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TRAVEL

Chantilly's National Botanic Garden Is a Love Letter to Nature and Sustainability

A Loudoun County couple combines art and earthmoving with sustainability and a love of nature to craft garden grounds worth visiting.

By **Will Schermerhorn** | September 13, 2022

The spine of a dragon made of rock carves through the earth just inside the gates of [National Botanic Garden](#). In sweeping curves hundreds of feet long, its scaly back winds through a tended lawn of grass and shade trees.

That's the first sign you're entering what feels like an ancient, magical world.

Nearby, a castle is under construction. Granite and red shale form thick walls, winding stairs, arched doorways, arrow slits, and battlements.



The castle the Knops are buiding is made of local stone, reclaimed highway construction material, parts of old buildings, utility poles, and other reused things. (Photo by Will Schermerhorn)

Across a rustic bridge is a tidy, tiny borough made of stone called Hobbit Town. It's built into a slope and has snug weathered wooden doors, curved steps, undulating walls, and dangling lanterns. Jagged shale bristles like dragon spines atop one of the little homes.

And the most ancient thing of all, the birth of the universe, is rendered in a glistening silvery chrome sculpture called *Interstellar* that evokes the explosive energy and delicate beauty of the Big Bang.

But look closer. The rounded doorways in Hobbit Town are discarded concrete pipes, and its curved steps were once in service elsewhere. Bars and grates of the castle are from other projects' yesterdays; its doors are from an old horse

stable; and massive support beams are hand-hewn railroad ties. Bricks underfoot everywhere come from walls, walks, and driveways across the region.

The sculptures, buildings, and plantings at National Botanic Garden are the work of Peter and Beata Knop. He's a wealthy businessman with a history of creative agricultural ventures; she's a native of Poland with talent in art and design. They share a passion for spectacular gardens worldwide, a concern about environmental issues, and a mission to show the power of sustainability in everyday life.



Photo by Will Schermerhorn

What they're doing with earth, stone, water, gardens, and reclaimed building materials is art as alchemy, combining artistic expression and ecological sustainability to create something new and valuable.

“To me, it’s magic because I work with nature,” Beata says. “Nature is magic, and nature walks with me, understands me. And I try to understand nature.”

The Dream of a National Garden

National Botanic Garden is on Peter Knop’s private land in southern Loudoun County. Most of the time, the metal gates at its entrance are closed, but the Knops welcome busloads of schoolchildren, occasional corporate groups, and garden lovers who have arranged their visit in advance. They intend the grounds to one day be an inspiring, educational destination for visitors from all over.

They say their love of compelling gardens near capitals in other countries motivates them to do the same in the United States. What they have built on the outskirts of the Washington, DC, metro area should be the United States’ national garden, Knop says.

Del. Suhas Subramanyam, who represents Virginia’s 87th House of Delegates District, sponsored a resolution this past spring that commended the Knops’ “desire to develop a great American garden that could be used for the education and enjoyment of Americans and to demonstrate unique and modern agricultural practices to other countries.”

“I love their emphasis on the environment and sustainability,” Subramanyam says. “All the things they’re trying to do are unique and add a lot of value to the community.”

The land itself is a work in progress across decades and hundreds of acres.

It was once cornfields and cattle pastures. Knop and his family have farmed in the area for generations. Starting in the 1950s, they charged contractors to dump earth excavated from construction projects. Over years, a mountain grew on the land, truckload by truckload. Now hundreds of feet high, it gives a bird’s-eye view of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the farms, neighborhoods, and distant skylines of Northern Virginia.



Peter and Beata K. Knop pose on the peak of an artificial mountain that Peter's family constructed over decades. The soil that makes up the mountain was mostly dirt excavated for buildings throughout Loudoun County. The mountain rises from land that was flat cattle pasture and cornfields when Peter was growing up. (Photo by Will Schermerhorn)

At the top of Knop's mountain is a grassy area with pine and cedar for shade and boulders for sitting. Along the road to the top are fig plants, banana trees, and swaths of winter jasmine.

To the west, Knop's family established a swampy lowland where bald cypress trees shade black water and cypress knees by the dozens. To the east are lakes, all connected by canals or smaller lakes. At the edge of one lake sit about 50 small islands, each with a different species of bamboo, forming a maze accessible only by water.



