

# Antiques in the Garden

By Ken Farmer

**Ken Farmer** is a lifelong resident of Virginia and currently resides in Charlottesville. He and his wife Jane have been avid students and collectors of Americana and Southern material culture since they married in 1974. Since his teenage years Ken has been a musician and singer of traditional Appalachian and American Roots music. As a performer he became interested in the songs, history, objects and stories of his native Southwest Virginia, which led to him the antique business where he has worked for over 40 years. Ken has also appeared on *Antiques Roadshow* since its inception in 1996, as a specialist in folk art, decorative arts, and musical instruments. Ken runs an antique and fine art appraisal and consulting business that serves collectors, estates, and individuals throughout the mid-Atlantic.

Ken Farmer

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**Fruit sign from Ken's collection**

This vintage hand-painted fruit vendor sign is part of Ken's personal collection. He and his wife Jane had been looking for a unique way to add a pop of color to their garden, and when they spotted this sign at the Fishersville Shenandoah Antique Show they knew they had found just the right piece.

As a collector I'm always on the lookout for the next great item to add to our ever-changing collection. Last year, I attended the Fishersville Shenandoah Antique Show hoping to find a great item that we could add to our garden. My wife and I knew we wanted something that would pack a punch by adding a lot of color and complimenting the flowers coming up that spring. As soon as we saw a vintage hand-painted sign with watermelon and cantaloupe illustrations we knew it was just right. The size, color, and handmade nature of it meant it was exactly what we had been looking for. This sign would have likely been created to catch the attention of drivers passing by a vendor's fruit stand, so it had already spent most of its life outside where it gained some attractive wear over the years. Since we planned to hang it in an area of the garden exposed to the elements it made sense to purchase something that already showed some wear, rather than searching for a pristine piece. Once we got it home, we hung it up on the side of the house where it still has pride of place today.

Considering making some additions to your own garden? From traditional jardinières and statuary to more inventive and upcycled pieces, the options are endless. Here are a few tips to help you as you begin your search. First, keep in mind that there is no need to search for items in perfect condition. Just like our sign, most

items in a garden will be exposed to weather and sun, both of which can have adverse effects. As you search, look for items that will age gracefully, such as wood, cement, or stone. If, however, you prefer a more rustic look, you can choose items that are painted or decorated in some manner that will noticeably change in appearance over time. There is even a historic precedent for this: painted Windsor chairs were originally used in the garden and only taken in during bad weather. Deciding whether you prefer a more natural, organic garden or a crisp, traditional feel is an important first step.

Always make sure that you take into account the layout of your own garden. If you are just beginning to plan, accents and sculptural items can help anchor it, giving you a backbone to start from. For those that already have an established garden, consider adding something that will either fit your existing theme or offer a new focal point, like a piece of contemporary sculpture by a local artist. It's easy to fall in love with a piece but make sure to consider if it will actually suit the garden space you want to enhance. Do you need a free-standing item or something for a vertical surface? Do you want something that has a lot of color or something that will fit more organically into the space? Making the decision to have an English, French, Contemporary or other style throughout can also help you select items that compliment your plan.

Another consideration is whether you want all of your garden items and fixtures to be antique or if you are willing to mix in contemporary pieces. Some of the best antique elements are late nineteenth and early twentieth century copies of earlier objects—especially statues and fountains carved from stone or marble. Shopping local has its advantages and it can help you get some local Virginia history in your garden, such as the striking cast iron garden accents created by James. W. Carr in his Richmond foundry. Carr's foundry generated a wide range of items in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including cast iron urns and benches that are still popular among collectors today.

Country auctions and antique salvage shops can be a great place to search if you are strictly looking for antiques. Architectural elements, such as antique wrought iron fencing or carved stone features, can add a lot of dimension to a garden space as can unexpected pieces like antique mill stones. One thing to keep in mind when you are buying pieces for the garden at auction or through retail shops: cast iron and concrete items can mean an expensive delivery due to their weight! If you have a good local shipper you might want to use them. If the vendor delivers, all the better.

Lastly, your garden is an extension of your home, so make sure to buy things you like and that express your own style.