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with Susan Banks

Big bug artist carves niche for himself

Saturday, January 13, 2001

By [Susan Banks](#), Post-Gazette Garden Editor

Winter isn't exactly the time to think of bugs, unless it's the viral sort. But beginning today, bugs -- those that crawl -- will be the subject of a new Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens exhibit, "David Rogers' Big Bugs."



David Rogers' dragonfly sculpture skims over the water as part of his Big Bug exhibit at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Garden. (John Beale, Post-Gazette)

Some of the bugs are highly polished, resembling fine furniture, others are fashioned from bent twigs, and some are a combination of techniques. Each has a personality of its own, but all are wonderful in a whimsical, quirky way.

Rogers, a guy who bears a resemblance to "Little Steven" from the E-Street Band, right down to the bandanna tied around his head, says he got into the big bug business when he was approached by a botanical garden interested in creating a show. Rogers, who has worked as a sailboat builder/restorer, cabinetmaker, carpenter and magician's

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assistant, said insects seemed the logical choice for a garden exhibit. And because he started his wood and twig sculpting career by building a 30-foot-long, 15-foot-high dinosaur, bugs just seemed like the next step. Now he travels the country with his dog, Jonah, and his entourage of bugs, safely packed in a rental truck that he drives to each installation site.

So far, the bugs have landed in Denver, Dallas and Washington, D.C. Phipps is the 21st site for the exhibit.

Rogers said this is the first time the sculptures, with the exception of the ants, will be viewed indoors in a conservatory space. Being indoors gives the insects a different perspective, making them seem even larger than when placed outside. The praying mantis looks real, rearing out of a bed of ferns in the Fern Room. And the large yet delicate dragonfly hovers over the pond in the Victoria Room. Visitors also can see a damselfly, a ladybug, grasshopper, earwig, assassin bug and spider with web, among others.

Each bug has been "placed" with advice from Rogers, who grins when he says he has "good suggestions about where they should go." He visited Phipps about a year ago to take a walk through and make plans about what to put where.

Marnie Conley, Phipps' director of marketing, says Phipps is lucky to get this exhibit so quickly. Since most of those on the waiting list put the bugs out of doors, winter is not a popular time to exhibit them. For outdoor installations, the wait can be up to two years.

As Rogers pulls sock-covered bee legs out of a crate, he notes that he assembles his creations at each exhibit site, with help from others. It usually takes three to five days to put the entire thing together -- not bad when you figure it can take three months to a year to assemble one of his bugs from start to finish. And some of his insects are duplicated or triplicated. In the case of the ants, Rogers owns 14.

He says that about 2,000 willow saplings go into the making of an ant like the ones displayed outside the conservatory. Rogers harvests the

Phipps hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays; closed Mondays.

Admission rates are \$6 for adults; \$5 for seniors 60 and over; \$4 for students with current ID;

\$3 for children ages 2 to 12; children under 2 and Phipps members are free. For more information about classes or activities, call 412-622-6914 or visit the Web site at <http://www.phipps.conservatory.org/index0.html>.

willow himself during forays into the countryside during the summer. He also utilizes things such as plate fungi in his sculptures. And when he has some "spare time," he makes a few twig chairs just to "keep his chops up." Twig furniture was his introduction to his current career as a bug maker.

After he finishes assembling the bugs for the opening, he'll return home to New York. But he'll be back to collect them at the end of the show. Then the bugs travel to Disney World's Epcot Flower Festival in Orlando, Fla., in April. But in the meantime, Pittsburghers will be able to enjoy an "infestation" of the fun sort with lots of activities and classes planned to complement the display.



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