



PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRISTINE PRICHARD

# Green, Clean, & Serene

*Enthusiastic people and a genuine sense of place make this rural urbanism experiment something special.*

Stream water tumbles into a shallow pool where Huckleberry Finn—or rather, Steve Nygren—stands ankle deep with his slacks rolled up and a smile on his face. Whether he’s wearing a business suit or blue jeans, it takes little prodding to get Huck, er, Steve, into this kind of playful spirit.

“This waterfall is what first drew us to the land,” says Steve, who along with wife Marie and daughters Kara, Quinn, and Garnie, cherish a place known as Serenbe. That name, a grafting of “serenity” and “be,” serves as a guiding principle for what Steve calls “an experiment in rural urbanism” near Palmetto, 30 miles southwest of downtown Atlanta.

“The idea is to build a modern community with traditional values while leaving most of the land undisturbed,” he explains. “Come on,” he adds, tugging socks and shoes back on and rolling down damp cuffs, “let’s walk into the village, and I’ll show you what I mean.”



TOP: The Nygren family—(from left) Kara, Quinn, Marie, Garnie, and Steve—moved to the country for scenic spots such as this. Their rural urbanism development, Serenbe, conserves 70% of the land as greenspace. ABOVE: Cottages cluster in Serenbe’s compact village area, leaving plenty of woods and fields untouched for all to enjoy.



ABOVE: Paula Williams helps keep the horses at Serenbe Stables healthy, happy, and ready to ride on equestrian trails. RIGHT: Creative touches such as lampposts designed by sculptor Robert Rausch give Serenbe a unique profile.

### Feel the Energy

Terms such as “low impact,” “sustainable,” and “walkable” roll off tongues easily among the 50 or so residents now living in this utopian setting. Steve leads the way from a seemingly remote hiking trail to a compact residential/commercial hamlet.

A dozen people chat over coffee and pastries at the Blue-Eyed Daisy Bakeshop. Others view art at StudioSwan, whose artist-owners live and work in the gallery building. This being a Saturday morning, still others peruse fresh vegetables at an organic farmers market held on a greenspace within Serenbe. Conversations often turn to what a great place Serenbe is.

### Others Pitch In

Unable to control growth beyond his own 900 acres, Steve Nygren convinced neighboring landowners with a combined 40,000 acres to join his green revolution. They formed the Chattahoochee Hill Country Alliance, promising low-impact development with an emphasis on keeping commercial areas in check and most of the land unspoiled. “It seems to be working,” says an overjoyed Steve. “I think we’re going to see a very different kind of growth on this side of Atlanta than we’ve seen in other directions.” For more information visit [www.chathillcountry.org](http://www.chathillcountry.org), or call (770) 463-1548.

“We’re keeping 70% of the property as greenspace,” says Steve, taking a seat among friends who all share a “hi” or a handshake. “That means putting houses, cottages, and stores close together. But you know what? It brings people together. We put mailboxes and bulletin boards in central areas to encourage people to run into each other on a regular basis. Serenbe is a place for people who live their lives with passion.”

“That’s true,” says bakeshop founder Angie Mosier as she sets out fresh brownies. “You can definitely feel the energy here.” Her husband, musician Johnny Mosier, just installed a wireless Internet access system for customers.



ABOVE: Paige Witherington (right) manages a 20-acre organic farm where people are welcome to help out. RIGHT: Angie Mosier, founder of the Blue-Eyed Daisy Bakeshop, serves residents Gwen and Pepper Bullock.



### Building on Dreams

Well-known as past owners of Atlanta restaurants including the Peasant Restaurant Group and Mary Mac’s Tea Room, Steve and Marie moved to the country to raise their girls. Starting in 1990 with 60 acres, they spent weekends exploring old buildings and wooded trails. Later they moved in full-time, added more cottages, and opened a popular bed-and-breakfast now called The Inn at Serenbe.

“I thought it would take a long time for urban sprawl to reach this far out from Atlanta,” Steve recalls. “Then one day I was stunned to see trees being cleared for development right next to us.” The Nygrens sold their restaurant interests, expanded Serenbe to 900 acres, dreamed about creating a keep-it-green community, and then acted on those dreams.



### Coming to Fruition

A master plan locks in greenspace. New stables anchor a network of trails. A low-impact wastewater treatment plant serves the 80 homes built so far. More homes, but not too many more, are expected. A well-received new restaurant, The Farmhouse, shares space in the country inn.

“That creative spirit and the natural setting drew us,” says artist Gail Foster, who owns StudioSwan with artist Tom Swantson, her husband. “We get to live, work, and run a gallery in one amazing place. Birds are



ABOVE: Steve and Marie started with 60 acres and a farmhouse. Now they’re grooming 900 acres. LEFT: Artist Gail Foster lives in the same building where she paints and runs a gallery called StudioSwan.

always chirping along a little brook running through some wild azaleas I can see from our balcony. Best of all is being around people who care about their surroundings.”

“What’s happening here is amazing,” Steve says, raving about successes and anticipating an art center, general store, and yoga studio coming soon. “We don’t want to get too big, but we want all the amenities of a strong community. People choose Serenbe for the lifestyle and the setting, but I think they’ll stay for the very real sense of connectedness.”

Gail, popping in from StudioSwan

for a snack at Blue-Eyed Daisy, puts matters into perspective with one quick stroke. “Everyone in Serenbe is a close friend of Steve and Marie Nygren,” she says. “What they’ve done here is pure genius.”

Steve accepts her kudos with a modest “aw, shucks” blush. As if his bare feet were in that stream again, his Huck Finn grin slides into its familiar place.

JOE RADA

**For more information:** Visit [www.serenbe.com](http://www.serenbe.com), or call (770) 463-9997.