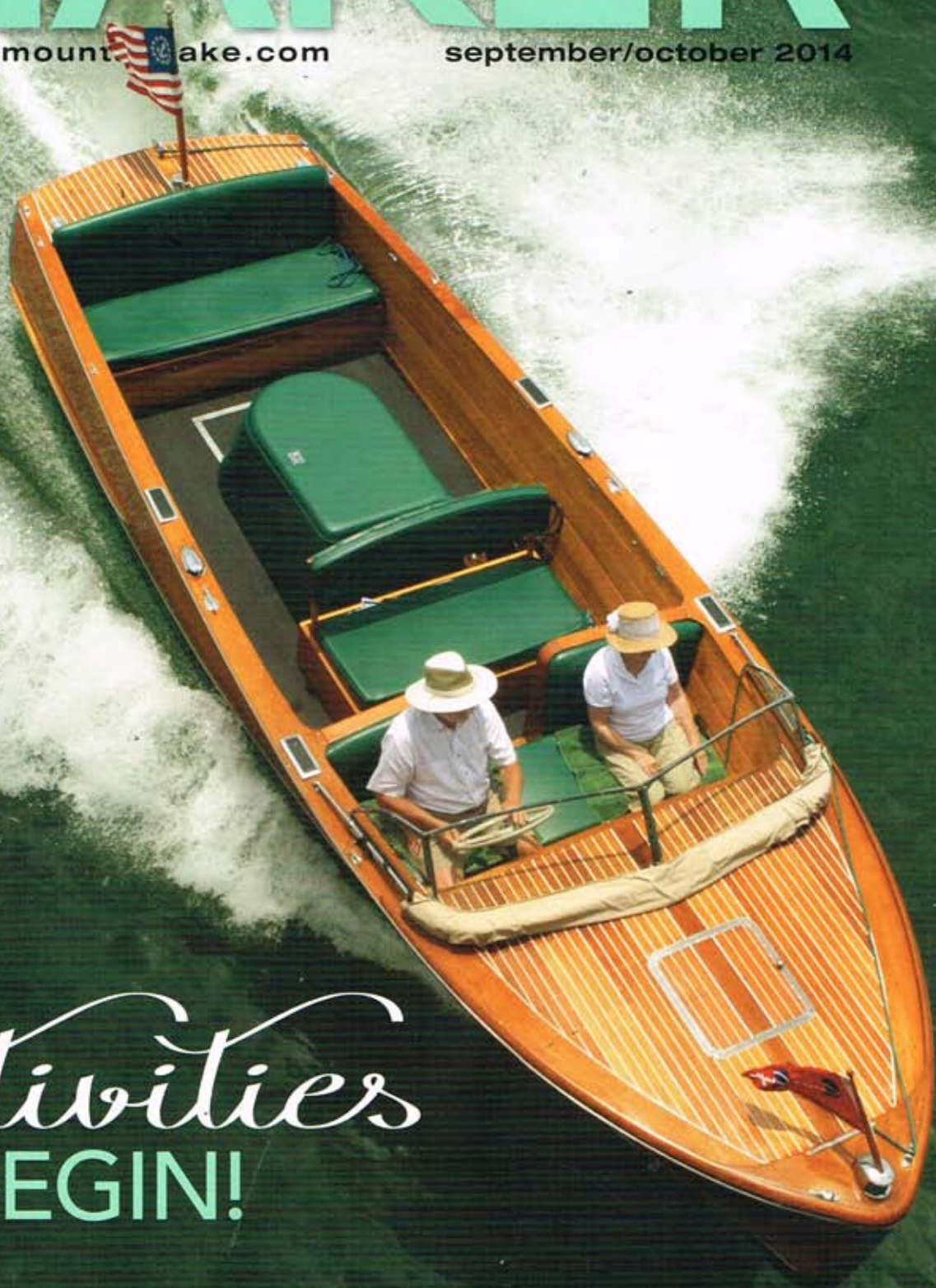


SMITH MOUNTAIN

LAKER

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Boat Show
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Landscape
Contest Winner

STORY BY CATRIONA TUDOR ERLER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON PETERSEN

Outdoor

Oasis

An elegant pond home to colorful and beloved koi makes the garden of Charlie and Theresa Converse a winning lakefront landscape.

This landscaping story begins in the early 1980s when Charlie and Theresa Converse lived in Rochester, New York. A friend had a koi pond that intrigued and inspired them.

