

## HOMEGARDEN

# Big Bugs Infest Missouri's Powell Gardens

BY LISA GUTIERREZ

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KINGSVILLE, Mo. — "Dude, they have big bugs!" Jade Hisey was stoked when she saw Powell Gardens the weekend she and her boyfriend took his mom to visit.

Three giant ants, 25 feet long and 700 pounds each — big enough to lift city buses off the ground — marched across one hill.

Over in the strawberry patch, a 1,200-pound female praying mantis, taller than a one-story building, waited to bite someone's head off.

In the woods, a 50-pound spider dangled on a giant web suspended between two trees in the deep shade. On the lily pond, a 100-pound damselfly had perched herself on a piece of black locust.

It was as though Powell Gardens had been exposed to something radioactive, like in one of those cheesy sci-fi flicks. And all the insects had mutated and were 100 times their normal size. And they were gathering to launch an attack on the unsuspecting villagers.

"We're supposed to be bigger than they are, and now they're bigger than we are," enthused Hisey, a photographer and owner of Dancing Man Studio in Blue Springs, Mo. She and her boyfriend hammed it up with the ants.

Click! In one photo she's a fair maiden in a pink top and white skirt being chased by giant ants.

Click! There they are fighting off the beasts with weapons she added digitally for World of Warcraft fun.

But here's the thing: Fungus, not Photoshop, stops these insects dead in their tracks.

They're the "Big Bugs," a traveling exhibit of oversized insects sculpted of twigs and branches and other rustic materials by Long Island artist David Rogers. Eleven of his creatures are hanging around Powell Gardens until October.

Since their debut in 1994, the "Big Bugs" have traveled the country, showing up in 54 exhibits in 35 cities at gardens nationwide. They came to Powell in 2001, then again in 2004, each time drawing big, even record-breaking crowds.

Kids, grown-ups, first ladies. All but the most persnickety bridezillas seem to swarm to them.

A 25-foot ant? Have you ever? "At the most basic level they do what art is supposed to do, which is initiate an immediate response from people," Rogers once said about his bugs.

"They're not interpretive, they're not abstract. It's just like, 'Wow, look at that ant — that's really cool!'" On the first day of the Powell exhibit, Rogers stationed himself along the main garden path to greet visitors.

When people saw his "Meet the Artist" sign, they smiled and nod-



A 100-pound sculpture of a wooden damselfly is shown at Powell Gardens in Kingsville, Missouri. The sculpture is crafted from red cedar, willow and black locust woods and is part of artist Dave Rogers' "Big Bugs" creations.

ded, several flashing thumbs-up.

"Good work!"

"Great job. We're enjoying it."

One little girl, prompted by her mom, showed him on an exhibit map all the bugs that she had found so far. When Rogers started to ask about her favorites she bounced away, saying, "I need to keep on looking for the other ones."

Then she turned around and yelled over her shoulder, "Thanks for making all the bugs!"

Kids love the sculptures, Rogers said. It's adults who tend to sniff: "Uh, I never really liked bugs."

Some get downright nasty about it, like a bride (at another garden) who complained that, "I didn't know you were going to have these ugly bugs in my wedding!"

Rogers was asked to move them out of her way. "I absolutely gritted my teeth," he said.

Early on this morning, Rogers saw parents plopping their kids on top of the sculptures to take pictures.

That didn't bode well for the poor little assassin beetle lurking in the bushes near the main path. He'd just had cosmetic surgery. Rogers re-carved his black-walnut body just last year, smoothing out his rough edges with, of all things, a chainsaw.

Low to the ground and cute as a bug — sorry — the 200-pound sculpture begged to be ridden, like one of those mechanical horses at the grocery store.

When Rogers told Powell Gardens marketing director Callen Fairchild Zind what parents were doing, she hustled off to find the please-do-not-climb-on-the-bugs signs.

Rogers is protective of his babies; some are long in the tooth, as giant insects go. The mantis and the damselfly are two of his originals, made "in the fall and winter of 1993, 1994," he said. "They've never gone home."

He doesn't make it home to Long Island much, either. He's a busy one-man show. He cleans the bugs, maintains them with protective showers of polyurethane and builds replacements — fungus and mold do a lot of damage to the wood after a few years.

