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Michelle Wallace, Consumer Horticulture Agent—Durham County and EMGV Coordinator
North Carolina Extension Service

NC State University A&T State University COOPERATIVE EXTENSION Durham County Center

In This Issue:

Growing Ginger	p. 1
Chinese Gardens	p. 2
Is There a Positive Side to Growing Invasive Plants?	p. 5
Charles Murphy: Ramblings	p. 6
Thoughts on Gardeners	p. 7
Bob Shaw: Holden Mill Trail	p. 9
A. E. Housman poem	p. 14

Durham County Center
721 Foster Street
Durham, NC 27701
MGV Desk: (919) 560-0528
Hort. Agent: (919) 560-2526
Fax: (919 560-0530

Growing Ginger

Cleaning up my desk, I came across an interesting article I'd clipped from *The Washington Post* on October 7, 2010. The garden writer, Barbara Damrosch, bought online some ginger roots—those in the grocery bins may be treated with a growth retardant—and planted them in pots with a potting mixture. Because she gardens in Maine, she kept them in the greenhouse but as soon as our soil is warm we should be able to plant directly outdoors. Ginger needs both bright light and moisture in a soil that provides good drainage.

By September Damrosch's fronds were three feet high. When she dug up the plants she was gratified to find that the rhizomes had increased in size: "For every ginger rhizome planted there were five or six new ones."[1]

[1] Damrosch, Barbara. "Growing Ginger in Cooler Climates," *T*

The best part was that the new rhizomes were not stringy and fibrous. The rhizomes will survive in the soil until the outside temperature falls below 50°.

The Chinese Garden

For rather obscure reasons, I had to take a crash course in Chinese gardens, a subject I knew absolutely nothing about. I vaguely thought about cherry trees, water, maybe a camellia or two—obviously I didn't have a clue. Well, Chinese gardens are very different from those gardens in the West and are very interesting. While they are unlike European formal gardens with their symmetry and geometric elements, Chinese gardens are in their own way very traditional. Simply put, Chinese gardens are man-made versions and interpretations of nature.

Chinese gardens are built; they are constructions consisting of architectural elements, rocks, water and some plants. In fact, the Chinese word for "landscape" means "mountains and water."[2] There is a sought after harmony between the architecture and the environment: "Architectural elements and nature were blended in such a way as to present unique visual effects. In both the imperial and private gardens, the buildings display a rich variety of appearance, style, and scale, both horizontally and vertically" [FX:13].

To look at pictures of Chinese gardens is to be aware that Chinese view their rocks with love and adoration. Rocks, the symbol for mountains, are not smooth but are filled with dents, holes, craters, and crevices with a very creased and wrinkled surface.

As Fang Xiaofeng points out, most of China lies within temperate and subtropical zones, high in the northwest and low in the southeast with rivers running east into the sea. In the summer the prevailing winds are from the southeast while in the winter the winds come from the northeast; as a result ideally houses should face the south to take in the summer sun and to avoid the winter wind.

To begin a Chinese garden there are certain steps to be taken:

1. Once the gardener has chosen the location, he marks off the center spot as this is where the primary architectural elements should be sited;
2. Because the Chinese garden is viewed as a painting, the most significant aspects of the garden should face the viewer;
3. Feng shui has had a deep impact upon the Chinese garden. The compass indicates where to site buildings so that the yin and the yang[3] are balanced. Walls are important because the outside world plays no role in these self-contained gardens. As Fang Xiaofeng says, "Chinese gardens, in essence, manifest a paradoxical sort of artificial naturalness" [FX: 52].

20-30% of the garden consists of architectural elements. The purpose of the following descriptions is to demonstrate the integral part architectural factors play in the Chinese garden. The most important is the ***Tingtang***[4], a hall or pavilion, which is situated in the middle of the most important scenic area, the

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[2] Fang Xiaofeng. *The Great Gardens of China: History, Concepts, Techniques* (The Monacelli Press, NY, 2010), p. 17. Future references will be listed as [FX: page] in brackets.

[3] The yin and the yang are often confused between good and bad in the West. The yin and the yang are opposites—but equals—that interconnect, such as the top and bottom of your hand. Wheat grows high in the summer (yang) and then dies back after it has produced seeds (yin). For a much greater explanation go to Wikipedia.

