



GRACEFUL GARDENS

TAh, a weekend at Lake Martin. A time to escape from city traffic and stifling smog. A place to experience the joy of cool mornings on a balcony overlooking the water, afternoons grilling on the patio or playing catch with the kids on the lawn, and evenings swinging on a hammock in a colorful garden complemented by the setting sun.

But oh, the dread of all that laborious yard work.

The lake is where we venture to escape our busy lives, to bask in the beauty of nature while indulging in the comfort and serenity of those beloved lake shore dwellings. The last thing one would want to worry about is yard work. But here's the good news: you don't have to. The company that perhaps has been caring for the landscaping of your home or business - or those of your neighbors - for years is now expanding its services to Lake Martin, making it possible to have both your dream getaway and your dream garden.

"For many people, Lake Martin is a second home," said Bryan Word, president of **Blackjack Horticulture** in Birmingham. "To be able to watch over the yard and maintain it would be a challenge. We're there to help alleviate that." ▶

photos Geoff Knight

Blackjack Gardens, Inc., was formed in 1998 by Miller and Frances Gorrie on the site of the family's 900-acre Blackjack Ridge farm near Trussville. The company consisted of four divisions - a high-end casual furniture business, a horticulture group, an equestrian center, and an organically grown produce operation that specializes in beefsteak greenhouse tomatoes.

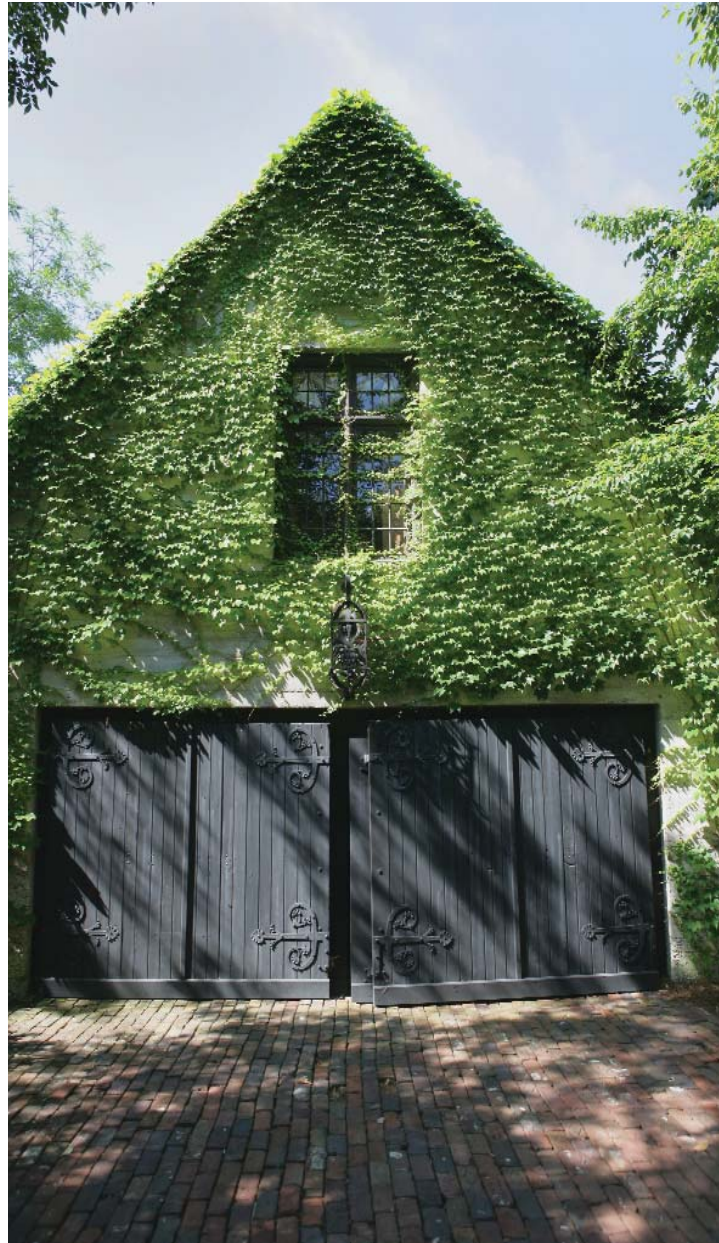
The Gorries sold the horticulture operation in 2004 to Kim Byram and Bryan Word, who had worked with the company since 2000 and had served as its managers for three years. Since then the business, which goes by the name of Blackjack Horticulture, has nearly more than doubled in size, Byram said.

Part of the success of Blackjack Horticulture is due to the two men's experience in the field. Word, who is the company's president, graduated with a bachelor's degree in Landscape Design/Horticulture and a minor in business from Auburn University, which is considered to have one of the top landscape horticulture schools in the southeast. While in college he owned and operated a small landscape company in Guntersville, AL and also worked for Southern Homes and Gardens in Montgomery. He was hired by Blackjack Gardens in 2000 as a landscape installation supervisor. Landscape projects he has managed while at Blackjack include the new UAB University Hospital, the Dawson Baptist Church addition, the Trinity United Methodist Church addition, and various numerous residential projects.

