



Master Gardener Barry Kirsch Lives a Life of Growth

BY MARY BOZA CRIMMINS

As you wander through the whimsical Restoration Cottage Garden, you experience a colorful array of plants lovingly tended to by master gardener Barry Kirsch. You may also encounter fairy robots and natural predators that transform the grounds into a unique refuge in Sanford's Historic Downtown.

Personal Transformation

Barry and his wife Debbie had the vision to transform their home into an English garden cottage. A natural storyteller, creative artist, and lifetime learner, Barry decided to complete the 50-hour University of Florida Master Gardener Program. His physics major didn't prepare him for the program's required botany course. "It was the hardest class I've ever taken," Barry states, "but I applied what I learned, and it works."

While native plants will prosper here, other plants, like roses are harder to grow. The scientist in Barry prompted him to overcome this problem through experimentation. He shares

his gardening knowledge in his book *The Fairy Robots of Restoration Garden*.

Garden Tour

You can visit the garden on May 6 when the Sanford Cultural Guild hosts its tour. As you wander through Restoration's wonderland, you first come upon the Bicycle Garden in the front yard. Depending on the time of year, you may enjoy the majesty of a Queen Elizabeth rose. Moving to the back, a volcano bush branches out with fountain-like grace in the Master Garden. Native to Japan, Barry purchased the bush for one dollar.

In the pollinator garden, monarch butterflies feast on milkweed plants. A Mexican sunflower plant had grown to almost seven feet tall. Despite being toppled by Hurricane Ian, hundreds of sunflowers have emerged. Sweet onions, leeks, edible lavender, and other herbs are grown in the summer, and tomatoes and kale in the winter.

Co-Existing

The fairy robots who farm in the gardens have

no natural enemies. Some insects, like beetles that chew up the insides of roses, are the garden's enemies. This is why Barry welcomes natural predators. A black snake lives in a brush pile that looks like an "unruly mess," but it's important because it provides a home for the snake and other insects that feast on unwanted garden pests. Wasps use Barry's hat as a launching pad, waiting to swoop down to eat worms harmful to the plants. Lizards circle, patiently waiting for a bug to be unearthed.

"Once we stopped using chemical pest controls," Barry explains, "and invited natural predators to live in our garden, the pest issue all but evaporated." Other benefits are "not polluting the environment and saving money on solutions that in the end did not work."

Walking through the garden always offers a new way to appreciate nature's and humanity's interconnectedness. ■