Beata created a xeric garden, which uses minimal water for irrigation, as a birthday gift for her husband. Cactus Hill is full of cactus and yucca plants arranged in gravel soil among massive boulders. Peter has expanded the garden, adding herbs and a section devoted to growing pineapples from the tops of fruits the couple bought at local grocery stores. (Photo by Will Schermerhorn)

There's a rocky garden of cactus, yucca, cloaks of green ground cover, rosemary and lavender, and ripening pineapples. It's a xeric garden, which means the plants thrive with a minimum of water. Water conservation is vital, Peter says, and his thriving garden demonstrates an alternative to water-thirsty grass lawns.

At the foot of the mountain is Kyoto, a hushed stand of hundreds of smooth green bamboo stalks. Water rushes down a man-made rock waterfall, and then courses across terraced levels till slowing in sharply winding bends.

Bamboo Entwined Them

Bamboo is special to Peter and Beata. They met during a garden party Peter hosted in 2005. Beata had learned to love nature as she grew up in Poland. She

says she was fascinated by the variety of plants and flowers and fruits at Knop's place.

Then the topic turned to bamboo.

“My mother always loved bamboo,” she says.

When she found Knop was growing dozens of varieties on his property and providing tender bamboo shoots as food for pandas at the National Zoo, she says, “I couldn't believe it.”



Photo by Will Schermerhorn

Her passion for bamboo surprised Peter, too.

“How many people are really interested in bamboo?” he says.

Their shared love of bamboo led in time to a shared love of the land where Peter grew up and then to a shared life. Even before they married in 2006, Peter gave Beata a spot to design her first land-focused art.

“He gave me a small part of the mountain to work on, and I said, ‘I’ll take it; I’m not afraid.’” She had been painting, making collages, and designing interiors, so she knew how to approach art, but this was different.

“I stood there,” Beata recalls. “In my mind, I was talking to the land, and slowly the shape started to evolve.”

The scale and materials were new to her. It involved collaboration with Knop’s staff, who are experienced in using heavy equipment to move earth and rock.

The result: “I felt like I was on top of the world,” she says.

Materials Find a Second Life

Each project they take on involves “cooperation with nature, using material which otherwise will be discarded or dumped somewhere in the area where it should not be,” Beata says.

And it’s not just art. They use reclaimed materials in buildings on their land. An open-air shed is built with wood from torn-down buildings and lumber from trees ravaged by invasive beetles. A wide terrace is made of bricks of varied shapes and colors, each rescued from being discarded.

“Imagine what this cost to make,” Peter says, indicating a single brick among the thousands at his feet. “Think of the firing of it, the hauling of it, digging it out of the ground, and so on, and what do they do with this?”

Their interest in reusing materials in beautiful, practical ways is all-consuming, says their longtime friend and garden enthusiast Deborah De Maris of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

“This is their magnificent obsession,” she says. “It’s a gem of sustainability.

“[Beata] will take the most mundane articles that they salvage and turn it into whimsical, useful things,” De Maris says. “This collection of bamboo is something that, as a raw material, is kind of a touchstone of sustainability.”

Glenn Eck, associate director of grounds at Temple University in Philadelphia, has worked for and visited renowned gardens around the world. “The style that they’ve developed is completely unique,” he says. “Their style is a reflection of their creativity, but also the material that they’re working with, even the techniques of the crew.”

“Why Does an Artist Paint?”

The winding paths and streams found on the grounds mirror her view of life, Beata says.

“What you experience here, in my view, is life,” she says. “Up and down, going with the flow and against the flow. Everything to me is connected with my life experience. So, my emotions go into the shape of anything I create.”

The Kyoto section is an example. The waters there diverge and then come back together, some on a winding path, some on a straighter one, some cascading over rocks, and some trickling from a spring.

“This is an artistic creation using nature,” Peter says as he stands near the waterfall, shaded by the bamboo. Part of the artistic challenge is, “How do we create something in a short time frame that nature might take 10,000 years to do?”

And to answer the question of why they do it at all, Beata replies, “This is my passion. I am a creator, and I want to create something beautiful.”

Peter adds, “I think that the pleasure of creating something is a reward in itself. ... Why does an artist paint?”

His question lingered in the quiet of that grove of bamboo as the waterfall continued to murmur and splash.