[4] *Tingtang* = *ting*, which is a place to discuss affairs and *tang*, which is a sunny room [FX: 60].

most important site. Often lavishly decorated, a large garden may have more than one *Tingtang*, but one will have the greater importance. This is the public aspect of the garden, the setting for social gatherings.

The ***Xuan*** is the courtyard in front of a building. Open on three sides, it, too, is an area for public gatherings but it may not be any larger than the *Tingtang* or smaller than a studio [FX: 65]. The ***Xie*** is a structure that faces water, with the side facing water being open. Because almost all Chinese gardens have water, the *Xie* is a very common feature. Its size depends upon the size of the water feature but typically is relatively small in private gardens and larger in the imperial gardens.

The ***Ting*** is a pavilion that, unlike the *Tingtang*, may be located anywhere in the garden—provided there is a good view. There are three versions of the *Ting*: (1) a sun pavilion with windows; (2) a stele pavilion lined with steles; and (3) a well pavilion housing a well, with a hole in the roof to facilitate conversation between man and the heavens. The ***Louge*** is a building consisting of two or more stories and an open-sided ground floor. Found on the perimeter of the garden, its function is to "relieve the sense of isolation created by substantial walls" [FX: 70].

The **boat hall** is located on the body of water with the short side of the building facing the water. Some structures actually look as though they could house boats whereas others only give that impression. A boat hall that isn't situated on the water is called a "boat on land" or a "boat with no mooring." A ***Shi*** is a small, closed private room, usually a study or a bedroom, located in the innermost part of the garden.

The ***Langzi*** is a covered walkway leading people through the garden while serving as a link among the best sights. The *Langzi* can go uphill, across lakes, and typically will have many twists and turns. Bodies of water will have **bridges** of many forms and styles. Other architectural elements are **windows**, which are ornamental in natures, often included in walls, and **latticework**, which often take the place of walls.

Chinese gardens are never level, always containing artificial hills, which Fang Xiaofeng declares "are…the creative works of art that make Chinese gardens unique" [FX: 86]. Resembling mountains, these small hills are composed of soil interspersed with rocks. These rock structures consist of three different kinds of rocks: (1) small egg-shaped lakebed stones; (2) large cube-shaped yellow stone; and (3) blue rock slabs from northern China. They could be constructed to resemble the side of a mountain, a cliff, or a combination of the two, a *fengluan*[5], which is modeled after real mountains in southern China. The rock structures are quite elaborate in many cases, containing caves, caverns, dry valleys (without water) and gullies with waterfalls. Stone slabs form paths going up the steep sides. Artificial hills generally fall into three types: earth, rock, or rocky-earth. The earth hills are gentle slopes while stone hills are part of the scenic route and rocky-earth hills offer the most dramatic views of an ever-changing garden.

Water is an essential element in Chinese gardens, although it's a more common feature in southern Chinese gardens than those in the north. Sometimes it settles in calm pools to house fish, sometimes it cascades dramatically off the side of a cliff, sometimes it trickles, adding a soothing sound to the garden and sometimes it even supports a boat. The water in Chinese gardens should have a traceable source, perhaps emanating from a grotto or even a river. Shorelines are an important part of the architectural design: stone shorelines are more popular than muddy shorelines but "the height difference between the shore and the water surface should be kept small enough to maintain an intimate relationship between

[5] A *feng* is a towering peak, while a *luan* is a rolling hill.

man and water [FX: 102]. Boulders frequently jut out into the water for dramatic effect. Gullies consist of running water squeezed between two hills while waterfalls form ponds at their bottoms, just as they do in nature.

The Chinese garden, with its manufactured landscape, consist of different views: "The classical Chinese garden, be it large or small, always consists of several scenic areas of different sizes, which are in turn further divided by circuitous walkways, flower-walls, and buildings into small courtyards displaying different themes" [FX-124]. Walls not only keep out unwanted guests but they also partition off parts of the garden, such as separating courtyards from scenic views. Walkways occur near the walls.

But "Wait! Where are the plants? Don't gardens contain plants?" you ask. As EMGVs, we all know there are many plants from China that reside in our garden: lilacs, azaleas and rhododendrons, *Rosa rugosa*, Lady Banks roses, camellias, daphnes, lilies, primroses, large flowered clematis, chrysanthemums, and tree peonies to name a few. Peaches originated in China before wending their way westward along the Silk Road. The China roses helped to spur on the development of the hybrid teas. Spirea, jasmines, and forsythia all are Chinese contributions to the world of horticulture.

