

# The Beifuss File: What's the buzz? Big bugs at the Memphis Botanic Garden

John Beifuss, USA TODAY NETWORK – Tennessee Published 8:00 a.m. CT Sept. 15, 2017



David Rogers talks about how he started making more than just furniture. Brad Vest/The Commercial Appeal



To paraphrase Sir Mix-A-Lot: I like big bugs, and I cannot lie.

And if you think my desire to deploy the above pun in the opening line of a newspaper story was my main motivation in deciding to write about the "Big Bugs" exhibit at the Memphis Botanic Garden, you are, as I'm sure you already know, correct.

But as stated, I cannot lie. I really do like big bugs.



I especially like them when they are unleashed in 1950s science-fiction films, to terrorize citizens, topple skyscrapers and wreak havoc on the countryside.

In "The Deadly Mantis," a 200-foot-long praying mantis perches on the Washington Monument.

In "The Black Scorpion," trains are derailed by awesome arachnids with boxcar-sized pincers.

In "The Beginning of the End," gargantuan grasshoppers hop Chicago to death.

And in the immortal "Them!," giant ants — gi-ants, don't you know — emerge from the desert, mandibles clapping with desire for Joan Weldon, cast as a shapely myrmecologist (ant scientist, to you).

The Memphis Botanic Garden is ready for such ants. The "Big Bugs" exhibit includes a picnic basket, built by volunteer carpenters, that is the size of a garage. The basket is the target of a trio of "Them!"-sized ants, arrayed across the lawn in a conga line of insectivorous hunger. Sanded and varnished, the bugs' thoraxes, abdomens, heads and legs are constructed from willow, while the eyes are red cedar.

Constructed? A better word might be "sculpted." The proper title of this exhibit — scheduled to be on public display from Saturday, Sept. 16, through New Year's Eve — is "David Rogers' Big Bugs." The title is acknowledgment that this installation of 10 imposing insects and arachnids is not only a novelty and a tourist attraction but a solo art exhibit, arguably closer in spirit to the giant inflatable rabbits installed in January outside the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art by Australian artist Amanda Parer than to the animatronic dinosaurs manufactured by exhibition companies for shows at zoos and museums.

"It's a hell of a great gig," said artist David Rogers, 57, a Long Island resident who 25 years ago traded a career crafting rustic furniture, gazebos and arbors for a more surreal not to mention entomological pursuit.

Assisted by girlfriend/assistant Terri Fox and local hire Andre Arnette, and accompanied by Polly, a 2-year-old speckled dog of the blue heeler variety, Rogers spent much of the previous week unloading, retouching and installing his stylized wooden bugs around the 96 acres of the botanic garden, as if they were props in one of those aforementioned monster movies.

Some visitors may be startled. What's that just past the azaleas and hostas? Boo! It's a 7-foot black walnut assassin bug!



September 09, 2017 -Terri Fox prepares one of the giant ant heads that will be in the "Big Bugs" exhibit at the Memphis Botanic Garden. "David Rogers' Big Bugs" is scheduled to be on public display from Saturday, Sept. 16, through New Year's Eve. (Photo: Brad Vest/The Commercial Appeal)

"This is the first time we've brought a truly national-scale traveling exhibit here," said Jana Wilson, botanic garden director of marketing, obviously impressed with the scale of the 18-foot-long praying mantis (carved from black locust wood) and the 4-foot-wide spider in its 12-foot-wide web (wrought from willow and black cedar).

His head wrapped in a red paisley-patterned bandana and his hands within protective blue gloves, Rogers, a unpretentious, outdoorsy type, said he created his first "creature" roughly a quarter-century ago, when he convinced a friend in Vermont to turn a bent maple sapling into decoration rather than firewood.

"To this day I'll remember the moment, because it really looked like a backbone — the curvature of the sapling was like the curvature of a spine," Rogers said. Adding branches and sticks, Rogers sculpted a sketchy, mythic-looking monster.

"It was a thrill for me," Rogers said. "Before that, making furniture, everything was form and function. After, it was like knocking a wall down and saying, 'I can make anything, I can use my imagination.' "

Further efforts along similar anatomical lines led to an invitation to create an insect display for a botanic garden, and then another. The work was challenging ("How do you make a 25-foot ant?" Rogers asked himself), but early installations proved so popular that Rogers eventually was able to turn his bugs into a business.



September 09, 2017 - Andre Arnette, hired locally, helps sand a front leg of a giant praying mantis while preparing the "Big Bugs" exhibit at the Memphis Botanic Garden. "David Rogers' Big Bugs" is scheduled to be on public display from Saturday, Sept. 16, through New Year's Eve. (Photo: Brad Vest/The Commercial Appeal)

Now, he's on the road about six months a year, taking his bugs from one garden or arboretum or park to another (including Epcot at Walt Disney World). Disassembled, the woody insects reside in a 26-foot Penske rental truck; when the truck is unloaded, the pieces are displayed as if on the floor of a mad scientist's workshop. Last week, three ant heads were arranged in a row like macabre trophies, while Arnette, an experienced carpentry worker hired through a temp agency, sand the grasping spikes on the inside of a praying mantis leg. "I knew I was gonna be sanding down," said Arnette, 38. "I didn't know I was gonna be sanding down a praying mantis."



The Memphis Botanic Garden gig will represent Rogers' 80th insect installation, more or less. "I like the idea of the role that botanic gardens play in trying to educate people about the sanctity of conservation," he said, standing near the paradoxically lacy yet wooden wings of a giant artificial damselfly, while an actual, normal-sized turtle sunned itself at the edge of a lake.

Inevitably, the "David Rogers' Big Bugs" exhibit is sponsored by Terminix. For a full schedule of events (numerous bug-related activities are part of the show) and more information, visit [www.memphisbotanicgarden.com/bigbugs](http://www.memphisbotanicgarden.com/bigbugs). The Memphis Botanic Garden is at 750 Cherry Road.