



# A Welcoming Garden

A black, wrought iron section of fence adds structure to the garden and evokes the sense of another time. The plants include *Phlox*, ferns, *Canna*, daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp.), peonies (*Paeonia* spp.) and wild ginger (*Asarum* spp.).

PHOTO: JUDY NAUSEEF



**ABOVE:** The gutted and renovated farmhouse has a cupola, metal roof and a wood-burning stove. A painted yellow sun with rays reflects a clump of wildflowers in the yard, grey-headed coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*) and false sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*).

**W**hen entering the Muller-Cool driveway, you know you are in the right place. Surrounded by a fabric of agricultural land and buildings, their home and gardens shine like colorful jewels. Among the many other things they do, Mark draws botanical illustrations and Val creates colorful gardens and garden art. They committed themselves to the 5 acres in 1992.

They had bought a deteriorating, 100-year-old white farmhouse with a lawn, silver maples trees, a windbreak, a barn, a machine shed, a tool shed and a corncrib. All of the structures needed work. Their plan was to take a degraded place and make it better than they found it. The barn eventually came down, but Mark and Val salvaged everything they could to repurpose the outbuildings, and gut and renovate the house. They also found useful materials from old, demolished buildings in Iowa City. They did the work almost entirely themselves with the goal of being “as off the grid as can be.” With solar panels, a wood stove, 8 inches of insulation and a solar attic fan, the house is cozy and warm in winter.

### Prairie Came First

The first planting they completed was the prairie. It fills a corner of the property wrapping around a pond dug for them by a neighbor. A mature prairie now, with strolling paths, it serves as a habitat for native insects, birds and butterflies. The prairie has 400 species of local, ecotype plants and creates a stark contrast to the surrounding cropped fields. The seeds came from the Ion Exchange in Harpers Ferry, Iowa; Carl Kurtz, a photographer, naturalist and prairie reconstructionist; and collections Mark made along roadsides.

Many gardens surround the house and buildings. Cutting, vegetable and flower gardens blend together colorful annuals, tall natives and many perennials. Paths, patios, decks, garden art and painted furniture welcome the visitor and provide a sensory experience. Sand along the edge of the pond forms a beach for children to play. The concrete floor of the long-gone grain bin serves as a dance floor or stage.

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TOP: An agricultural rake painted yellow becomes an art object hung on the red wall of the firewood shed. The garden planted along the wall includes yellow false sunflower and goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.) and blue flowering *Hosta*, which brightens the area. ABOVE: Raised beds surround a shed and greenhouse. Flowers for cutting – mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*) and Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*) share space with vegetables.

PHOTOS: JUDY NAUSEEF



TOP: The question mark butterfly (*Polygonia interrogationis*) rests on blue flag iris (*Iris shrevei*) in the prairie.  
ABOVE: A former tool shed, now known as the love shack, has its own deck, seating, garden and flower boxes. It doubled as the perfect sleepover location for the couple's daughter when a child. Plants include purple coneflower, *Hosta*, sedum (*Hylotelephium* spp.) and false sunflower.



**ABOVE:** A walk of found pavers leads to a deck off the house with a blue picnic table. Sitting here, the visitor has a view of a large garden and restored buildings. Plants include purple coneflower, *Canna* and tiger lilies (*Lilium lancifolium*). **RIGHT:** Mark Muller built this support for birdhouse gourds out of hog panels and t-posts, creating a shady hide-a-way.

## Found Art

Found objects became garden art, sometimes brightly painted. An old hay rake painted yellow hangs on the deep red side of a firewood shed. Next to it is a corncrib, now used for storage and for parking Mark's 1951 Farmall Super C tractor. A segment of a wrought iron fence graces a garden. Val paints large colorful wooden barn quilts and one hangs on a former machine shed, now a garage with an attached greenhouse. The colors in the quilt repeat in the garden below, which connects the shed to the deck and house. A painted sun with yellow rays sits on the house cupola, reflecting a large clump of yellow wildflowers in the yard.

A love of gardening and the Iowa landscape shines throughout this garden. 🌱

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