

The Garden that Served a Restaurant Featured on August 9

By Sarah Edmonds



Lots of people in Flagstaff know Frank Branham as the owner of The Cottage restaurant, which he ran for 22 years along with his wife, Nancy. But probably not as many people know him as the innovative gardener that he is. His backyard garden, in the pines and irrigated almost entirely by rainwater, is one of the gardens included in the August 9th garden tour sponsored by the Coconino Country Master Gardener Association.

Frank and Nancy bought their unique house, featuring a hexagonal design, in 1992. Nancy had spotted it in her early days as a relator. Nancy wanted to grow flowers, so Frank bought her a pick axe for her birthday to get rocks out of the native soil. Although

Frank's father had gardened when Frank was young, he himself didn't become interested until he got frustrated trying to find local produce for his restaurant, which he bought in 1994.

"In those early days of the (Flagstaff Community Farmer's) market, you couldn't buy half a pound of sage. We had a sage marsala sauce that took a cup of sage and we made it every couple of days." So, Frank decided he would grow his own.

"Actually, one of the people I was buying food from said 'I'll teach you.' He turned out to regret that because he was the person I was paying \$1 a squash blossom and buying hundreds of squash blossoms over the course of the summer. The last five years I had the restaurant I grew 1000 squash blossoms a summer. I'd pick probably 25 every morning and we'd sell as many as we could."

When Frank started gardening, his soil was silt-like, clumped together easily, and had a pH of 8.3 due to its limestone content. He uses soil sulfur twice a year to get the soil down to pH 7, but to improve the soil structure, one of his secrets is his compost!

Most people in Flagstaff spend hours bagging up mounds of pine needles to take to the landfill, but Frank does pine needle composting. "We grind them to break up the cuticle so they can absorb water, then I soak them and compost them like anything else. They have a unique substance in them--lignans. Lignans need a white fungus to break them down and the fungus is good for soil structure."

The Branham's also do worm composting. The worms eat food scraps and produce castings, which contain organic matter, beneficial microbes, and other nutrients. Nancy showed me plastic totes in their garage full of California red wigglers, and they are happy to help people start their own worm farms!

Frank waters his garden mostly with collected rainwater. He has a 240 gallon and another 200-gallon tote collecting water from the roof. He uses gravity feed to send the water down the hill in his backyard to eight fifty-gallon barrels interspersed throughout. His newest toy is a handheld battery-powered pump that he can put in a barrel, attach a hose to, and water anywhere he wants. He also says he leaves his rain barrels attached to the downspouts throughout the winter to collect snow melt, which definitely gives him a head start over those of us waiting for the monsoons!

Tomatoes are one of Frank's favorite things to grow. He says, "Tomatoes need nitrogen in the beginning, then you have to get them high phosphorus, potassium, calcium sometimes, and even if you get them to grow, there can be issues like blossom end rot. I start mine inside in March, then plant them outside in mid- May using walls of

water. I plant them deep, two thirds of the way up the stem. I think it is the holy grail of gardening in Flagstaff, once you get it down.”

The Coconino Master Gardener Association’s annual tour of local gardens is on Saturday, August 9, 10am-4pm. Come on out and enjoy viewing the nine gardens on the tour, including Frank’s. Volunteers and the gardeners themselves will be available to answer all your questions. Tickets are available online now at [CMGA2025.eventbrite.com](https://cmga2025.eventbrite.com) or at Warner’s Nursery on the day of the tour only from 9-noon.

Sarah Edmonds earned a Home Horticulture Certificate from University of Arizona Cooperative Extension in 2024.