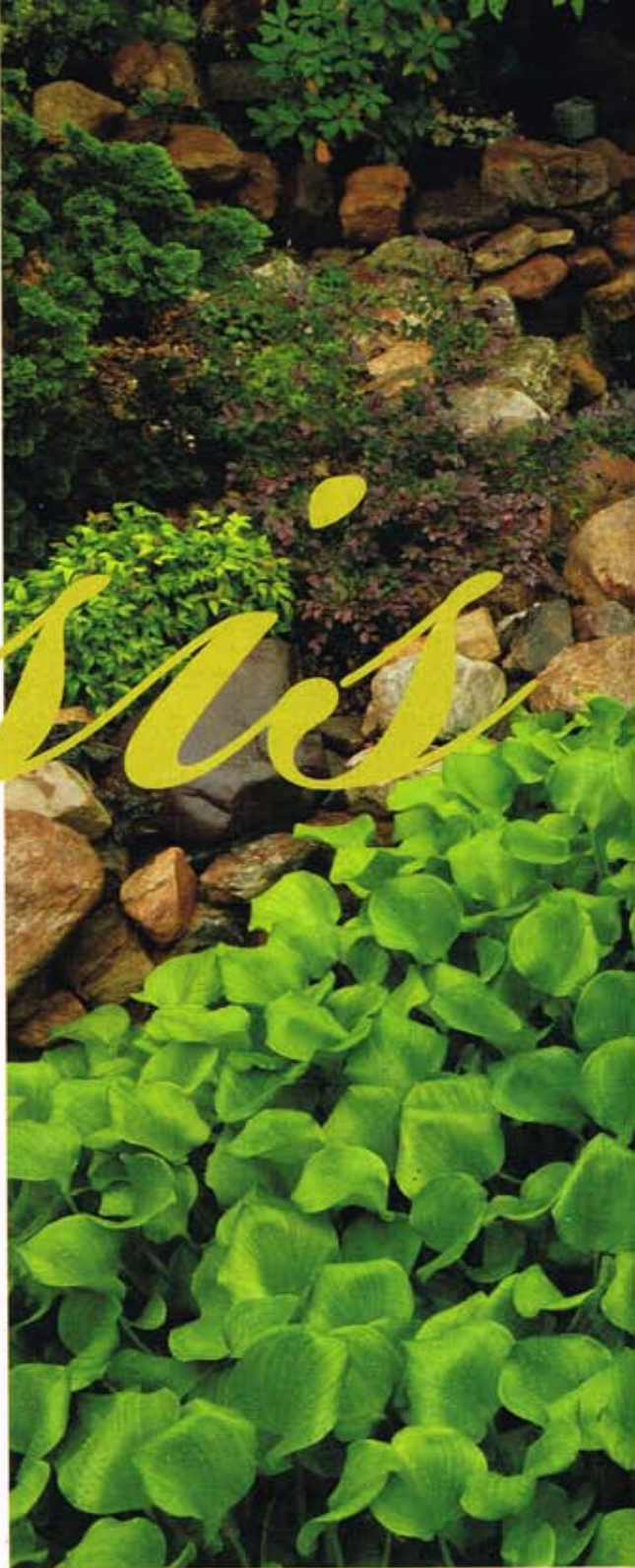
"We were drawn to the koi," said Theresa, "and we both liked the concept of having a pond and the sound of running water."

The couple started with a store-bought pond and one fish, but the koi collection quickly grew to 38 after they purchased additional fish and those had babies. They also rescued damaged koi and nursed them back to health. They decided to add another pond.

"Everything my husband does is larger than life," Theresa said. "Pretty soon, he had a backhoe and was building a larger pond from scratch."

When Charlie retired from his job as line forman for the Rochester Gas and Electric Company in late 2001, the couple decided to move south, in part because koi prefer long, warm summers.

"In New York we only had about three months of weather that was warm enough for them," said Theresa. "The water has to be 55 degrees [Fahrenheit] for the fish to awaken from dormancy. In Rochester, sometimes it was May before they became active."



ABOVE Charlie and Theresa Converse with granddaughter Abby, 10, beside the pond they added to their landscape in 2013.

RIGHT From left, ceramic planters add a whimsical touch to the Converses' upper deck; the pond's resident duck; a decorative frog climbs one of the stone walls at the Converse home.





LEFT From the back deck of their home, Theresa and Charlie Converse enjoy the sound of running water from two cascading waterfalls.

BELOW Koi in a variety of sizes and colors reside in the couple's pond.



KOI FACTS

- Koi can live 80-100 years; owners often write them in their wills as property to pass on to loved ones.
- A valuable koi can sell for up to \$20,000; they are shipped from Japan on ice to keep them dormant during the journey.
- A koi is valued by its coloration, patterning and scalation (clarity or shininess of its scales).
- The word koi or *nishikigoi* means brocade carp.
- Koi first were developed from common carp in Japan in the 1820s.
- Koi are domesticated common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) that are selected or culled for color; they are not a different species but a subspecies, and will revert to the original coloration within a few generations if allowed to breed freely.

