

Exteriors



BRIAN DEXTER

The Winter Wheat store sells china teacups mounted on steel posts as novel bird feeders. Top left: A sculpture has "Elton John" the crow playing the piano with "Bette Midler" the canary. Below, Winter Wheat co-owner Lucy Ogletree with one of her paintings.

When the hermit left



Lucy Ogletree and Mike Roberts created whimsical folk-art haven
Sparta property once owned by recluse, write Brian and Joanne Dexter

SPARTA—It's one of the most peaceful and relaxing places to shop for decorating your home and garden.

Fittingly, it's the former forest abode of a man known as "the hermit," now transformed by a couple raised on local farms, who went on to establish their careers in folk art and chainsaw artistry.

Lucy Ogletree and Mike Roberts regularly draw 2,000 people a week to their country folk-art enclave, called Winter Wheat, tucked away on two hectares off Quaker Rd. in Sparta, a community 10 kilometres southeast of St. Thomas.

Many visitors return often to enjoy the gardens and wooden sculptures Ogletree and Roberts have created beneath the forest canopy, never mind the one-of-a-kind items on sale in their barn-style store.

Hydrangeas are everywhere — mainly the legacy of the hermit — and you'll also find ferns, hostas, impatiens and petunias plus trilliums in spring.

Paul Fraser of Mississauga, who is a regular visitor with his wife, Sharon,

started coming here about two years ago.

"We've been to a lot of places in the world and have seen a lot of things but what they've got here is rather unique," he says. "Their creative juices are quite wonderful and every time we return there are all kinds of new things."

For more than 40 years, the property was the home of Fred Shepherd, a former railway brakeman, who lived alone in a house built in 1842.

He planted hundreds of wildflowers, along with pine and spruce trees — some of which are now more than 20 metres high.

As a young man, Roberts used to deliver groceries to Shepherd in winter, from the general store in Sparta.

Shepherd died in 1989. In 1997 Ogletree and Roberts bought the neglected property from the subsequent owners, started cleaning it up and fixing the house for themselves.

It has Gothic peaks and Victorian trim, original tulip fretwork and roof pinnacles.

At one point during the cleanup, Rob-



erts, 57, cut down 110 trees in two days. In the process, he found he was adept at making wood sculptures with a chainsaw. Ogletree, a self-taught artist, helped him design the various objects he made. She also worked on her acrylic paintings that are now featured in two folk art calendars by Pine Ridge Art and sold in Canada, the United States and Britain.

The couple resolved to turn their property into a unique place while preserving the natural habitat. They built a barn to manufacture country giftware items, such as bird feeders and clocks, which they sold to other stores, but the business was a struggle. Almost four years ago, in a desperate attempt to fend off a business crash they held a "fire sale" on their property. They were amazed when people kept returning, not only to buy products but also to admire the sculptures and gardens. Suddenly their retail enterprise was born, and they've never looked back.

On a recent weekend, Fernan Enriquez, an accomplished pan flute musician from Mississauga, played for visitors outside Ogletree's studio, which was once the hermit's garage.

In a neighbouring glass house, visitors served themselves coffee or tea and a cookie while listening to music.

At the laneway entrance to Winter Wheat, wooden angels holding birds line a split rail fence. They were sculpted by Roberts.

Further on, a sign beneath six carved clocks attached to tree posts proclaims, "This is the place where time stands still." Elsewhere, a sculpture of a crow, supposedly singer Elton John, plays piano and accompanies a Bette Midler-style canary warbling on the top as John's *Candle In The Wind* drifts through the forest.

Ogletree says that most people arrive at Winter Wheat through word of mouth. She adds, "It's very much a folk art environment that connects with nature."

The store has about 600 items mostly ranging in price from \$10 to \$500. Some wood products are produced on the spot, metal ones are made locally, while others are cherry-picked from sources across Canada and the U.S.

Especially popular are Roberts' wooden fence post angels at \$95. Smaller angels with metal parts are priced at \$12.

Ogletree's folk art prints are \$35 to \$650 with many images culled from her childhood near Thamesville, including one of her grandmother cooking.

Other eye-catching products at the store include teacups on metal poles that are \$15 and used as bird feeders, a funky metal bird on a pole at \$40 and a potting bench with a water fountain feature at \$450 that can go inside or outside.

Roberts worked in inventory at the Ford plant in St. Thomas for eight years before going into business on his own. Ogletree had about 30 different jobs before starting a company that made grapevine wreaths and in recent years has travelled with the American Folk Art Museum.

The couple share Winter Wheat with four dogs, a cat and two goats and say their property is a work in progress, although, Roberts insists, they don't feel the need "to get everything done by next Friday."

Winter Wheat is on Quaker Rd, two kilometres south of Sparta, southeast of St. Thomas and is open daily all year 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free. For information, call: (519) 775-2618 or go to www.winter-wheat.com.