"China owes the astonishing wealth of its plant life to a unique combination of geographical accidents."[6] When ice sheets covered much of Europe and North America, China remained ice free, thereby allowing plants to continue to develop. Alpine plants thrived in the foothills of the Himalayas while the temperate plants of the dry, cold north and the warmer south interbred for thousands of years. What is hard for westerners to comprehend is how few of these plants avidly collected by westerners are used in Chinese gardens. Those plants that the Chinese use are full of historic symbolic meaning; consequently plants discovered in the nineteenth century in the wild are deemed not suitable for the garden. The Chinese are *very* conservative as to what plants they will use in their gardens: most rhododendrons, lilies and primroses that grow in the wild are considered unsuitable for the garden as they hold little or no symbolic meaning.[7]

First grown for their medicinal qualities, chrysanthemums are the symbol for long life. The lotus first gained notice for its nutritional qualities while the tree peony, a symbol of wealth and aristocracy, came into the garden relatively late but was one of the first plants to be cultivated purely for show [MK: 197-8]. However, bear in mind that "relatively late" refers to 700 CE. Bamboo, the symbol of virtue, is highly esteemed in the garden as are pines, the symbol for wisdom.

The Chinese garden celebrates seasonal change, which is reflected in the way "different courtyards and space cells are often in rotation to celebrate the flowers of different seasons" [MK: 200]. For this reason the Chinese will amass tree peonies, which bloom and fade at the same time. Then the focus will be on the lotus in the water, which is replaced by chrysanthemums. Of course we do the same thing in our gardens—a spring garden is quite different from an August garden for example—but our gardens contain lots of plants, we don't limit the number of plants to a few, and we cultivate masses of bloom. In the Chinese garden pots holding herbaceous plants—frequently chrysanthemums—and dwarf trees become garden accents while bonsai adorn rock gardens. However when we look at pictures of Chinese gardens we mostly see trees such as pines and camellias.

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[6] Keswick, Maggie. *The Chinese Garden: History, Art and Architecture* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2003), p. 190. Future references will be [MK: page] in brackets.

[7] Valder, Peter. *The Garden Plants of China* (Timber Press, Portland, OR, 1999), p. 24. Future references will be [PV: page] in brackets.

Whereas western gardens are expansions around the houses where we reside; Chinese gardens are quite different in that those Chinese who have gardens dwell in them as the architecture is considered to be part of the garden. Western gardens on the whole do not imitate nature—a herbaceous border might follow the natural contours of the land but no one pretends that such borders exist in nature—whereas Chinese gardens attempt to manufacture nature but on a more intimate and dramatic scale. Slowly Chinese gardens are opening up. Under the Communists who considered these gardens elitist, gardens played no role in Chinese life. Beginning in 1976 under Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese authorities once again permitted the commercial production of ornamental plants and botanical gardens saw a slow revival. However, more than plants and gardens were lost during the twenty-six years of Mao's reign: there was also a loss of horticultural knowledge, especially among the young. Many old cultivars were lost during this period at a time when old city quarters were turned into blocks of sterile apartment buildings.

Today it is gratifying that the Chinese are reviving this old horticultural art form by revitalizing old gardens and creating new ones.

Is There a Positive Side to Invasive Plants?

Science Daily reports that scientists have identified a positive aspect of man-introduced invasive plants, believe it or not. A team at Pennsylvania State University set about to "test whether certain well-established, invasive fruiting species have negative or positive effects on bird and fruiting-plant communities."[8] An invasive plant was one man planted that had become numerically dominant. The question they asked themselves was: "are we sometimes doing more harm than good when we eradicate plants that , despite being introduced recently, have formed positive relationships with native animals?"

The area these two scientists studied was a section of Pennsylvania known as Happy Valley that was covered with non-native honeysuckle. They discovered that the birds in the region and the honeysuckle had developed a relationship of mutualism. The honeysuckle provided the fruit-eating birds with food in the fall while the birds distributed the honeysuckle seeds over a large geographical area.