Byram, Blackjack Horticulture's vice president, also graduated from Auburn with a degree in Landscape Design/Horticulture. He worked for several years at a nursery and landscape company in Tuscaloosa, AL before being hired by another company to help build golf courses and athletic fields. Projects he has managed include the University of Mississippi's football field construction, Vanderbilt University's baseball field construction, and various projects for Greystone and Birmingham Country Clubs.

But the business' growth can also be attributed to the love its two owners feel for what they do for a living.

"I enjoy getting to be outside and just being able to take an area that's not defined and make it very picturesque," Byram said. "It's kind of like being an artist."



This spring, Blackjack Horticulture began expanding its operation in Auburn and nearby Lake Martin after being hired to maintain the gardens and landscape on the 10-acres of land surrounding Auburn University's presidential mansion. With full-time staff now in place in Auburn, it seemed a natural progression to pursue business in the area where the company's Birmingham-based clientele seek the comfort of retirement or weekend relaxation, Byram said.

Blackjack Horticulture can do it all - from providing ideas to maintaining landscapes. Their experienced staff can install garden beds, irrigation systems, retaining walls, and water features, to name a few. The company's extensive maintenance program includes weekly visits between March and November and twice-monthly visits during the winter months to take care of those pesky details: weeding, pruning, fertilizing, leaf blowing, mowing, and flowerbed upkeep.

Creating a look for a Lake Martin property can be as elaborate as installing an outdoor kitchen or it can be as simple as adding a splash of color in the form of a small flowerbed.

"Just a little bit of color goes a long way and is not expensive," Byram said. A large benefit of landscaping, he added, is that it can increase the value of a home anywhere from 7 to 15 percent. ▶



Betsy Hayes, Blackjack's landscape designer, suggests using perennials, which will flourish year after year with little upkeep. Specifically, Byram recommends installing plants native to the area, such as shrubs like native azalea, Sweetspire, and Ccletbra or flowers like cone flower, coreopsis, and black-eye Susan. Shade-loving plants thrive around Lake Martin because there are so many large trees there, Word said.

Decorative urns, Hayes added, could also spice up a drab yard. Depending on the style of urn, one could create a yard with a Tex-Mex feel, or the look of an ancient Greek garden, or a beautiful Southern landscape. Urns could also serve a functional purpose by holding herb gardens or dressing up an outdoor table as a centerpiece, she said. Both Byram and Word stressed, however, that a drip irrigation system would need to be installed to help potted plans survive harsh summer conditions. But with the beautiful and variety of styles of that are available, urns could even stand alone as design elements with nothing planted them in all, Hayes said.

The first step in getting a landscape makeover from Blackjack Horticulture is to set up a time for one of its staff to come out for a consultation, Byram said.

Clients can then pay just the consultation fee and run with ideas provided by Blackjack Horticulture's experts or hire the company to draw up a plan and follow through with installation and maintenance. With the help of Blackjack Horticulture, most projects can be completed within a month, Byram said.

When ready to accessorize, Lake Martin homeowners can visit Blackjack Gardens' shop, located at 5549 Derby Drive in Birmingham. The store features high-end merchandise such as Summer Classics, Lloyd Flanders, and Gloster as well as expert advice on how to further enhance a weekend home at Lake Martin.

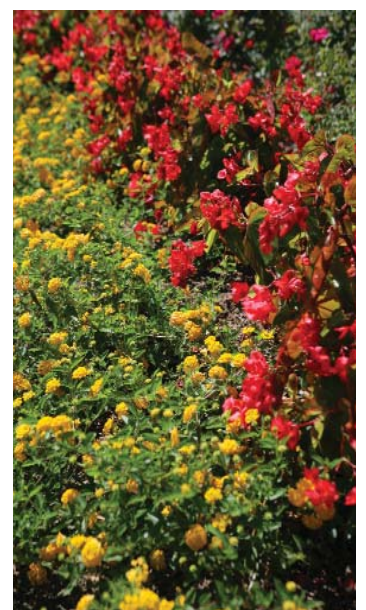
After taking advantage of all the services and products available through Blackjack Horticulture and Blackjack Gardens, there's little left to do other than sit back and enjoy one's own personalized lakeside paradise.

"Having a nice landscaped home makes it a lot more relaxing at the lake, where people spend a lot of time outside," Word said. "They don't have to worry about spending their whole weekend working in the yard. All they've got to do is relax."



HELPFUL TIPS

- Plant perennials for annual color.
- Choose plants native to the area, like azalea, sweetspire, anclethra or flowers like cone flower, coreopsis, and black-eye Susan.
- For heavily shaded yards, plant shade-loving plants.
- Decorative urns can add character to any yard. Use them to hold herbs or flowers, as a table centerpiece, or as stand-alone art.



RESOURCES

■ Blackjack Gardens

205.836.2933

www.blackjackgardens.com

■ Blackjack Horticulture

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www.blackjackhorticulture.com