

Spotlight – Kevin Schwanke

Submitted by Barb Dorzweiler



Meet fellow master gardener Kevin Schwanke. He can often be found in his gardens wearing jeans, sweatshirt, and hat to avoid overexposure to the sun as well as those nasty insect bites, while enjoying the often-changing spring, summer and autumn weather in Wisconsin. He loves designing gardens and in winter he spends time on the computer to design gardens, then compares that design to the new project the coming summer. He loves experimenting and learning and has no one favorite gardening style. He feels circle-shaped gardens are his most challenging garden design project so far. A pragmatic gardener, Kevin prefers to incorporate design items that serve double duties, looking artistic while serving useful purposes. That means garden choices that are made of natural material, are those that blend in to support and compliment what is growing around them. Good examples he finds are stone benches, clay pots, and wood trellises. If a garden features plastic fences, painted bird

houses, or gaudy focal points, it becomes difficult to admire the beauty of the garden's foliage and flowers. He finds many garden structures leave a lot to be desired. He likes the internet as his favored reading source for gardening subjects as it has ample digital articles that don't require bookshelves and subscriptions. He says it's hard to pick a favorite gardening website as the variety is infinite and constantly expanding. He thrives on the many website choices as well as the challenge of spotting misinformation when comparing website information.

Kevin began true gardening just after retirement, but his interest developed earlier, during his late 50's. He enjoyed watching his mother grow flowers in the back yard and loved taking nature walks with his father. His parents often pointed out favorite plants. His parents are now deceased, so he grows some plants his parents appreciated in a special garden dedicated just to them. He started



with no formal garden training and experienced many expensive failures in his gardens. As a veteran educator, he realized taking a class would improve his gardening techniques and help him make better plant choices. That's when he signed up for OCMGA classes. The master gardener classes really opened his eyes and helped immensely. He finds growing plants to be both therapeutic and rewarding, and being outdoors is enjoyable. He has garden spaces overshadowed by mature oak trees, so shade perennials are his dominant choices at home. Dozens of great hosta varieties currently dominate his yard, but that is beginning to change. This year, he's integrating additional native and exotic choices such as *Lebelia cardinalis*, *Astilboides tabularis* and *Syneis-*

esis aconitifolia. He really appreciates variety and is also working to eliminate invasives in his yard. His favorite gardening stores are Rosehill Gardens in Hobart and the Flower Factory in Stoughton. Spending way too much money on our fabulous garden outlets in the valley is something he happily deals with. His best tool, besides a shovel, is something called a stirrup hoe, marketed under names like "Action Hoe" or "Wiggle Weeder". It easily decapitates most emerging weeds and is easy to maneuver around ornamental plants. It works great if you don't like using herbicides or spending hours pulling weeds by hand. Pests are controlled in Kevin's gardens with the use of fencing, fragrant herbs and flowers, planting enough natives, and just plain accepting that there will be losses. After all, animal pests need to eat and they support the food chain in the bigger scheme of nature. In fact, little frustrates Kevin about gardening itself. When autumn evenings force us indoors earlier and earlier, or when winter seems to last forever, he sometimes gets frustrated. And there's that thing called the mosquito that frustrates many a gardener! Other garden concerns on Kevin's mind include the general misuse of dangerous pesticides and herbicides by uninformed home owners. He doesn't appreciate lenient regulation of these chemicals especially because his yard has long been a drainage area from neighboring yards.

As far as other garden related activities, his garden harvest includes making wonderful smoothies. He blends a variety of things he grows, experiments with different combinations, and with a smoothie, little gets wasted when you drink from your garden to stay hydrated in the heat of the summer.

The coolest garden he ever visited was the quarry farm developed by Karen and Carl Vanden Heuvel north of Appleton. Their place will likely be on the American Hosta Society's convention garden walk next summer. It's well worth a visit by any gardener in Wisconsin, even if you don't like hostas. But, if he could visit any garden on the planet, he favors his own back yard! With all his efforts it keeps getting better each year and working in it is always pleasurable. To Kevin, Wisconsin has three great seasons and a tolerable winter; not too many natural or human-made catastrophes occurring, and many of the people living here are wonderful. The best vacation he ever took is a trip to Europe with his family. He fondly remembers touring castles in Scotland and biking in Germany.

For non-gardening activities, he loves research on the computer and participates often in volunteer work. Learning in general and especially learning about history interests Kevin. He will occasionally take a class or attend a workshop on various topics. His other hobbies include computer and software work. He enjoys genealogy research, and sometimes photography. Family research has been his hobby for decades and he's helped others with identifying their ancestors. He plans a couple hours of exercise and healthy eating into his day. Few master gardeners know that he's completed over 200 triathlons and still tries to enter at least one per



year. At 63, his knees complain a bit, so he usually limits his exercise to knee-friendly activities like biking, swimming, yoga, and walking. He does miss the running, though.

If he could be granted one wish, he'd like to be able to eliminate our human tendencies that escalate hostilities, and close our country's political divisions. He hopes people would respect individual differences and find ways to compromise in disagreement. Dreaming of the best possible thing to do in life if he had the chance would be to become a successful architect like Frank Lloyd Wright and then design human structures that integrate beautifully into natural habitats. Kevin is single with no children. Looking ahead, Kevin hopes to learn more about cooking, especially to preserve and better enjoy fruits and vegetables grown in his gardens. With hopes and dreams like this, he wonders if there are any unattached women out there? He doesn't have a gardening joke to share for this article, but would like someone to tell him one. So the next time you meet Kevin, walk up to him in warm greeting and tell him this one: "Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad".