

On a Personal Note

Jay Kranyik: “My Own Little Walden”

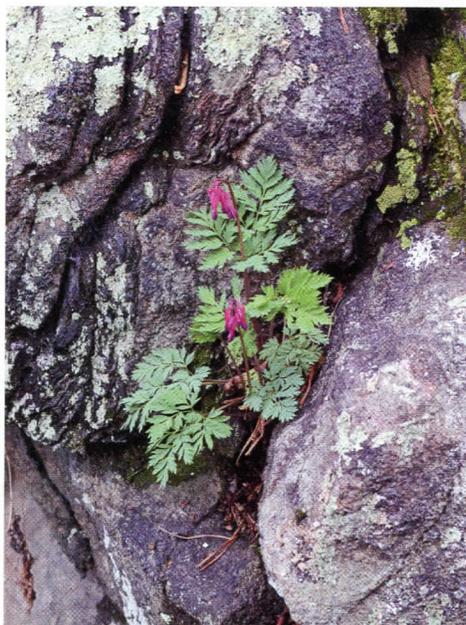
Story by JIM MURPHY | Photos by PAUL M. HOWEY

Jay Kranyik admits, “I have an intense love affair with this ten-acre piece of property. I always think of it as my own little Walden.”

Jay’s “own little Walden” is the Asheville Botanical Gardens where he plants seedlings and prunes bushes. He also fixes the plumbing, cleans up graffiti, does paperwork, and conducts tours—all part of a day’s work as manager of the garden.

discovery to the next. “We get regular visitations from bobcats, coyotes, black bears. We gave birth to a red-shouldered hawk last year. He has stayed on the property, and I see him every day.”

Jay discovered Asheville in 1989, and it was love at first sight. “I consider it a gift living in Asheville. When I first came here to visit, I couldn’t leave. I went back to DC, quit my job and moved here. I had to be here.”



A self-taught naturalist, Jay’s laid-back disposition dissolves when the conversation turns to the gardens.

“Everything here is native to the Southern Appalachians. We have over 600 native species. All the native birch. All the native conifers. All the magnolias. We have three trees that are the largest of their species in the state, and our mountain paper birch is the largest in the whole country. We have more than 80 rare plant species that are tracked by the state and federal government.”

His enthusiasm extends to a walk along the garden’s mile-and-a-half path, where he points out a sycamore tree. “This tree went to the moon,” he says. “The astronaut, Stuart Roosa, took a bunch of seeds with him on Apollo 14 in 1971. We got this one and planted it Arbor Day in 1976.”

Above the highest branches of the sycamore, the dormitories and classroom buildings of UNC Asheville offer a reminder that Jay’s “little Walden” is more like New York’s Central Park, a patch of nature surrounded by the pace and buzz of urban life.

As we continue our walk, his narrative leaps from one

He expands on the thought, and once again his words swing back to the garden. “Southern Appalachia is an art form that I think profoundly affects a lot of people, and I think this garden is a very good example of respect for our native natural history.”

It wasn’t until 1995 that he found the Botanical Gardens. He began working there as a volunteer, progressed to salaried part-timer to board member and chairman of the horticulture department, and finally to garden manager.

Now, after nearly 20 years, the experience still seems as new as the coming season. “Last year I figured it out that I’ve walked 7,000 miles in here. And I still find new things. Just in the last week, I’ve seen frogs laying eggs in the pond. Our mallard ducks show up at the same time every year at the same place in the stream.

“Its amazing. And I love to turn people on to that.”

The Asheville Botanical Gardens are located at 151 W.T. Weaver Boulevard. Jim Murphy, of Mars Hill, is a retired television news reporter and former copy editor for the Los Angeles Times. He can be reached at jimurph41@gmail.com.