

Organic Oasis

The National Botanic Garden transforms discarded materials into a sanctuary of earthly delights

By *Julie Sanders* / Photography by *Will Schermerhorn*

A privately owned, 250-acre garden in Chantilly bears witness to the surprising and expansive vision of Peter and Beata Knop. The couple—he’s an entrepreneur and she’s a sculptor—are on a mission to harmonize the bounty of nature with the beauty of art, using sustainability as a guidepost. They recently opened their gates to the public.

“We see enormous value in doing this in the DC area, where there is no botanic garden of this scale,” says Peter Knop, whose family owned and farmed the land for generations before he inherited and added to its acreage.

When the Knops began transforming the property 20 years ago, “it was pastures and cornfields, flat as a pancake,” Knop recalls. Now, the rolling landscape is animated by waterfalls, gardens (in one, cactus, yucca and pineapple demonstrate an alternative to typically thirsty gardens) and a swampy, cypress-strewn lowland. Manmade lakes are connected by canals; one lake harbors 48 tiny islands of bamboo, grown and harvested to feed the pandas at the Smithsonian National Zoo. A 300-foot-tall mountain with panoramic views was formed over years out of soil excavated from nearby construction projects.

Fanciful structures include an 827-foot-long dragon of jagged rock and a castle built with reclaimed stone and recycled highway and building parts. Twenty-five monumental modernist sculptures by Beata punctuate the landscape, all crafted from reclaimed materials.

The Knops, who own a total of 1,000 acres, plan to sell surplus acreage to create an endowment for the botanic garden. Eventually, they’ll establish a private foundation to keep it going in perpetuity. Says Knop, “We want it to be a gift to the nation.” The garden is open to visitors four to six days a month and hosts public events, from art shows to wine tastings, on site. nationalbotanicgarden.org

"Almost Contained," a sculpture by Beata Knop made from a repurposed-steel fiber-optic conduit.



A footbridge connects bamboo islands in a manmade lake.



Stairs led to a diminutive Hobbit Town of fieldstone.

