

WASHINGTON

gardener

the magazine for gardening enthusiasts in the Mid-Atlantic region

**Should You
Worry About
Hammerhead Worms?**

**Attracting the
House Finch to
Your Garden**

**The NEW National
Botanic Garden**

**A New, Improved
New England Aster**

**Beech Leaf Disease
in Our Region**

Fall Bulb Planting Timing

**Great Gardening
Books Reviewed**

**The Many Benefits
of Cover Crops**

**How to Grow Beets:
Best in Fall**

What Are Soil Pores?

Franklin Tree
(Franklinia alatamaha)

The NEW National Botanic Garden



By Kathy Jentz

A new public garden is growing on private land in Loudoun County, Virginia. The National Botanic Garden is the creation of Peter and Beata Knop, who intend to build up the garden and then leave it to the federal government with an endowment so it will last in perpetuity.

Their ambitious plans include converting former cornfields into a world-class plant collection for education and research that connects people to nature.

Naming Controversy

The news of a new public garden called the “National Botanic Garden” has some people in the local gardening world feeling a bit perturbed. “Yeah,

there are a lot of people kind of got their hackles raised by that because there is a ‘national’ Botanical Garden downtown [the U.S. Botanic Garden],” said Peter.

“We’ve got a great National Arboretum, great National Portrait Gallery, great national, everything,” he continued. “There’s no great National Botanic Garden. And after our lifetimes, we’re going to leave it to the nation. That’s where that’s where we got the name national.”

The Knops are selling some of the plants they propagate at the garden as one means of supporting the property. They also host group events and art festivals.

Purpose and Mission

With more than 1,000 acres of land, much of which is the Amazing Fun Farm that welcomes school children and corporate events, the possibilities are endless. The Knops asked themselves: “How do we stimulate the imagination? How do we get people back into nature?”

With those questions in mind, they set about creating landscapes filled with large-scale sculptural art and fantasy elements.

They have built up 40 acres so far. “We’ll be about 150 acres, with a little over 100 of true gardens,” shared Peter Knop. “Then there will be about 150 acres of natural wilderness.”

Beata designed the Xeric Garden for Peter as a birthday present. “My husband was, at one time, fascinated with cacti,” she explains. “And I saw so many those cacti suffering. They didn’t have a home sitting in the greenhouse or outside. He said do something with them, so I said, okay, you are not allowed to pass that road for one month and I will create this landscape for them.” The result is the East Coast’s largest xeric garden, demonstrating water-wise gardening and low-maintenance garden techniques.

“From an environmental point of view, we see water as being a critical resource,” said Peter, “and America’s love affair with the lawn is not something that thrills us. The only way you’re going to change people is showing them something different that they can look at and understand.”

Reclaim and Reuse

Peter Knop is a fourth-generation owner of the land and previously operated a winery and a Christmas tree farm on the property. He then turned to “agricycling,” composting garden waste (leaves, fallen limbs, grass clippings, etc.) and recyclable materials such as newspapers into mulch and soil additives.

The gardens and hardscapes are predominantly made from reclaimed materials. From the brick pathways to wooden sheds, the materials are reused from other projects or repurposed from elsewhere.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Much of the stone and soil used in the garden was removed from nearby developments in Northern Virginia and brought to the location to create the undulating landscape, berms, walls, pathways, and—most notably—a mountain.

That artificial mountain has made the local news several times. Both nearby Dulles Airport and the Manassas National Battlefield Park objected to the project.

“We had a lot of problems building the mountain,” acknowledged Peter. “But now it’s the highest point between the Atlantic and the Blue Ridge—you get 360-degree views.”

From the mountain’s summit, you can view four states (Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania). The Knops anticipate it will be open to visitors next year.

Famous Friends

Frank Cabot, founder of the Garden Conservancy, was an early supporter of the project. Beata shared that “he said Peter is doing what God would have done, if he had the time and money.”

Other connections at local public gardens in the area have resulted in sharing plants and advice for developing the gardens.

“As we are just starting to open our wings, we are wide open to suggestions about how we can promote others and vice versa,” said Peter. “We have exchanged plants with numerous gardens, especially from plant collecting trips abroad, where we sometimes come up with some fun plants, like the Bulgarian fig. Another favorite we are studying to see how potentially invasive it might be is the Chinaberry (*Melia azedarach*), which we know has been a problem further south, but we have a Malta variety, as well as South African, which seem to do well here. We see it as a source of high-value timber as well as a beautiful decorative landscape plant, but are also looking at its potential downsides.”

“One thing we started to discuss is the need to bring in non-natives to replace those we are losing to climate change and invasive bugs. But to bring them in (and to release to the public), we have to be sure that they meet many of the qualities or characteristics



of the trees/plants they are to replace from the point of view of their role in the local ecosystem, from being a food source for our existing native critters, from butterflies to mammals and all of our cold-blooded friends, reptiles, etc., and on the other side, do not have negative impacts like allelopathy for our remaining natives. It takes us 10 to 15 years to believe we have something that we do not object to seeing go ‘wild.’ Some of our Mahonia fit that category—50 years and totally minimal spread.”

