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# AT HOME



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**Klara Marable** uses the wishing well in her grandfather's garden.

# LIVING HISTORY

*This garden preserves plants from a community's past, as well as memories of those who grew them.*

BY BETTY CICHY  
STAFF WRITER

The yard around Dave Marable's house is a living museum, a monument to the people and plants that have made their home in Levittown over the last half century.

He even has a name for it.

"This," he says, "is my Little Levittown."

Marable, a retired Pennsbury art teacher, is an avid collector of stories and memorabilia from the community's past. His passion for Levittown history is so well-known that people will drop off their original Cobalt Ridge door if they're remodeling or call up and invite him to sift through their discards before they move.

The Snowball Gate resident has displayed that memorabilia at dozens of exhibits throughout the region.

But his other collection — a landscape full of trees and plants that once grew in the yards of the community's longtime residents — is difficult to pack up and show off, so far fewer people have seen it.

"No one knew I had the bushes," says Marable.

But bushes he has — pink- and red-flowering rhododendrons, boxwoods, yews and more, some of them preserved from the early days of Levittown. Each new home sold in one of Levittown's sections in the 1950s came with its own meticulously planned landscape, which included shade trees and evergreens, flowering shrubs and perennials.

Abraham Levitt and his sons, William and Alfred, wanted their new community to have a park-like feel, with greenery as far as the eye could see. Abraham was a gardener at heart, and he chose the plantings that were put in



Small figs grow on one of Dave Marable's fig trees.

place around each house.

"Levitt put almost \$8 million in plant material into Levittown," says Marable.

Within a few years, what had been woods and farmland was transformed into a thriving landscape of neat, yet surprisingly diverse, suburban gardens.

William Levitt called his father "the Johnny Appleseed of the 20th century," according to Marable.

The homeowners were supposed to maintain the lawn and gardens according to the original design — and many of them did at first.

"Everybody was into gardening," says Marable, whose parents moved into a home in the Willowood section when he was 4.

But by the time Marable bought his own house in Snowball Gate in 1975, many of those original plantings had died or were overgrown, and homeowners were ready for something new.



Dave Marable collected many of the plants — and even the bricks and blocks — in his yard from friends and neighbors.

If Marable heard about it, he'd stop by to salvage what he could of the old shrubs or perennials, bringing them home to plant in his own yard.

He also did some landscaping work on the side, and if he saw something choice, he'd ask permission to dig up a little clump or take a few cuttings. After a while, people who were moving or settling the estate of a longtime Levittown resident started inviting Marable over to take his pick from the garden.

Marable has some of the original plants that came with Levittown houses, including a pear tree in his backyard that still produces fruit, and a grapevine that originally grew on a trellis by a side door in Lakeside. He also has a seedling, now about 5 feet tall, from one of the sequoias that Abraham Levitt brought back from California, where the redwood that was used to frame the houses was milled.

Non-living materials from Levittown's past have also become part of the hardscape of Marable's garden:

■ Fireplace stones from houses that were torn down in Oaktree Hollow form a walkway that winds through a side garden.

■ Rocks from the old Levittown Shopping Center have a new home in one of the flower beds out front.

For Marable, the value of these collections lies less in the plants and stones than in the memories they preserve of people and places that shaped Levittown's history.

And that's why he started naming areas of his yard after the people whose gardens the plants originally came from.

Some of them are familiar names in Levittown history, like Raymond Proffitt, William Levitt's pilot and a local environmental activist.

"Those are Ray Proffitt yuccas over there," Marable says during a recent visit.

The Helen Rouderbush garden and the Fay Roupp garden are named after original Levittown residents. The John and Paula Levitt garden just outside the front door has a columbine that once

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Art Gentle/Staff Photographer

**A former art teacher,** David Marable incorporates some of his art in his gardens.

## History

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grew in the garden of John Stuart Levitt, Alfred's son. And the William Levitt garden has two boxwoods and a yew that belonged to the builder and his second wife when they lived in a grand house off County Line Road in Montgomery County.

In a way, Marable is just carrying on an old family tradition.

His grandfather on his father's side was a landscaper who worked on some large estates in Germantown, and he'd rescue plants the wealthy owners had grown tired of, wrapping them carefully in burlap that he carried in his truck.

Marable's grandfather on his mother's side worked for the Pitcairn family — and he'd bring home rose bushes from the estate in Bryn Athyn.

When Marable got a yard of his own, he found a place for some of those Pitcairn rose bushes and a

holly tree that had once belonged to his grandfather.

So it seemed only natural, when he started collecting Levittown memorabilia, to bring home plants, too.

But Marable doesn't just take plants from others. He also gives his own plants away.

It's not uncommon for him to dig up one of his fig trees or a red Japanese maple and give it away to a neighbor.

That's just what the Levitts had in mind 50 years ago when they instructed buyers not to fence off the yards around their new homes, according to Marable.

They wanted homeowners to enjoy the greenery up and down the street, and they thought that swapping plants and sharing the pleasures of gardening would help the new residents develop a sense of community.

And Marable believes that's just what happened.

"It's part of the thing of living in Levittown," he says.



**A well-trimmed yew** is one of the many shrubs in a collection of original Levittown plants.

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## You can — and should — grow figs

If you think of figs as plants that grow only in California, around the Mediterranean and in other hot, dry places, you should see Dave Marable's garden.

Dozens of fig plants flourish around his yard in the Snowball Gate section of Levittown, most of them no more than 3 feet tall.

"I have them planted all over the place — and at a certain point, I just give them away," Marable

says.

Marable gets about a dozen figs from a single plant, but since he has them all over the yard — 16 in one bed alone — that can still be a substantial harvest.

He has been a fig lover all his life, and he's happy to have his own supply.

Marable's figs all started with a clump he dug up from the garden of Sylvia Kaskey, one of his neighbors in Snowball Gate. He rooted it and planted it in his garden, where it soon produced leaves and, after a year or so, figs.

The plantings spread on their own, putting up new shoots nearby, but Marable also makes more plants by digging up clumps with

roots attached.

"I produce maybe four or five dozen a year," he says.

He doesn't baby his fig trees or give them any special protection over the winter. And he doesn't worry when the plants are still bare and leafless in early summer.

"They might look dead," says Marable, "but then you notice a little green spot."

And before long, the little trees put out leaves and start to grow again.

According to Marable, anyone can grow figs, and they're so good for you, everyone should.

If you don't have a garden, you can even plant them in large pots.