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INTO THE GARDEN!

ART ISN'T JUST FOR THE WALLS OF OUR HOMES – IT LOOKS RIGHT AT HOME IN THE GARDEN. WHAT FOLLOWS IS A POTPOURRI OF ITEMS THAT WILL HELP TO MAKE YOUR LITTLE SLICE OF THE GREAT OUTDOORS LUSH, EXPRESSIVE AND EVEN ECO-FRIENDLY.

BY SUE LONG



Mississippi metal artist Stephanie Dwyer, whose work has been seen in countless newspapers and magazines, is doing her part to revive interest in a Southern tradition – bottle trees. Stephanie's commissions have included trees for homeowners, museums and corporations. She decorates her trees not only with bottles, but with collectible glass insulators that were once used on electric poles. Stephanie's bottle trees have evolved into other forms, including arbors. Visit her website at www.missmetaldesign.com. Photos courtesy of Stephanie Dwyer.

Bottle Trees... A Tradition Revived

The first time I saw a bottle tree was on P. Allen Smith's blog. Then, I began to notice them in gardening magazines. I want one!

The bottle tree is a Southern tradition that began to wane in popularity during the '60s. Garden mania has helped to revive interest in the unique "trees." Like most art forms we see in gardens, bottle trees are rooted in history. In this case, according to Felder Rushing, who might be considered an authority on bottle trees, the tradition dates back to 1600 B.C. Egypt, where glass was first made. The sound of wind rushing over the tops of bottles convinced people that spirits lived within them. The folklore eventually gave rise to the genie-in-a-bottle concept. The legend made its way through sub-Saharan Africa and eventually into Eastern European cultures, where witch balls – the forerunner to gazing balls – guarded homes.

The Africans believed that bottles were the perfect depositories for evil spirits. Enslaved Africans brought the folklore to the Deep South, where the bottle-tree tradition evolved. The slaves would either hang bottles from trees or place them on the tips of tree branches in hopes that any evil spirits lurking near a house would be attracted to the shimmering bottles at day's end. The tale further held that the spirits would become mesmerized by the play of the sunlight through the colors of the glass and become trapped inside the bottles. (Sometimes, the insides of the bottle necks were greased with animal fat to ease the spirit's entry and make its exit more difficult.) Some believed that the trapped spirits were destroyed when the sun rose the next morning. The bottles were periodically corked and thrown into the river in an effort to wash away the unwanted spirits.

Although bottles of many colors were used, blue was the most preferred. The color not only embodies the sky and water, it also signifies dreams, spirituality and distance. Because of its attributes, blue was considered to be especially potent in repelling evil spirits. Blue was also regarded as the color that could provide the best protection against an illness that was spreading through the area. (This is why you can still find homes in the South with doors and window frames painted a hue that is called Haint Blue.)

Skip ahead to the 21st century and bottle trees are not only dotting the landscape of the South, they are steadily making their presence known in other regions of the country. One year, the Chelsea Garden Show in London even paid homage to the bottle-tree tradition. Thanks to both Southern-based and gardening magazines, readers are becoming acquainted with the tradition. Interest is also being generated by the Internet, where any number of artists, historians and garden-supply companies are helping to breathe

new life into the tradition. One such metal artist is Mississippi-based Stephanie Dwyer, who shares, "I am passionate about bottle trees and am particularly driven to educate and remind people of their significant historical value. Here in the South, particularly in the Mississippi Delta, they were and still are part of the visual fabric and backdrop to the Blues. Their presence adds to the mystique of an area so overrun with poverty, yet it attracts millions of tourists from all over the world." Homeowners, as well as corporations, are commissioning Stephanie to create bottle trees that pay homage to a Southern tradition whose roots are millennia old. You can visit Stephanie's website at www.missmetaldesign.com.

The aforementioned Felder Rushing, who's also a Mississippi resident, maintains a website (www.felder-rushing.net) that is filled with amazing pictures of bottle trees.

Vermont-based Gardener's Supply is also selling bottle trees in unprecedented numbers. The customer-feedback page contains glowing comments from thrilled buyers. Visit www.gardeners.com for more information.



Gardener's Supply has had great success with its very affordable version of the bottle tree. Visit www.gardeners.com for details.