Plant Collections

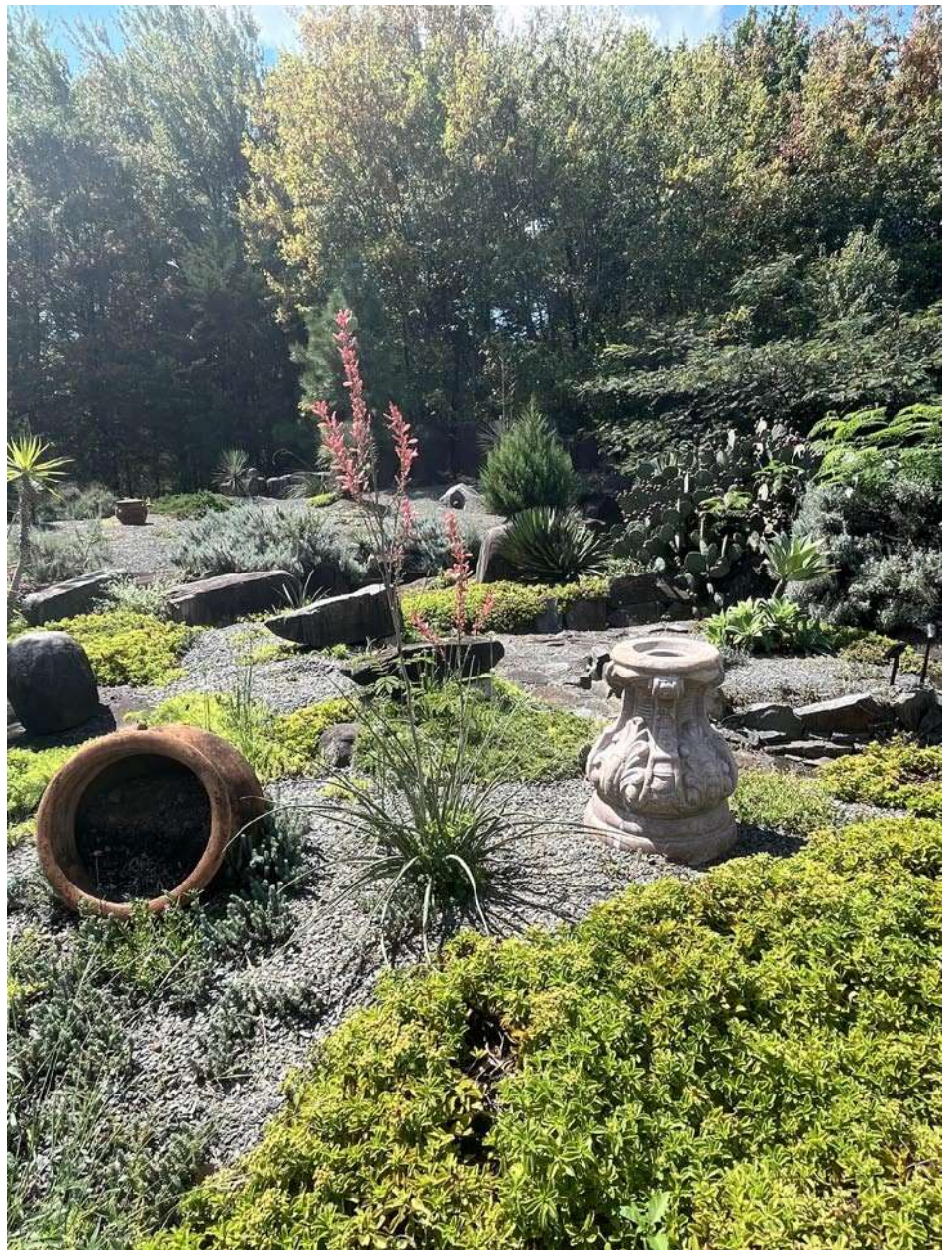
The grounds feature unusual specimens as well as common ones. There are few labels at this point, and a few educational signs are sprinkled about.

There are fruit tree orchards, including collections of figs and jujubes, that will be available for picking and fruit-themed festivals.

A swampy low area is host to bald cypress trees and wildlife.

Canals cut through the landscape and flow into a lake with 50 small

DAY trip



islands—each one planted with a different species of bamboo. This is billed as “America’s largest bamboo garden” and the running varieties are kept in check by that surrounding water.

Some of these tender bamboo shoots provide food for pandas at the National Zoo.

“Bamboo is a very fast-growing plant,” said Peter. “We think that we can modify it or breed it to use for carbon sequestration.”

Art and Follies

The biggest elements of the garden currently in place are the outdoor sculptures. They are mainly formed from recycled steel and are modern in design and theme. Beata Knop is the artist behind the creations.

She is also the visionary behind the HobbitTown, an undulating dragon sculpture, and a castle (still in process). These garden follies are meant to be interacted with—visitors can scramble over the rocks and even enter the little hobbit abodes to make themselves at home there.

Future Plans

“What we’re focusing on now, or trying to, is stimulation of the imagination,” said the Knops. “To have a full and rewarding life, you need to be connected to the earth and imagination is part of it. You need to have pleasure in life. And nature delivers it in spades.”

In future years, they plan to open the property up for regular visitor hours and to start a docent program.

Visiting the National Botanic Garden

The National Botanic Garden is located at 26320 Ticonderoga Road, Chantilly, Virginia.

Currently, the gardens are only open by appointment and during specific weekends and events. To get notification of upcoming events and scheduled openings, sign up for their newsletter at <https://nationalbotanicgarden.org/>.

Garden clubs and other horticultural-related groups can also contact the Knops to set up a visit to tour the grounds on a limited basis. 🌿

Kathy Jentz is the founder and editor of *Washington Gardener*.

