

# Sculpting with sticks and string

*Curious collection rises with volunteer help at University of Pennsylvania's Morris Arboretum*

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Patrick Dougherty's stick sculptures look so natural, it's almost as if they simply sprouted out of the ground, sculpted by a stiff wind and maybe help from a fairy.

Actually, the sculptures take weeks of work, the vision of an artist and the labor of dozens of volunteers (including me). Dougherty spent three weeks in March building a yet-to-be named sculpture at Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania. The sculpture was recently unveiled and, weather-permitting, visitors will have about two years to explore and find the words to describe the piece.

Paul Meyer, executive director of the Arboretum in Philadelphia's Chestnut Hill neighborhood, described it as a giant basket.

"When I see it, it looks very castle-like," he added.

Dougherty's no stranger to Pennsylvania. In 2000, he created "Tea Time," a tea pot and three cups on the grounds of Lancaster Museum of Art as well as works at Swarthmore College and in Pittsburgh and Allentown. In 2009, he made "Summer Palace," a sculpture resembling a wind-swept stick hobbit house at the Morris Arboretum. During its two-year residency, the sculpture was a big hit with



Patrick Dougherty

visitors of all ages, especially children, Meyer said. Arboretum staff saw a new sculpture as an opportunity to get more kids to connect with nature.

"If we want the younger generation to grow up and appreciate nature and want to conserve nature, they have to be connected with it," he said.

So, they invited the North Carolina artist back.

To prepare, the arboretum thinned out some young trees — zelkovas, from the elm family — to make supports. A flatbed trailer delivered the rest: lots of willow branches from upstate New York.

Morris staff also had to recruit and schedule scores of volunteers over three weeks. They started in March to

## GRAND UNVEILING

Patrick Dougherty's sculpture was recently unveiled at the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania.

The sculpture's expected to remain there for about two years.

For more information about the arboretum, visit [upenn.edu](http://upenn.edu) and search "arboretum."

For more information about Dougherty's art, visit [stickwork.net](http://stickwork.net).

provide the longest window of time for viewing before a potentially destructive winter, Meyer said.

The crews started by digging into the frozen earth with augers. Linda Thomson, an artist who lives in Chestnut Hill, spent a few hours anchoring the first branches with gravel and binding them together to make support posts. She volunteered because she admired Dougherty's work and was curious about how he came up with a concept and then brought the idea to life.

She came back two days later and handed out string for others to train the branches, creating walls. Thomson also bent tall willow branches around the doorways.

A few days later, she wove smaller branches inside the walls in a random pattern. By the end of her last volunteer day, she saw how these materials influenced the sculpture. For example, one of the huts was tilted to the side because of a bend in some of the support branches.

She walked away with that knowledge, plus the pride of helping build this work of art and some confidence in her own physical strength.

"I am 74 and I thought, gee, there are going to be

these young bucks around," Thomson said. "But I discovered that I could do it."

On my cold but bright afternoon of volunteering, Dougherty tasked me with wrapping branches around a doorway. It was hard work, but those branches eventually bend. Parts of the sculpture already were taking shape, but we were left to wonder what the bare zelkova branches would later become.

By the end of the day, Dougherty told me to weave smaller branches onto an outside wall.

"You want to look like it's blowing this way," he said.

Just before work wrapped up for the night, a couple cheered as they placed their bent-stick cap on top of one of the huts.

What a great way to bring in spring.

It was inspiring to see something beautiful being made out of modest materials with (mostly) untrained volunteers.

My job for the afternoon followed a pattern: anchor a stick somewhere, bend it around and poke the top somewhere else. As long as those ends were tucked away or cut away, that undulating swoop was all you saw. The curve was key.

I'll never look at a willow branch the same way again.



ERIN NEGLEY/STAFF PHOTOS

The doors of each structure at Patrick Dougherty's sculpture at Morris Arboretum, top, were framed by zelkova branches, which needed to be covered with curved willow branches. Volunteers like Linda Thomson, center, wove the willow branches into the exterior walls, concealing the larger branches, bottom.

## TEA TIME IN LANCASTER

Dougherty made "Tea Time," a tea pot and three cups on the grounds of Lancaster Museum of Art in 2000 at Musser Park. The sculpture was formed from a variety of sticks collected near the Holtwood dam: sassafras, cherry and maple. The tea pot remained there for more than a year and boosted attendance at the museum.

"It seems to be the center of attention, and is an object that has created some very positive activity," Cindy Morrison, former museum executive director said at the time, according to newspaper records. "For us, it's been better than a neon sign, and a great promotion for art overall."

It met a sudden end after it was damaged by climbing children and teens.

City workers chopped up the sculpture with chain saws and turned it into mulch.



PAUL MEYER PHOTO

The finished sculpture, which doesn't yet have a name, opened to the public recently.

**WATCH THE VIDEO**  
Visit the story at [lancasteronline.com](http://lancasteronline.com)

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A photo gallery of the sculpture's construction and the end result can be found at [LancasterOnline.com](http://LancasterOnline.com).