The scientists then tested the effects the honeysuckle had on other plants but placing pots of American nightshade, *Solanum americanum*, both in areas where the honeysuckle grew and where it didn't. In those areas covered by honeysuckle the fruit-eating birds ate 30% more of the fruit of the American nightshade than in those areas where the honeysuckle was non-existent. Therefore, the area where there was honeysuckle proved to be more beneficial to this native American plant than those areas without the honeysuckle because of the heavier presence of fruit-eating birds.[9]

Because of the honeysuckle, Happy Valley now has three or four times the number of fruit eating birds than it did 30 years ago. Concluding that "while some invasive human-introduced plants are definitely problematic, others could serve to restore ecological balance by providing essential food resources to

[8] "Invasive Plants Can Create Positive Ecological Change, " *Science Daily* (February 14, 2011), http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/02/110211095555.htm, p. 1.
[9] *Ibid*., p. 2.

native migratory birds," the scientists believe that some invasive species should be left alone.[10] "We should be asking: Are we responding to real threats in nature or to our cultural perception and scientific bias?"

My thanks to Jan Little of Duke Gardens who alerted me to this article.

C M: Ramblings

Odds and Ends

The postwoman, completing her appointed rounds, delivered the Spring 2011 Gardener's Supply Company catalog late in February. Every time a new plant, tool or equipment catalog shows up in the mail, it's a reminder of how things were when I was a kid and the Christmas edition of the Sears catalog came. Almost every page had a picture and description of something I thought I just had to have.

Leanna Murphy-Domo and I put together a presentation on container gardening for the Durham Garden Forum in January, and Gardener's Supply has gone into containers in a big way. Their website, www.gardeners.com displays containers for ready-made raised bed kits, and planting bags for potatoes, peppers, green beans, tomatoes, melons, and more.

Raised beds are, of course, containers of a sort, but they're not portable. And, being more or less permanently located, the amount of good sunlight they get can be diminished if there are nearby trees that provide more shade year by year. And, raised beds require significant amounts of soil to fill, and need repairs from time to time. So, while I'm a big fan of raised beds, this year looks like a good time to move more into separate containers.

Advantages of the containers include portability, lower soil requirement, lower labor investment and, since there is usually only one plant per container, less angst if a plant doesn't work out and has to be pulled out. They can also be inexpensive, especially if you shop around. All of the Big Box stores will likely have some good buys on various sizes of containers, and if you poke around construction sites after hours you can sometimes pick up a few empty 5-gallon paint buckets for nothing. True, they aren't exactly decorative, but with a little bit of cleaning they serve very well for medium-sized plants such as peppers and eggplant. They would also serve well for smaller, determinate varieties of tomatoes, though trying to grow a Big Boy tomato in them could be frustrating.

Unless you buy the commercial planting bags, you may need to do some work prior to planting. Plants don't like wet feet, so any closed-bottom container needs to have three to five drainage holes, about ¼ "diameter, drilled through the bottom. The best medium for planting is a mix of soilless material generously leavened with good compost (preferably home-grown). An alternate medium is a 50:50 mixture of topsoil and compost. Soil and mulch suppliers usually have that mix, but unfortunately it may only be available in large quantities. I try to keep some of the 50:50 mixture on hand because I use it for making new flowerbeds and enlarging my vegetable beds when necessary, but you can't just go to Lowe's to get a bag of it. (Hint: To prevent drain holes from becoming plugged buy soil, wrap small rocks [clean pea

[10] *Ibid*., p. 2.

gravel will do] in landscaping fabric, then cover the drain holes with the bundle before you add soil mix. This will allow water to pass on through the holes, but will block soil.)

If you want to get a larger container, you can mix plantings to create a sort of edible tub. Leafy greens such as different lettuces and spinach, plus herbs like chives and parsley, as well as some small flowering plants, make an attractive and edible addition to the deck or patio.

Container plants obviously have less soil mass for roots to spread in, and to hold moisture, so more frequent watering than permanent beds will probably be necessary. When temperatures are warm, watering once a day or maybe even every second day may be enough for your container plants. Add water to the container until it runs out of the bottom holes, that's enough. (If your containers are going to be on a hard surface, such as a driveway or sidewalk, raise the bottom by placing a couple of bricks or 4x4" treated wood underneath. On very hot days it may be necessary to water more than once. Look for the usual signs of lack of moisture, e.g., drooping leaves, and don't forget to do the "finger" test. Poke a finger down into the soil mix; it if feels moist, you're OK, but if it's dry, add water.

