

The National Botanic Garden Opens to the Public!

Whose Woods These Are, Now We Know



Kelly MacConomy ✉



Artist and organizer of the first annual Art, Flowers, and Flavors Festival Alexandria (Ola) Rokita on Hobbit Hill at the National Botanic Garden in Chantilly. (Photo Scott MacConomy)

Alexandria, VA – As the Washington exurbs have extended as far as Baltimore, the Chesapeake, Fredericksburg, and West Virginia, development and redevelopment have devoured almost every square foot of available land as far as the eye can see. It would surely prove to be astonishing for anyone to discover that there exists over 1,000 acres of secluded woodland and a botanical oasis just a stone’s throw from Route 50 in Chantilly.

The [National Botanic Garden](#) was established eight years ago by Beata and Peter Knop, who purchased the 17 adjoining farms, adding to their existing property and collectively forming the Eden that exists today. The Knops were determined to create an ecological retreat as a contemplative garden showcasing not only horticultural wonders but sculpture crafted from construction materials and organic material collected on-site.



An illustration by Ola Rokita, whose work was exhibited at the inaugural Art, Flowers, and Flavors Festival held last month at the National Botanic Garden. (Photo Ola Rokita)

Peter’s Mountain, as it is affectionately called, was artificially created, reaching a 248-foot elevation not only to preclude Dulles Airport traffic from disrupting the zen vibe of the

preserve but also to offer a panoramic view extending from the Blue Ridge to the monuments of the Capital City. The bamboo grove on the grounds is grown exclusively for the National Zoo's beloved Giant Pandas.

Beata is a gifted sculpture/installation artist. Her dynamic and often kinetic works are diverting surprises encountered throughout the 225 acres of publicly accessible grounds. All of Beata's artwork on display is constructed using up-cycled materials. She even reconfigured roadway construction piping sections into giant planters sporting a colorful Mondrianesque-mosaic theme.



Even in darkness, Beata's sculpture assumes a natural otherworldliness, rivaled only by the transcendent twinkling of a starry, starry sky. (Photo courtesy of the National Botanic Garden)

While her favorite color is white (because it represents all the colors of the spectrum combined), Beata employs color here and there precisely as it likely would be discovered in the natural habitat enveloping her sculpture. Yellow metal curves echo the daffodils springing up helter skelter about the rocks and breaks in the tree canopy. Red shocks of color mirror the vermillion plumes of a male Cardinal or the scarlet breast of the first Robin come spring.

The apple — or more likely the acorn — doesn't fall far from the tree at the National Botanic Garden. Beata's daughter Alexandria (Ola) Rokita, the Garden's director, is a gifted illustrator. Ola organized the first annual Art, Flowers, and Flavors Festival held this past Memorial Day weekend at the garden. It was the first time the grounds were open to the general public.



The perceptual illusion construed by the placement of the vertical reeds renders the trees they imitate, as well as people nearby, virtually invisible in this sculpture by Beata Knop. (Photo Scott MacConomy)

Festival-goers were treated not only to tastes of beer from Solace Brewing, wine from award-winning wineries [50 West and Sunset Hills](#), and chocolate from [Shenandoah Chocolate](#), but also fine art for sale amid the aesthetic and sublime setting. Even a Hobbit Hill and a castle ruin (being converted into an event space) call to mind romance fantasies of Jamie and Claire's interminable *Outlander* misadventures in Scotland or the Blue Ridge. Or perhaps a location for an imagined kinder, gentler variation on a Red Wedding theme, a la the *Game of Thrones* prequel coming soon. It would make an ideal milieu for a farm-to-table wine or beer pairing event. The Botanic Garden grounds are available for weddings and private events too.



Mysterious and magical rock features prevalent throughout the lush garden are reminiscent of settings from Outlander and Game of Thrones. (Photo Scott MacConomy)

Artists on exhibit, in addition to Beata and Ola, were Nikki Colette, Martha Brettschneider, Mark Drefs, Michael Spilotro, Rebecca Freeman, Dena Radosevic, and the Jazz Art Studio. And being as talented and beautiful as her mother, Ola bakes – when she’s not busy working at the World Bank, enjoying life with her family, or cycling. Ola is an avid cyclist and art aficionado. Her baked goods were among the flavors available at the festival. She and Beata came here from Poland in the 1980s to escape communism.



All the sculptures on the grounds are created by garden owner Beata Knop using repurposed materials that take on an organic expression mirroring the natural surroundings of stone and arboreal splendor. (Photo Scott MacConomy)

You don't need to navigate the crawl of New York Avenue to enjoy a botanical garden nirvana. Only a 40-minute drive from Alexandria, you'll imagine you are in a land of enchantment far from the touristy crowds of the National Mall, any mall, or Old Town on a picture-perfect day. Come for the curiosity. Stay for the serenity. You'll thank us!

The National Botanic Garden is located at 26320 Ticonderoga Road, Chantilly, VA. 20152-0000
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