Theresa discovered Smith Mountain Lake while traveling for her job as a healthcare consultant. She visited Roanoke and fell in love with the area. In March 2002, they came to look at property. Charlie didn't plan to be on the water, but Theresa really wanted a lakefront home.

"Charlie grew up on a lake in New York, so I hired a fishing guide to take him out. I told him, 'If you come back with a big fish, we'll buy a lakefront home.' He joked that it would have to be a *big* fish. Six hours later, he came back with a string of three huge fish. When he held them at chest level, the tails touched the ground. So we bought a lakefront lot and built an Arts and Crafts-style house."



Stonework around the pond and deck complement the natural appearance of the Converse's garden, which includes foliage with various textures in shades of green, blue, yellow and red.

"We were drawn to the koi, and we both liked the concept of having a pond and the sound of running water."

TERESA CONVERSE, HOMEOWNER

After purchasing a lot in The Water's Edge, challenges started to arise. The couple's Rochester house sold before their lake house was finished. They had to move the koi from the sold property, but the proposed ponds at the lake had not yet been built. After some brainstorming, they hit on the idea of temporarily housing the fish in a 4-foot-deep above-ground swimming pool.

Once the lake house was ready, they bought large plastic bins to transport the fish. They put enough water into large plastic bags to cover the fishes' backs, put one to three fish (depending on their size) into each bag, filled the bags with pure oxygen that would disseminate into the water slowly, and knotted them closed. Each bag of fish went into separate plastic bins, which were stacked in layers and filled the bed of the couple's pickup truck.

"We had no idea what would happen to them," Theresa recalled. "We drove nonstop for 10 hours to get them to Virginia. It was midnight when we arrived at the house."

Immediately, the Converse released the koi into another above-ground swimming pool they had prepped in their garage. There, the fish awaited their new outdoor home.

The Converse built a series of naturalistic ponds and streams that wandered through the back woods on their gently sloping lot. After a few years, they decided a more formal design would better suit the style of their house. They drew up rough plans for the design they envisioned, and then brought in Lynchburg-based landscape architect Norman Tharpe to finalize and implement the design with assistance from nearby Lakescapes Nursery.

ANDIE GIBSON



ABOVE Hostas, rhododendrons and azaleas are among the plants that thrive in the Converses' garden.

BELOW Bright green water hyacinths thrive in a "settling" pond, serving as a biofiltration system to purify the water that cascades to the fish pond below.

FOILING THE DEER

Charlie and Theresa Converse brought 500 hostas from New York and lost them all to hungry deer. Determined not to let that happen again, they have developed a successful, three-pronged system to stop the pests in their tracks:

1. Throughout the year, they keep bars of soap (Dial brand) hanging in the trees around the perimeter of the property, replacing them 3-4 times per year.
2. As soon as the hosta first appear in spring, before the deer have a chance to get a whiff of them, Theresa sprinkles the granular Deer Scram Deer Repellent around the property boundary. She respreads it after every rain.
3. Beginning in early spring, Theresa sprays Bobbex Deer Repellent, a topical foliar spray, on the leaves of her plants. She reapplies every 10 days.

"I've seen a doe and two fawns stand on the edge of the garden, sniff the air and leave," said Theresa.

"We looked into several people, but chose Norman because he has the most experience at the lake with koi," said Theresa, noting Tharpe's 30 years of expertise in design, installation and maintenance of water gardens and koi ponds around the region.

Unfortunately, the home's septic lines ran right through where they wanted the upper pond. They solved the problem by building a shallow, above-ground "settling" pond five feet lower than the deck off the back of the house. Well above ground and over the septic lines, the upper pond is too shallow for fish. Instead, the Converses planted water hyacinths, an ideal plant for biofiltration to purify the water that cascades to the fish pond below. The lower pond's depth (6-8 feet) and steep sides provide no access for wading, foiling local herons that would relish a feast of koi.

A stone wall hides the mechanics of the raised pond, and blends with the stone fireplace on the deck. To this hardscape, the Converses have planted a garden that focuses on foliage with various textures and myriad shades of green, blue, yellow and red.

"There's not a lot of color," said Theresa, "and no annuals."

Instead, the couple has planted hostas, euonymus, nandina, spirea, lorapetalum, rhododendrons and azaleas.

Charlie and Theresa Converse are passionate about koi and about landscaping. These two loves are a winning combination for this year's Lovely Laker Landscape Contest. The couple takes home \$1,000 in credit to use on plants, materials or anything else available at Lakescapes Nursery.

Catriona Tudor Erler is a freelance garden writer, photographer and speaker who divides her time between Smith Mountain Lake and Charlottesville. She is the author of nine books on gardening and landscaping.

