



Igneous ROCK

Text by Jill Gleeson,
Photos by Paul Emberger

It's tucked away, this new showroom – just off the Carlisle Pike in Mechanicsburg, behind a camera shop. But, oh, the treasures inside...slabs of basalt, large and small, in every shade imaginable, from eggplant purple to salmon pink, champagne yellow to deep rust. Yet it is the water features Robert Wertz, proprietor of Igneous Rock Gallery, crafts of this material that truly stun.

They burble and gurgle, with streams of water gently flowing down the vertical columns of basalt. At night they are even more impressive; the uplighting Wertz installs in the base of the features illuminate the lava rock with a glow that, as one of his clients describes, "looks like little flames leaping up through the cascading water." Says Wertz of his creations, "They are very natural looking, and beautiful in a stark, rustic kind of way. Each piece is like a snowflake – there are no two that are alike."

The lava rock in and of itself is impressive: 17 million years old, and the highest quality in the world, it comes from Washington state, where it is mined from the Columbia Plateau, the largest magma flow on the planet. While most basalt is black or gray, the exterior of this unique igneous rock is colored by sediment that leached into lava as it cooled over eons.

Using one of the oldest materials on the planet for a water feature adds drama, according to Christina Persson. The Camp Hill resident, who had one of the features installed on her Camp Hill property in May, explains, "I love it! I get a lot of compliments when I have parties. And when I explain what the rocks are to folks, there's a lot of jealousy, because there's nothing else like it."

Wertz first encountered the basalt water features two years ago, when he noticed one that had been installed in a local plant nursery. He'd been interested in offering water features through his landscaping business, Wertz Landscapes and Hardscapes, but, as he notes, "I'd always seen pictures of the frog sitting on a lily pad with a stream of water shooting out of its mouth, or the lady pouring water from a pitcher...it was all the same look. When I saw



this I thought 'Now that's something I could offer to my most discriminating customers!'"

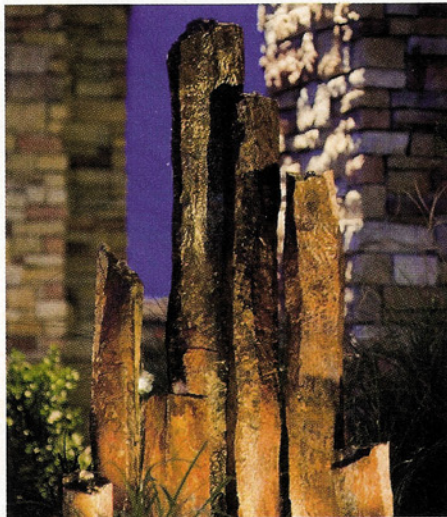
The mechanics of the water features are fairly simple; water, controlled by a pump hidden in the basin of the feature, flows through holes drilled in the basalt. The challenging – and creative – part of the work comes from designing the features. Wertz may choose to cut the basalt down to shorter sizes, or polish the top to a fine shine, revealing the black basalt within. (This also allows the water to flow uniformly down the column). The rocks may also be flat-topped or broken-topped, and choosing what kind of top, colors and sizes add up to the most aesthetically pleasing combination requires an artistic eye.

Wertz debuted the basalt water features at the 2008 Pennsylvania Home Show as well as this year's Garden Expo. By mid-June he had built 25 of the features and was in the process of getting his showroom up and running. As summer comes to a close he figures he'll have more time to devote to his new passion, which is good news, because his clients appear to be head over heels for his creations. Pat McCallum, a Carlisle resident, had her feature installed in the space between two patios. She enthuses, "It looks natural, and flowing water is always nice and peaceful. People find it very beautiful."

Eventually Wertz, who designs the features

with his employee, John Lauver, would like to sell them in garden centers across the state. But for now, he's content with, as he says, "creating the space where people enjoy the best times of their lives. We also design and install the surrounding landscape and hardscape, but these water features often become the focal point. The calm sound of water, the lights playing on the basalt at night...it really is special."

For more information on Wertz's basalt water features, which start at about \$1,000 and can also be installed indoors, visit igneousrockgallery.com.



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