

Poe's garden inspired by trip to the African Serengeti

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It all began five years ago, following a trip to the African Serengeti in Tanzania.

Bill Poe said after his trip, he went “Serengeti” crazy. He was intrigued with all of the natural beauty of the Serengeti and wanted to bring a little of that beauty into his own landscape.

And Starkville residents will have the opportunity to see Poe’s African oasis as part of the annual Art in the Garden tour, set for May 21, sponsored by the Starkville Area Arts Council. Five gardens will be part of the annual tour, and local artists will use the gardens as inspiration as they set up to paint or draw.

Event organizers said visitors to Art in the Garden will have the opportunity to view five of the most outstanding gardens in Starkville, as well as interact with local artists as they create.

“In the opinion of many, Bill’s garden is whimsical and a truly different experience for many garden tour goers,” said Suzy Turner, one of the organizers for the 2011 Art in the Garden event.

As an art lover himself, Poe’s “Serengti Outback” began with two murals, painted by local artist, Eric Abbott.

The first mural was painted on the back of his house, creating life-size giraffes and wildebeests, zebras and a monkey in a tree. The second mural on a brick wall, features ostriches, gazelles, zebras and warthogs, drawn from photos taken on Poe’s trip to Tanzania.

For all of the beauty, there was a problem. Poe was also facing a water drainage issue through the backyard. His friend, Wayne Wilkerson, who is a landscape architecture professor at Mississippi State University, recommended and designed a “drain garden” to solve the problem.

Landscape architect Mark Bullman of Bullman Yardworks provided the skills and ideas to complete this project, which features a rock-lined channel diverting water in the appropriate direction.

The small pool created as part of the backyard garden was the perfect place for Poe to expand his Serengeti dream. He found two topiary forms for a “momma and baby” elephants, and created a fountain, as the elephants squirt water from their trunks into a pond filled with goldfish.

The elephants are not life-size, but are appropriate for the landscape. Poe said the moss-filled topiaries look like a cross between an elephant and a woolly mammoth, but add whimsy.

Many shade-to-part-sun loving plants were selected to be part of Poe's "Mississippi Serengeti" including azaleas, hydrangeas, fatsias, ferns, grasses, weeping mulberry, lenten roses, pyracanthas and an assortment of annuals. He has tried to implement many grasses in the landscape to give a feel for the Serengeti, including zebra grass. He has a burning bush plant he is experimenting with, and after six years, his pomegranate trees bore fruit last year. The beautiful flowers are starting to peek out and will provide vibrant color by the time of the Art in the Garden tour. More recently, Poe has added an "Observation Deck" to the landscape for "adequate viewing of this wildlife scene." Designed by landscape architect Jeremiah Dumas, the deck was constructed, complete with ceiling fans, rockers, and with wireless speakers. Mural flood lights illuminate the scene for evening viewing. "It is a great place to sit out here and relax," Poe said, "sipping on your favorite southern beverage while dreaming about your next adventure."