He travels with the bugs to their various destinations, where he helps install them, too.

(That "ant hill" at Powell? That's the best site he has ever seen for them.)

Rogers started building stuff out of scraps when he was 15 and spent a lot of time foraging in the

forest behind his house.

He was building wooden boats and cabinets as an adult when he met a man who made rustic twig furniture. He was taken with the idea of making something using only simple hand tools and a few nails.

"It was an opportunity for self-expression. Boat-building... is a very exacting discipline," he said.

He made a name for himself in the early '90s, when he built giant dragons and dinosaurs out of trees and twigs for outdoor exhibits all along the East Coast.

After House and Garden magazine did a story about his dinosaurs, the folks at the Dallas Arboretum called.

Could you make us something "visually arresting" that will attract visitors and help promote our educational message, they asked him.

Thus the "Big Bugs" were born. "I have to say, after so many years," he said, "there are times when I come into the garden, really late, when no one's around, and I'll pull over and look at the ants and say, 'Oh yeah, I made them.'"

"We love your bugs," a gray-haired woman with a gardening hat and European accent told Rogers on the exhibit's opening

day. "What is the material?"

Wood, he told her.

"Oh," she said, sounding surprised.

Roger Noah of Kansas City had to see for himself, climbing to the top of the hill to inspect the ants up close. "You can't see how they're put together," the wood-working fan marveled.

Then click! Noah posed his wife, Sara, and their two boys in front of the ants for a family portrait.

You have to get close like that to see the secret to the bugs. A friend showed Rogers how to weld metal skeletons that can be built in modular pieces, lightweight and easy to transport.

Rogers sculpts and shapes the bug bodies by wrapping supple willow saplings around the skeleton and filling in with other wood.

Red cedar and black locust are his go-to materials.

"One of the most common things you hear is, 'Oh, they're made out of wood!'" Rogers said. "I hear people argue about it."

The bugs are purposefully, unapologetically whimsical. ("Did you see the longlegs? I wasn't trying to do an entomological study with it.")

He had to decide early on just how literal to make them. Making the dinosaurs and dragons taught him that less is more.

"The first dinosaur I did, the lower jaw was just two sticks... and I found this little curved piece for a tongue. It looked like a lizard. It's on my website. It's called Goliath."

"The next one was a dragon, and the jaws on that were 12 feet long. I had done rows of teeth, and I nailed them up there. And I climbed down off the piece and I was standing there saying, 'What's wrong with this? It's just too literal.'"

"So I pulled all the teeth out, and I just left a few nice roots. And they told the tale of a lot of big teeth without all of them."

Even without details like feet and mandibles and multiple eyes, kids recognize them, he said.

"I've seen mothers say, 'Look at the grasshopper.' And the little kid said, 'It's a praying mantis!'"

Will you ever do a giant scorpion or tarantula, people ask him, a lot.

Nope.

"Neither one intrigues me much from the standpoint of subject matter," he said. "A tarantula? It would essentially be like an ant. But a giant hairy one."

That's just as well for Michelle Roncelli, a self-described arachnophobe from Richmond, Mo., who rather unhappily came face-to-face with Rogers' spider in the woods. She still managed to eke out a compliment for the artist.

"I think it's neat that he appreciates what a lot of us don't," she said.

To make her family happy, Roncelli posed for a picture in front of the giant spider.

Click! (Why did she keep looking over her shoulder?)

She was grateful that the spider didn't "look very aggressive when really they have fangs that secrete venom!"

The only thing that would have made it scarier? "If it moved," she said.

That probably won't ever happen, especially now that Rogers is thinking about retiring in a few years, which means the bugs might be on their last legs.

He has been asked but isn't interested in selling them to any of the gardens that have shown them because, frankly, he's not sure anyone can maintain them as well as he can. And that is his name on them.

"This was my introduction to the botanical garden world and what their mission statement is," he said. "And it's been almost 20 years. I'm not just making some art and being successful at that. I'm getting to participate in something... with a much bigger message."

## WEED PATCH:

## Wuebben Conquers Weed Problem

BY LINDA WUEBBEN

Hot diggity dog! My garden looks pretty weedless.

I have been pushing myself to do the one-half-a-day regimen. You know the one — heading out to the garden every day for 30 minutes with a ball and chain clamped on my ankle to force myself to stay there until the weeds are eradicated. Yeah, that one.

It's great when Bob comes out and helps me get everything caught up; we are making progress. So with a few rows at a time, we have conquered the weed patch and have declared ourselves winners.

The only problem with gardening I have had this year is the bugs. They haven't been bad for several seasons but this year they are making up for it. I even asked my husband if they were as bad in the morning as evening and he said yes. I did go out this morning early and it was a little better than last evening so maybe they were still sleeping.

Also, hello Houston, we have blast-off! Well, what I mean to say is, I have tomatoes on the vines. Yes! I was determined not to suffer from last year's tomato-less situation and have been diligent in my spring planting process to rectify that loss. That blight, or whatever reason my tomatoes were veggie-less, put a huge dent in the season of 2009. I shall not forget!



Linda Wuebben

fresh and raw. Last Sunday evening I was sewing on one of those bridesmaid dresses (I'm making progress there, also) and he slipped out of the house in the middle of a College World Series game.

Curiosity got the better of me, so I peeked out the patio door. Sure enough, there he was, picking his peas, one pod at a time, enjoying the fresh garden flavor. No worries, though — my beans are blooming and I'll be doing the same thing while I'm picking them.

I was a little worried when spring sprung and it was so dry. We were on the receiving end of buckets of rain this past week measuring more than 3.5 inches. I'm pretty sure during the month of June we were lucky to get almost 10 inches. We all know July comes in hot and heavy, so hopefully there's a lot of ground water to keep the plants alive and growing.

I know the weeds have been taking advantage of all that lovely moisture. Too bad we can't eat them although somewhere someone probably does.

Regrettably, I had to plant my cucumbers twice. Just this last week I put a few hills in hoping for a late crop. I remember growing up and having corn on the cob, fresh tomatoes and sliced cucumbers for the evening meal. That was it and it was one of our favorites. Add a glass a sweet tea to that and life was good.

Hey, I'm going to a garden party! On Saturday, July 10, the Third Annual Missouri Valley Master Gardener Tour will be stopping around Yankton at some of the loveliest gardens around town. The morning event begins at 8 a.m., and ends at noon, with a light lunch served at the last stop.

The tour starts at the home of James and Marilyn Nyberg at 400 East 6th Street in Yankton, where \$10 tickets may be purchased. Tour participants will receive a list and a map of the other gardens.

There's not a better way to spend a Saturday morning. It's much better than vacuuming and scrubbing so come on out. I'm sure there will be new plant varieties to discover and old favorites to fawn over and as always there will be some sage advice from the master gardeners.

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**Community Dinner**  
Friday • 5:00-7:00PM  
Hot Dog or Hamburger, Chips & Pop \$3.00  
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**SCHEDULE OF EVENTS**

**Friday, July 16th**  
4:00-5:00 p.m. Team Registration  
4:30-5:45 p.m. Survivor Registration  
5:00 p.m. Survivor Reception  
5:45 p.m. Survivor Photo  
5:00-7:00 p.m. Community Dinner  
5:00-9:30 p.m. Relay Store Open  
**6:00 p.m. OPENING CEREMONIES/SURVIVOR'S LAP**  
6:00-10:00 p.m. Silent Auction  
7:00 p.m. Honorary Survivor Chair/Drawing  
7:15 p.m. Entertainment/Yankton Children's Choir  
9:30 p.m. (dusk) Luminaria Ceremony  
9:45 p.m. Bagpipes  
10:00 p.m. Raffle Drawings/Silent Auction  
11:30-4:00 a.m. Relay Teams: All "Star" Games

**Saturday, July 17th**  
5:00 a.m. Community Breakfast  
5:30 a.m. Closing Ceremony/Team Awards  
6:00 a.m. Last Lap led by Survivors

**Community Breakfast**  
Saturday Morning • 5:00AM  
Sponsored by: McDonalds  
Juice & Various Breakfast Sandwiches  
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The public is invited to all meals!  
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC...  
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6:00-10:00PM  
This Year's Theme...  
**"Lights, Camera, Action For a Cure"**  
All proceeds are donated to American Cancer Society's Relay For Life - Yankton Unit.

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