With nothing more than a sunny patio, deck or even driveway margin, you can grow herbs and enough vegetables in containers to help make a sumptuous summer meal. Gardeners with limited space, sunshine or mobility may find container gardening an ideal way to scratch that "grow it yourself" itch. Plus, if one plant doesn't work out, there's less trauma involved in yanking it out and trying another.

So, gather up the urns, tubs, buckets or whatever and go to it. And always remember, home gardening is supposed to be fun.

Thoughts on Gardeners

There are, I think, two types of gardeners: landscapers and plant collectors. This became particularly apparent to me when I attended the afternoon presentation Bill Cullina gave at Duke Gardens this past February. Suddenly I heard him recommend that we buy twenty-five specimens of the same plant. Now Bill is currently the Director of Horticulture at the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens so I can understand—perhaps—his purchasing large numbers of the same plant but I have trouble even buying five specimens of the same plant. I must add that when I did so I lived to regret it.

You see, I am a plant collector, not a landscaper. Landscapers use this term scornfully to describe my garden but I have two major reasons to advocate plant collecting: (1) I like to test a plant to see if it will be happy in my garden and will please me by thriving; and (2) I simply have to satisfy my curiosity by trying new and different plants. Landscapers assume that I have no taste, that I know nothing about the principles of gardening, and that I have no gardening technique—and I'm quite willing to cede all those points. I, on the other hand, will yawn upon viewing perennial borders that repetitiously repeat the same plant again and again. If truth be told, some of the garden slides Bill Cullina showed as a demonstration of no planning and foresight I thought looked pretty *good*.

These two types of gardeners even read garden catalogues quite differently. The landscaper will first ask: do I have room for this plant? To plant collectors this is a silly question. Of course we have room because we will *make* room. Consequently, plant collectors like myself will mark off a copious number of plants that they lust after—price is not a big consideration in that we're not buying twenty-five plants of one species. This is the gardener whose eye is drawn to the "**New!**" in the catalogues. You see, "**New!**" means exploration, being on the front edge, and being ahead of the crowd. As soon as I read

about *Tetrapanax papyrifera*, there was no question but that I had to have it. Because this plant has steadily creeping rhizomes, it is a good thing I didn't purchase twenty-five (even if I could have afforded it) because I would now own a *Tetrapanax* grove, something I have no desire to possess. My one *Tetrapanax* is now six in number and I ruthlessly pull out the new babies (which is easy to do when they are young). I suspect a landscaper would refrain from purchasing even one *Tetrapanax* because their plans fail to incorporate steroidal plants.

All gardeners in our area wish fervently for a fence of some type because of the deer problem. I've heard landscapers nonchalantly declare that we simply have to plants those plants deer leave alone—and gardeners like myself regard these landscapers as though they live on a different planet. Where's the fun in planting the same plant again and again? What is so great about owning one hundred hellebores? A garden can only incorporate so many *Euphorbia wulfenii*. Occasionally it would be lovely to own a rose bush or a hosta.

Now the hosta people are the ultimate plant collectors—I mean these people are fanatical about hostas. To be a hosta obsessive you either have to have a fence or live on an island where deer have never penetrated as otherwise, growing hostas is an impossibility. Deer would rather eat hostas than any other plant. Hosta people go to hosta conventions, hosta people have the most active plant club I have ever encountered, and hosta people publish a quarterly magazine on hostas (what else?) that is by far the best garden magazine devoted to one plant that I have ever seen. In short, hosta people make orchid collectors look tame.

To grow hostas is to be a plant collector because hosta people are obsessive in their search for new and different hostas. No one knows how many hosta cultivars there are—I suspect there are thousands but that is pure speculation—but in the world of hosta collectors it doesn't appear to be unreasonable to want them *all.* Bob Solberg, owner of Green Hill Hostas in Chapel Hill, has addressed this problem in an article in an issue of *The Hosta Journal*: "When the hosta bug bites, there seems to be so many hostas and so many holes to fill. I know collectors that have purchased hundreds of different hostas in their first year of madness."[11]

For those of you who love to design gardens on the transparent paper garden designers call "trash," I know you're shaking your heads in disbelief because you *plan ahead*. You already know what you want to plant; plant collectors typically make up their minds when they hit the nurseries. Plant collectors forget what they ordered on those dark, dank days in January whereas landscapers remember each plant they ordered and why they ordered them; when the order arrives, plant collectors will scratch their heads wondering why they ordered such-and-such plant whereas the landscapers know where each plant will go in their gardens. Needless to say, plant collectors will have ordered a wide assortment of plants whereas the landscapers will have ordered a large number of the same plant.

