

'It's really about the wood'

Florida couple carves creations, excited for first festival visit

BY JENNA-LEY HARRISON

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"It's all about the wood" for one Florida couple headed to their first Flowertown Festival.

John and Laurie Smith will be setting up a vendor table showcasing their hand-carved wooden fixtures: candlelight centerpieces, lanterns and sconces.

"We're super excited to be coming to the event. It's a big deal," Laurie Smith said.



John Smith

Because of the time and detail involved in creating their pieces, they range in price from \$50 to \$150.

While her husband has been working with wood for years — starting as a young boy helping his father — Laurie Smith picked up the hobby about

four years ago. That's when they started their operation Woodsmith of Naples.

"I've worked with wood forever," John Smith said.

Laurie especially admires him for the way in which he makes the work appear smooth and easy.

"John makes it look very easy like cutting butter and sliding through it," she said.

Even before Laurie Smith started carving, her creative juices were already flowing, as she served for years as a website designer for a publishing company. She even eventually established her own business for custom website design.

Though the couple, who live in Yalaha, Florida — a small town about 45 minutes northwest of Orlando — attend craft festivals in their home state, they ventured to a show near Atlanta in September — and soon will be adding South Carolina to their travel list.

And no wooden display is the same. The couple changes it up every show, always bringing with them a new set of distinct wood types and products.

"They're very unique. Every time we go (to a show), people say they've never seen anything like them," Laurie Smith said.

Depending on the piece, it may take weeks for the crafters to finish one. Laurie Smith said the process is tedious and time-consuming, and the couple often works for hours. They have a special woodworking shop on their property.

"We work eight days a week. We're either in the shop or at a show," she said.

The time to complete a piece is based on years of experience and how the piece is



Laurie Smith works on a creation.

coming along. They also work on multiple projects at once.

"I guess you have to work with the wood to really have that feel for it. You can kind of equate it to flour and sugar, and then you turn it into this amazing loaf of bread or dessert. (The wood) looks like firewood before you start working. ... The general person would not understand what they're looking at," she said.

Though the hobby forces them to work more hours than pre-retirement, John Smith doesn't mind it. It's his passion.

"To me you take a plank of wood (and) you can create something that's just gorgeous, and something you can use and it looks good," he said. "There was a full-time (job) then, and a full-time (job) now is different. When it's something you enjoy, doing it is different than your nine-to-five job."

The couple uses only salvaged wood pulled from "property being cleared or storage areas so all is going to the chipper or to be burned," Laurie Smith said. Near their house there's actually a mill that reclaims wood — wood types not typically found in hardware stores. And they never know what they're going to get. It isn't until the couple starts cleaning up the wood and carving it out that they discover its true beauty.

"It's really about the wood; we're really passionate about the wood," Laurie Smith said. "We take something that's pretty much going to be discarded and turn it into something gorgeous. We never know what we're going to come across."

She particularly raved about a striking "brilliant orange" tigerwood, an African hardwood.

"You just look at it, and it just reminds you of...tiger stripes," she said.



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Each time one of the Smiths delves in to a piece of wood, using any number of about a dozen hand tools — drills and sanders included — to complete the carving process, they find that the original design evolves. It's taken "to another step and another step" until finished, Laurie Smith said.

And it's taken trial and error to achieve their seasoned skills.

"It's like a lifetime of work because it's such a trial and error. You have a thought and a design — you start with a sketch and pencil it out on wood, and (if) it doesn't come together right...then you tweak it. ... It's not something you can take a shop class (for)," Laurie said.

The Smiths always research their wood and learn more about its characteristics and origin. They currently utilize 40 different hardwoods from around the globe — some domestic, some exotic.

"We do use many Florida hardwoods like Turkey Oak, Camphor and Wormy Hickory... and other domestics like Black Walnut from the Carolinas and Monkey Pod from Hawaii," Laurie Smith said.

Her favorite wood creation thus far is a pineapple-shaped piece that she said most people also think looks like the tropical fruit. She's thankful the design turned out the way it did.

"The pineapple is a welcome symbol. It's very graceful as well," Laurie said.

For more information on the Smiths, visit woodsmithofnaples.com.

They will be at Booth S52-A.