

# FAIRY

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new, much like a three-dimensional version of those children's books that cram diverse items into one picture and then ask you to hunt for them.

Study Mark and Dot's main tree intently and you'll find: a full-sized birdhouse, a hedgehog sitting atop a fan mushroom, peacock feathers, a silver spider web made of bugle beads (hand-crafted by Dot), clusters of Lucite grapes, Santa riding a giant flying goose, a moose, seed pods and mushrooms turned into tiny homes.

And fairies. Fairies galore.

There's a fairy in white hovering near the ceiling, by the top of the tree. And another standing at the base, also in white; she's touching the tree, starting a string of white garland that spirals to the top.

"We wanted them to look like snow fairies making the garland turn to ice," Mark says. "So everything they touch, and everything the garland touches, is white."

Mark created many of the fairies himself. "All anatomically correct," he points out.

There's a fairy that's half-man, half-frog.

There's a nude fairy holding a bird in her hands.

And a blue fairy in a bird's nest, holding a stone and sitting next to a blue egg with brown speckles. When told that this particular fairy looks like someone out of "Star Trek," Mark admits to having had a "Star Trek" themed tree one year.

They've also had a medieval tree, and one devoted to the six wives of Henry VIII, Dot adds. "We have boxes and boxes of old Victorian things," she says. As well as old-fashioned bubble lights and ornaments from when Mark was a boy. Some of his treasured childhood stuffed animals are in repose around this year's main tree.

"We had a tree with everything natural: huge, wild seed balls, ornaments filled with seeds, everything earthy, natural," Dot says. One year they had a tree that was completely white, including bleached seashells and starfish.

"We've done tons of theme trees," she says.

"This is what happens when you get two old retail display people together," Mark says happily.

The couple, who have been together for 25 years, both worked in visual merchandising in the Northeast for 18 years, creating displays for G. Fox in Hartford, Conn., and Filenes in Boston.

"Beautiful display is a dying art," Mark says. "You go to an average mall here... and it's so generic. No individual creativity is encouraged. When's the last time you saw something that made you stop and say, 'That's amazing!'"

Back in the day when they were designing store windows and displays, Dot says, "It was about display and not visual merchandising. It was about creating ambience and excitement in the stores. It has somehow turned into visual merchandising... less of the creative and more about presenting existing merchandise."

It used to be about creating environments that were exciting, she says. "Now that type of creativity isn't there." She allows that perhaps some New York store still have display departments that do that kind of work. But that's the exception, not the rule.

Mark now works as an interior designer for Landmark Designs in Naples, and Dot is the costume designer/shop supervisor for the Naples Players at the Sugden Community Theatre.

And instead of turning stores into Christmas wonderlands, they now trans-



form their own home.

"It's a magical time of the year, and we want to bring the magic in," says Mark.

They literally bring the outside in, as part of their Christmas decorations.

Underneath the tree moss, pinecones, bark, dead leaves and dried mushrooms create a realistic environment for the various deer and hedgehogs stuffed toys. The grapevine that winds its crooked way around the tree is from Massachusetts.

Other major displays around the house — there's something special in every room — include branches with fairies, dragonflies (more than a few found right outside the front door) and lights in a graceful arc over the doorway to the master bedroom, a similar fairyland over the dining room buffet, and an artful arrangement of greenery and elves standing tall in a living-room corner.

## A labor of love

The initial bulk of the decorating work gets done Thanksgiving weekend, but Dot and Mark continue working over the following weekends, whenever time allows. "We both like doing it," Dot says. Of course it's work, though, Marks hastens to add, joking that birds don't fly down and help them decorate the tree while butterflies flit about, a la Disney.

Undoing the decorations after the holidays isn't easy either.

"Everything is delicate; you can't yank it down," Dot says, adding it takes a whole day to take the main tree down. Then there's the full-sized tree in the family room decorated in traditional



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Every year, Mark Vanagas, and his wife Dot Auchmoody, transform their Neapolitan home into a Christmas fairyland. The main Christmas tree in the living room, there are two more trees in the family room, is chock full of fanciful ornaments, feathers, beads, garland, tree branches, grape vines, birds' nests, white lights and fairies.

German and Lithuanian ornaments, a tribute to Mark's heritage. A table in the same room holds yet another tree, this one about three feet tall and considered "the dogs' tree," referring to Nixie and Ceirin, their beloved Schipperkes.

After the holidays, both Dot and Mark enter into their busiest time of the year. Mark, who acts with the Naples Players, is usually in their big spring musical, so he begins rehearsals in addition to working full time. Dot has her hands full as well, because a big musical means a big

cast to costume.

So sometimes their Christmas trees stay up long past the holiday season. "That's why we don't have real trees," Dot says about the longevity of the artificial variety. Even into March some years, the magic of Christmas thrives all through the house.

That's just fine with Dot and Mark — and also with anyone lucky enough to be invited in. "We love it," he says. And as much as they enjoy it all themselves, they love it when friends enjoy the magic, too. ■