Bill Cullina advised us to buy plants as liners whenever possible, stating that the plants would quickly grow and purchasing larger plants is simply a waste of money. Bob Solberg advises us to do the opposite: buy mature hostas and forego the liners. His reasoning is quite simple and makes perfect sense to the plant collector. The liners are unquestionably cheaper but they lack the mature leaves. It might grow up to be a beauty contestant but it also might become an unruly teenager in your garden. Now the landscaper would have thoroughly researched the hosta before purchasing and would know there is a beauty

[11] Solberg, Bob. "Running Out of Room? Congratulations!," *The Hosta Journal.* www.americanhostasociety.org/pdf/running_out_of_room.pdf., p.1.

queen in the making. Landscapers do their homework whereas plant collectors prefer making their choices on a whim.

Eventually the plant collector has to give something up. As a plant collector, I can attest to the thrill of the chase, the fun of acquiring new plants. Sometimes an old passion becomes, well…old, stale, and trite. It's okay to say goodbye. Well meaning plant collectors will try to find homes for these fading objects of old lust but sometimes these plants land on top of the compost heap. Because landscapers are organized and plan ahead, their gardens aren't subject to such whims. Azaleas remain in place, the boxwoods never get disfigured, and most important of all, the plants are situated where they show purpose.

When Cullina recommended buying twenty-five identical plants, it made me, the plant collector wonder: how does he cope with the hot new plant that appears every spring? Surely Bill Cullina doesn't advocate buying twenty-five specimens of a new introduction? As gardeners, we have all discovered that the new hot plant can be underwhelming in its performance, failing to live up to its hype. Take *Echinacea*. Last year there were so many introductions that they made my head spin. Of course, I succumbed and bought some (but not *all*—even I occasionally have some common sense); some performed poorly for me and some were okay, but just okay. This year I shall judge them more critically, deciding whether they remain or go. Plant hybridizers tend to wax poetically and—might I say it?—untruthfully. The landscapers among us know this and wait until the jury is out while we plant collectors always hope that we're onto something new that's going to be great.

FYI from Michelle: I am by the above definition a "landscaper," but I prefer to be thought of as a gardener. While I love to plant masses of the same plant, I advocate for tremendous diversity and I always typically leave space for unplanned plant introductions.

B S: Holden Mill Trail—Early March

The Holden Mill trail lies in the "Western Trails of the Eno River State Park"—those superb lands saved for us by local visionaries during the last century. And, after the cloudburst yesterday, wildflowers along the trail are invigorated. Lovely little bluets have emerged and Dogtooth Violets, my favorites since childhood, no longer droop disconsolately, and several more varieties have emerged. Drive out Cole Mill Road, cross Pleasant Green Road, and continue on. The Park once provided maps in a nice metal map box at the trail head. Now those boxes are empty; blame venal Wall Street financiers and the ensuing budget collapse; and download a map from the web. The Holden Mill trail continues from the Buckquarter Creek trail—another splendid loop. Eno River Park loops often have one long walk on the flat along the river and another walk up and over the ridges above. Both are worth traveling with their own families of flowers and bushes and trees and denizens. Along the river one is more likely to encounter one of North Carolina's splendid variety of snakes—a slim and docile Rough Green Snake or a lovely Ring Neck Snake or, tracing S's in the water, a Banded Water Snake. And the wildflowers grow thicker down near the river. Up on the ridges, one finds the remnants of homesteads—the rubble of hearths and fallen chimneys from a century ago. Passing from Hillsborough through Durham, the Eno falls enough to give us a succession of rapids; they burble after a rain. That fall was enough to sustain mills along the Eno and the remnants of Holden Mill are found along that trail. Don't take the loop around when it leaves the river, hop the small creek and continue on to see the mill. Then walk back, hop the creek and climb up over the ridge, almost as high as Cox Mountain across the river. Walking is

fine all through the year: in fall and winter, when the leaves are down, one can see the lay of the land. The Holden Trail is luxuriously wide, even in mid summer one is unlikely to pick up a tick.

http://www.ncparks.gov/Visit/parks/enri/pics/enri_west_trails.pdf