rest and relaxation
at three botanically beautiful bed and breakfasts.*

BY L.A. JACKSON



A pristine lake (top) and organic gardens (right) complete the alfresco experience of the 200-acre Big Mill Bed and Breakfast.



It isn't hard to find quality bed and breakfasts in our state that exude amicable ambiance. Plenty of inviting havens offer rest and relaxation as soon as a weary visitor comes in the door. There are special lodgings, however, that compel guests not only to enjoy the comfort

and hospitality of their rooms but also to step outside, where the spell of a peaceable place continues.

The owners of these inns exert as much effort in preparing their gardens and surrounding landscapes as their rooms, providing guests with a total sense of serenity and leisure. It is here that the

irresistible aroma of fresh-brewed coffee mixes with the sweet smells of roses, ginger lilies, and magnolias.

And just where are these green dreams? Although there are many in North Carolina, here are three special getaways where good times, gracious hosts, and inviting gardens await.

BIG MILL BED AND BREAKFAST

Williamston

The Big Mill Bed and Breakfast is a delightful blend of William Robinson and good ol' Southern living, with the slight waft of a Bahamian breeze thrown in for good measure. William Robinson was a famous Irish horticulturist who taught that less formality with plantings leads to more enjoyment of the garden. At Big Mill, guests have more than 200 acres of Robinsonian-inspired country charm to enjoy.

The inn is actually part of a farm that owner Chloe Tuttle's family started back in 1922. According to Tuttle, her father, Johnnie Gurkin, cleared the land "with one mule and a lot of dynamite." The result is a pleasing mix of open Coastal Plain farmlands, forests, and cypress swamps frequently intersected by paths, meandering rivers, and slow-moving streams.

Being a man of the land, Tuttle's father knew the benefits of having plenty of plants, and Big Mill is still served by his wisdom. Pecan trees nearly 80 years old shade the inn in the summer and provide a crop of nuts in the early winter, many of which become the key ingredient in the pecan bread Tuttle makes for her guests. Other freshly prepared treats (including continental breakfasts, which are served in the

rooms) come from the bounty of blueberries, plums, pears, and grapes that have been grown on the property for years.

Tuttle inherited the farm in 1984; in 1988, she decided to start a bed and breakfast on the property. Having been a cook aboard a private yacht in the Bahamas for seven years, Tuttle knew plenty about not only keeping guests happy but also well fed. She also knew how to integrate lively Caribbean colors into her Carolina setting. Hand-decorated Portuguese, Spanish, and Mexican tiles are evident throughout the inn, and the rooms are accented with Caribbean-inspired hand-stenciled floors, stained glass doors, and faux-painted walls.

There are three suites and one regular room at Big Mill, and all feature private entrances. The Mardi Gras Suite is in the main house, and its original pine floors, French lace curtains, overstuffed loveseats, stone fireplace, and Portuguese tile wet bar make it a guest favorite. The Abaco Room is also in the main house; its decor reflects Tuttle's fun times in the Abaco Islands, where she lived during her sailing days.

Separate from the main house is the Pack House, once a functioning pack house with three mules and stored tobacco, corn, and hay. Since its "hay

days," the structure has been extensively renovated and now has two high-end suites: the Grading Room and the Corn Crib. The Grading Room, Tuttle says, "has two large rooms — a bedroom and a separate kitchen and sitting area — with hardwood floors, marble countertops, tumbled Greek tiles, a British cast iron enamel stove, white cottage-style queen bed, French doors, full kitchen, and a large bath with a tub. Nothing has been spared in this exquisite suite."

The Corn Crib also entices guests with fine details like original pine floors, an overstuffed couch, a brick breezeway, and kitchen and bath tiled in what Tuttle calls "the sun-drenched colors of Mexico."

Big Mill's accommodations alone make for a relaxing stay, but at this delightful bed and breakfast, the surrounding landscape can easily turn a "stay" into a "wander." Two large lakes dominate the scenery close to the inn, but the sizable, 40-year-old, trellised grapevine in the distance and the open farmlands beyond also beckon. All of the outbuildings from the farm still remain on the 200 acres of property, adding to the sense that this is a place from another time that runs at a much slower pace than the modern world.

Tuttle notes, "The surrounding

farmlands give credence to all of the native plants and flowers. I think the original old farm buildings ‘belong’ and justify the orchard and cutting garden.”

In addition to the cutting garden, which provides plenty of colorful material for fresh flower arrangements throughout the inn, there is a cook’s garden, and it produces both herbs and vegetables for many of Tuttle’s treats for guests. While these gardens provide delights to tingle the taste buds, other senses will also be in for a feast. The nose will appreciate the sweet scents from ginger lilies, gardenias, and moonflowers, while the eyes will be overwhelmed, especially in the spring and summer.

Spring at Big Mill brings an

explosion of color from a large massing of forsythias, 50-year-old azaleas planted by Tuttle’s father, and native dogwoods — a casual presentation that would have pleased William Robinson. In fact, the most formal bit of gardening at the inn is espaliered ivy on the west side of the main house. Tuttle says, “At night, it is lit by tiny white lights and is visible from a half mile away.”

The color carnival continues into the summer throughout the 20 acres of landscaped grounds, as sunflowers, heirloom garden phlox, butterfly bushes, and zinnias begin to put on their flower shows. These displays get unusual competition from the vegetable garden, where Tuttle delights in the strange. She

admits, “I especially enjoy planting odd varieties of vegetables like white eggplants, yellow tomatoes, and purple bell peppers.”

For all of their colors, these flowering (and fruiting) displays don’t overwhelm the landscape at Big Mill. Rather, they blend comfortably into the surrounding scenery of the farm. A little bit country? You bet — but with subtle Tuttle twists and amenities that turn this bed and breakfast into a consummate rural recipe for rest and relaxation. 

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