

*BELOW: Clouds of pink rose blossoms perfume the air. BOTTOM: A flagstone terrace softens to gravel paths crisscrossing the flower borders of Richmond Hill Inn.*

A cool, gray mist shrouds the gardens at Richmond Hill Inn in Asheville, North Carolina. You sip your coffee, savoring the window seat view from the breakfast room for a while, then decide to slip outside to the Parterre Garden.

It's irresistible: You have to give in to the childlike urge to get lost in this sumptuous buffet of blooms. Breakfast can wait. It's

your soul and spirit that need feeding first. You stroll slowly past over-your-head, purple puffs of joe-pye weed, planted next to pure-white blossoms of cleome. They look like sparklers caught in freeze-frame. Fuzzy purple spikes of liatris spray skyward, resembling some far-fetched flower straight out of a Dr. Seuss book. Sweet fragrances tickle your nose; the waterfall's gentle murmuring and birds' cheerful chirping combine in a symphony for the senses. A low-pitched buzzing announces the arrival of a hummingbird, hovering as it sips nectar from a salvia's trumpetlike blooms.

You lay your napkin out on a dew-coated bench, take a seat, breathe deeply, and truly feel lost in a garden. But you're not lost: You've found a floral heaven, here at Richmond Hill Inn, one of several places across the South where the gardens are as special as the lodging.

"I really wanted to do a full-tilt Victorian garden that was authentic to the late 1800s, when the house was built," says Greensboro garden designer Chip Callaway, the garden's creator. Richmond Hill's owners, Dr. Albert J. and Margaret Michel, contacted Chip to design a garden to complement their beautifully restored mansion about 10 years ago. "I researched what were appropriate gardens for that time," Chip adds. "So I knew a lot about plants that were popular back then.

"I used plants that are authentic to the look and feel of that time—cleome, foxglove, heliotrope—what I call my grandma's plants," he says. "They aren't all old varieties, but they have that old-fashioned look."

Hunter Stubbs, head horticulturist at Richmond Hill Inn, puts Chip's dream garden in the ground. He's literally involved from the soil up in the planting and daily maintenance of the thousands of petals on parade.

"People find it hard to believe the Parterre Garden is only 3 years old," Hunter says. "We've had to use a lot of annuals until the perennials and woody shrubs fill out a bit, but it still looks pretty astounding for a garden this young. A lot of people think the garden pretty much came with the house, which is a great credit to Chip's design."

The entire garden stretches from the Garden Pavilion guest quarters, past a 14-foot-wide waterfall, and then up the hill to the mansion. Woody shrubs, perennials, and annuals elbow each other for attention. The garden continues across the road to five Croquet Cottages, so named for the closely

