

“The more we teach people about the natural world the better stewards they’ll be of it.”

CARMINE STAHL

In the Fantastic Forest, a spindly, red palm-fiber-haired creature restrains a mottled, wolflike beast on a leash. They are the Guardians of the Gardens, watching whoever enters and exits. A knotty, twisted Old Witch sits on her mushroom, stirring her acorn cap cauldron. With a sinister laugh, she offers visitors a cup of soup. Roaming through the trees and vines, the Great Protector Scorpion smiles, unless someone litters. Then he growls. If someone tramples the flowers, his acorn eyes bulge and he might even attack.

These Fantastic Forest creatures are the products of the fertile imagination and playful spirit of naturalist Carmine Stahl, program coordinator for Harris County’s Jesse Jones Park and Mercer Arboretum and Botanic Gardens. Limbs, leaves, acorns, seeds and other natural tidbits stimulate images in his mind just as other people see shapes in clouds. By adding a little glue to the scattered pieces he collects, he builds scary, ugly, mean but humorous and gentle forest friends.

Stahl designed his first forest creatures simply as a creative exercise and as unique Christmas gifts for his family. Soon, he made

“critter trophies” for arboretum volunteers, had two pieces commissioned and last year displayed them at the Houston Lawn and Garden Show. The Guardians of the Gardens will be permanently installed at Mercer. Although surprised by the interest his fantasy figures are generating, Stahl is even more impressed by their potency

as a teaching tool.

Speaking in classrooms and at the twin nature centers, Stahl emphasizes the interdependence of man, animals, plants and the Earth and encourages direct contact with our natural environment. In his “Create a Critter” class, he guides children through nature trails where they pick up fallen branches, twigs and leaves to shape their own fantasy creatures. Then they tell how the animal fits into the whole ecology, what it eats and where it lives.

“It gives them something creative to do and helps them develop a good attitude and familiarity with the world around us,” said Stahl. “The more we can teach people about the natural world, the better stewards they’ll be of it.”

Everything that exudes the vitality of life attracts this effervescent, elderly man whose soft voice quotes Plato, John Wesley and William Faulkner on human nature as spontaneously as he identifies the scientific and common names of plants and their uses. Growing up in the Arkansas hills during the Great Depression, Stahl’s father, a doctor familiar with the plant origins of medicines, and his naturalist mother,



Carlos Hernandez



*Carmine Stahl and his wife Mary Lou (left) share an enthusiasm for nature and an interest in edible plants. Stahl uses his *Fantastic Forest* creatures, such as the witch on the opposite page, as teaching tools.*

work. He taught school in Arkansas, worked for Beech Aircraft in Wichita, Kansas, as a nurseryman in Houston and finally felt pulled toward the ministry. After graduating from SMU's Perkins School of Theology, he returned to Houston. For the next 20 years, he worked as a pastor and coordinated community programs to help troubled children. After retiring, he served as executive director of the Houston Audubon Society and helped lay out the trails for the soon-to-open Jesse Jones Park.

Now in his fourth year at Jones and Mercer, Stahl sees his role as a continuation of his ministry. "I have so much contact with people, especially kids. I love the opportunity to awaken their minds and interests to this wonderful planet we live on," he said, his blue eyes sparkling. "I think it's important, life-enhancing, that people find a positive, direct relationship with nature whether it be in their yard, their garden or walking a nature trail. Stop to smell a flower. Touch a leaf. Occasionally go by yourself to a mountain. It engenders so much respect, wonder and happy feeling about the world. The variety of life on Earth is so astonishing. There's a kid in me that looks at nature and says, gosh, that's awesome." ★

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taught him to love and respect nature. "I've been reading about nature all of my life. It's my escape reading," he said with a laugh. "Although I've never been especially hungry, I hate to see people or animals who are. Whenever I see a plant, I always wonder if it can be eaten."

That nagging question led to the publication of a pocket-size book on wild edibles and wilderness survival, "Stahl's Wild Edibles." Available at nature center gift shops, the book contains original "wild stuff" recipes by his wife,

Mary Lou, a native Houstonian whom he met and married in 1950 at Arkansas' Hendrix College. She shares his enthusiasm for nature and experimentation with plants. When he brought home some cattails in order to eat the white bulbs at their base, she hated to throw away the rest of the plant. So she used it to weave baskets.

With a B.A. in English and a bride, Stahl ventured to the University of Missouri where he continued studying English and tried to decide on his life's