

Rural Escape

A couple transformed their 52-acre Warren County property into an expansive garden retreat that includes orchards, prairie, a waterfall and a multitude of plants.

WRITTEN BY RITA PEREA
PHOTOS BY DUANE TINKEY

Mi, ut faccus et voluptis ullaut vellam inci aut
hiciat ut adi anis et, officitemod enectur
ratetur simaion sequam, occae as dolupta
sedioribeate sande pro velit et laceptam re
maio.

P

eeeking beyond the driveway gate of Craig and Judy Stark's 52-acre property near Prole creates a feeling of anticipation for the garden that lies ahead. Thousands of gemstone-colored day lily and spiderwort plants provide a grand and welcoming entrance.

"I loved the day lilies we had in our Clive garden, so I brought the shoots with me," says Judy Stark as she gestures across the horizon and down the massive driveway. "You should have seen us: We rented a tree planter and planted the thousands of day lily shoots by hand, knowing that when they grew they would welcome visitors to our property."

Indeed, the Starks' hospitality and love for the land are immediately evident by their home's dining terraces and their multi-acre garden spaces amid mature trees, reclaimed prairie, an orchard and two ponds.

"We first saw this property on a rainy September night in 2003," Judy recalls. "An older gentleman had owned it since 1961, and it had naturally fallen into disrepair. In fact, local teenagers thought it was a great hangout space.

There was no driveway, only ruts in the ground. Everything was overgrown. I didn't want to get out of the car to take a look. But Craig has a good eye, and he saw the vision of what the property could become: the rural escape we craved that was close to the metro area."

Growing up in Michigan, Craig, a Des Moines physician, fell in love with the 100 acres of botanical beauty at the Dow Gardens, established by the founder of the Dow Chemical Corp. Those boyhood memories influenced his vision for the couple's Iowa property.

With that vision in mind, the Starks worked side by side every weekend for four years to clean and reclaim the land. They started by burning off acres of the unwanted bromegrass and then drilling holes into the ground to plant the prairie flower seeds. "We don't golf; we don't really have any hobbies," says Judy, a Des Moines health care executive. "Loving the property became our hobby. We have such a good time working together.

"Once you start caring for something, you just fall in love with it," she adds. "And we want our visitors to feel that love, too."

After four years of intense labor to reshape the property into prairie and orchards, the Starks spent another two years working with their contractor to build their stone



Mi, ut faccus et voluptis ullaut vellam inci aut hiclat ut adi anis et, offictemod enectur ratetur simaion sequam, occae as dolupta sedioribeate sande pro velit et laceptam re maio.



Mi, ut faccus et voluptis ullaut vellam inci aut hiciat ut adi anis et, officitemod enectur ratetur simaion sequam, occae as dolupta sedioribeate sande pro velit et laceptam re maio.

1.-2. Mi, ut faccus et voluptis ullaut vellam inci aut hiciat ut adi anis et, officitemod enectur ratetur simaion sequam, 3. occae as dolupta sedioribeate sande pro velit m re maio. 4. occae as dolupta sedioribeate sande pro velilaceptam re maio. 5. occae as dolupta sedioribeate sande pro velit et laceptam re maioe pro velilace pro velilac.



1



2



3



4



5

“When I look at this garden and this property, I hear the Bible verses and hymns of my childhood reminding me to share my joy with all who enter here.”



Mi, ut faccus et voluptis ullaut vellam inci aut hiciat ut adi anis et, officitemod enectur ratetur simaion sequam, occae as dolupta sedioribeate sande pro velit et laceptam re maio.

sights and sounds. The multi-tiered waterfall and stream create a soothing percussion of rushing water, complemented by singing birds in the mature trees.

As in an ancient tapestry, the plants Judy has selected for the garden beds surrounding the waterfall are planted in massive drifts; their rich jewel tones can be seen from across the property. One of Judy's favorite areas, which can be enjoyed from the dining terrace overlooking the waterfall, is the shade garden, home to hundreds of large hostas. Judy especially loves the chartreuse-hued variety known as 'Guacamole.'

As we leisurely stroll past the plants in the beautiful shade garden to the west of the waterfall, Judy points to the ferns, bleeding hearts and lily of the valley plants that she painstakingly rescued from her mother's home in Sioux County. "It is so special to have a little piece of my mother's garden here with me," she says. "When I look at this garden and this property, I hear the Bible verses and hymns of my childhood reminding me to share my joy with all who enter here." ■

home. With all of that work behind them, in 2009 they turned their attention to designing and creating the garden spaces surrounding the home.

"With the size of the house, we knew that the garden design had to be substantial as well," Judy explains. "And, with my roots in northwest Iowa, I knew that I wanted native plants and domesticated perennials to be showcased."

Built into the hill on the north side of the home, the large gardens beckon friends and family with beautiful