Surrounded by Nature

* Inside the home of the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum's new director

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The arboretum's new director Ed Schneider and his wife Sandy were open to a cross-country move after their California home burned in a wildfire.
The arboretum's new director is at home on the grounds, and he has big ideas for growing its gardens.

Many people dream of taking the gardens at Minnesota Landscape Arboretum home, but Ed and Sandy Schneider are at home in the arboretum's gardens—literally.

The new arboretum director and his wife moved into a home on the arboretum's property in July when Ed started his new job. The house, which was built in the 1970s, was a part of the deal when Ed accepted the job, and he feels that it will play a key role in helping him grow support for the arboretum. "The concept behind the director's home [was] that it would become a place to build friendships and cultivate donors for the future of the arboretum," he says.

The Schneiders already have entertained colleagues and an international visitor to the arboretum, and hosted a fundraiser and an open house for arboretum employees. Ed refers to the house as Westcliff—a counterpart to Eastcliff in St. Paul where the president of the University of Minnesota lives.

Although the home has been dubbed Westcliff, it still remains a modest rambler with a walk-out basement. While Eastcliff is a mansion, boasting 20 rooms and 10,000 square feet, Westcliff is much more humble—but it's the location that counts. During a recent visit, deer ambled through the yard, while cardinals perched on nearby bird feeders. The Schneiders say they've noticed a lot of wildlife, including skunk, turkeys, geese and fox.

The Schneiders' new residence was built by the Russell family on land adjacent to the arboretum. In 2000, the arboretum made a deal with the Russells to purchase the home and the land it sits on by 2010. The Russells happened to be moving out of the house around the time the new director was planning to move to Minnesota. Arboretum staff worked to prepare the residence, painting the rooms and preparing the grounds.
"The minute I drove through that entryway to the gate house, I thought, 'Wow, this is a special place.'"

—Ed Schneider, on his first visit to the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum

Living in a home that's not quite their own comes naturally to Ed and Sandy—the couple's previous home was owned by the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden in California, where Ed worked. "We think of it as the arboretum's home," Sandy says. "And we're fortunate enough to be living here."

Before moving to the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, Ed spent 18 years as the director of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, and Sandy worked in nonprofits for 11 years. In May 2009, tragedy struck when the Jesuita wildfire scorched 60 acres of the botanic garden's 85 acres of land. The core part of the garden and main buildings were not destroyed by the fire, but two structures were completely destroyed, including the horticultural building and the home where Ed and Sandy had been living. "We grabbed what we could when we were told to evacuate," Ed says, including their 11-year-old Shih Tzu dog, Dali, and their parakeet, Shady Blue.

Since they lived in a high fire zone, Ed and Sandy did have their old photos packed up and stored at their daughter's home in downtown Santa Barbara. The couple stayed with their daughter during the fire. "There was a moment in time where everything we owned was in the trunk of our cars," Ed says.

"Our past burned," Sandy says. The couple is slowly rebuilding at Westcliff.

The fire represented both a personal tragedy and a professional challenge for Ed. While he came to terms with the loss of his home, he also had to focus on reviving the garden. "Of course there was a big task, and during the subsequent year we rebuilt and cleaned up the burnt vegetation, and today the garden is thriving quite nicely," he says. "Every day at work, I'd look back over and see the burnt foundation of the director's house, and I said 'This is a memory I don't want to have every day.' And because we were unencumbered with junk and stuff, we said 'It's time to take on another opportunity.'"

During that time, Peter Olin, who was the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum's director from 1984 to 2008, was encouraging Ed to apply for his open position. Ed was intrigued, but wasn't sure about relocating to Minnesota. He wanted to see the arboretum in person before making a decision—and he didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings if he found the facilities lacking. "I didn't know what to expect, and I thought I could just say 'no' over the phone," he says.

So in July 2009, Ed made the trip to Minnesota; he rented a car and came to the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum as a visitor. "The minute I drove through that entryway to the gate house, I thought, 'Wow, this is a special place,'" Ed says. "And then I drove around the Three-mile Drive, got out and walked a few places, and I said, 'Why don't more people know about this?' Well, the answer is that everybody knows about it up here, but because Minneapolis isn't the great destination that many other cities are, we have a big job ahead of us, marketing what a wonderful treasure this is."

Ed went home and applied for the job, and now he's...
beginning to implement some of the ideas that started to take shape during that first visit. His first mission is completely practical. "The biggest issue that the arboretum faces is on the busiest days, the traffic backs up getting in, getting out and trying to find parking space, so we need to re-look at the circulation pattern," Ed says, noting that a donor recently provided money for a circulation study at the arboretum. "Hopefully we can improve entrance, exit and parking."

While he eventually hopes to add new features to the arboretum, he says it's important to build capacity rather than congestion. "There's a lot of dreams that have been on the table for a long time, including the big glass conservatory," Ed says, adding that he hopes to see a Chinese garden, a modest amphitheater and expansion of Three-mile Drive included in plans. "In time they'll be realized," he says.

Ed, who was a college professor and dean at Texas State University in San Marcos before moving to Santa Barbara, also hopes to build on the arboretum's connection to the University of Minnesota, perhaps by creating a remote campus for continuing education. "It makes a lot of sense with all of the property we have here to have a continuing education facility. It would be multipurpose, serving the needs of the arboretum, as well as citizens," he says. "We will explore that; we don't know where it will go."

In addition to continuing the arboretum's tradition of developing new plants, Ed also hopes the arboretum can play a more active role in plant conservation, ensuring that native plants are around for generations to come. He recently invited the CEO of the Center for Plant Conservation to speak at the arboretum, and he believes the arboretum—with its staff and the faculty members at the University of Minnesota—is poised to make some important contributions to plant conservation.

Above all, Ed wants the arboretum to continue serving the needs of the community. "We want the arboretum to be utilized by a growing population of Minnesota citizens," Ed says. "We want to make it better for them, we want to make it better for their children and their grandchildren. There's this great sense of community pride about this place. Everybody I've talked to just loves it. ... We've got a lot of land here, and a lot more potential that the arboretum can realize."

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