

Pasadena Star News

Couple have natural give and take in their home-decor business

By Michelle J. Mills, Staff Writer
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A simple, smart house sits at the very end of a narrow road etched into the canyon area of Pasadena.

Native plants bloom in beds and the trees are resplendent, offsetting the day's heat. The doorstep has a leaf-embazoned porch light and Whip, a Maine coon-mix cat, peeks out through the open door, no doubt hoping to spot a lizard or bird. (Burmese kitty Miracle is in hiding).

This is the home and workplace of Catherine and Ovie Cowles, owners of Leaf Motif.

Leaf Motif is a home decor company with a focus on nature. The couple creates collages, prints, Kandle Kuffs, lamps, sconces, stationery, jewelry, clay leaves and more all with a leaf or floral theme. Catherine Cowles has appeared on "Crafters Coast to Coast" and "That's Clever!" on HGTV.



Ovie and Catherine Cowles pose for a picture with leaves from a Japanese Maple, at their home in Pasadena, Thursday, June 4, 2009. Catherine and Ovie Cowles own, "Leaf Motif", a business that uses leaves to decorate candle and light fixtures, and framed art pieces. (Photo by James Carbone/Correspondent)

"When I was in second grade, I did a collage with bougainvillea and bits of sandpaper ironed between wax paper," Catherine Cowles said. "As I kid, I remember thinking, 'This is really beautiful. When I grow up I'm going to make pretty things.'"

She forgot about her goal when she grew up, of course. She worked at a bank and then at a non-profit. Catherine took up ceramics to relieve stress and in 2002, she lost her job and decided to work for herself. She thought she would make ceramic leaves, but her husband knew that wouldn't pay the bills and encouraged her to be more creative.

Catherine began creating collages with leaves. Soon she was making porch lights. Then a customer asked for something to put on her table, so the Kandle Kuffs line was born.

Business was in bloom, so much so that Ovie left his job in marketing for the cable television industry to help his wife with Leaf Motif full time.

Catherine and Ovie each use their talents in ways that best help their business. Catherine spends the bulk of her time arranging her finds from nature.

"Some collages will create themselves," she said. "The elements and the movements will just come together and it will be just a refinement over a period of time. When I move one leaf, others move, no matter how careful I am, and I like that because things will be revealed to me that might of otherwise been overlooked."

Leaf Motif's product line includes items containing real leaves, as well as pieces graced by photographed or scanned arrangements of plants, such as Catherine's "fresh collages." These artworks are created for the moment, as they are not pressed nor preserved in any way.

Other collages for some items are designed by Ovie on the computer.

"We figured out a way to do the collages, not moving them on a piece of paper any longer - this is where my husband comes in - but moving them around in 25-30 layers on the computer through Photoshop. Each layer has different properties," Catherine said.

"The computer is more linear, more like a graphic arts approach to the work," Ovie said.

Ovie also photographs plants at their source in nature, such as a flower in bloom or a tree branch. He works much more quickly than Catherine, which is helpful with Leaf Motif's faster-selling items, such as the Kandle Kuffs.

The Cowles spend a lot of time looking for leaves.

Catherine has permission to pick at Descanso Gardens in La Canada Flintridge and often draws from its Japanese maple collection. She also picks from friends' gardens and receives leaves from her mother, who lives in Carlsbad, and her artist friends across the country.



Catherine Cowles works on her leaf collage, at her home in Pasadena, Thursday, June 4, 2009. Catherine Cowles owns, "Leaf Motif", a business that uses leaves to decorate candle and light fixtures, and framed art pieces. (Photo by James Carbone/Correspondent)

"I like to mix leaves from other places and other seasons and create my own forest floor," Catherine said.

Her favorite leaves are the Japanese maples.

"They are absolutely fabulous because in this climate, they will give us a whole range of fallish colors and it's great to pick them in the springtime when they're perfect and then even in the summertime," Catherine said. "They dry well. I just love them."

Ovie has his own taste.

"I have two favorite leaves and both take me back to my youth when I used to hike with my folks in the Sierra Nevada: Aspen leaves and skeletonized cottonwood leaves," he said. "The skeletonized cottonwood leaf is a cottonwood leaf that has been naturally decomposed by falling in the river and sitting along the riverbanks for five or six months covered with algae."

What remains of the leaf appears as intricate and delicate as lace and it is just as fragile when removed from the water, but once dried and pressed, it is surprisingly sturdy.

The Cowles hope that their art will spark others to admire the world around them.

"We're encouraging people to recognize an appreciation for natural forms as simple and ubiquitous as a leaf," Catherine said. "Leaves are everywhere. We rake them up, we burn them, we blow them, we get annoyed with them on our sidewalks and they're absolute works of art. So it's a way of bringing people's attention to nature's unmatched beauty in this very simple form."

The leaves teach many things. For example, they show how weather impacts nature, as in the case of green skeletonized sugar maple leaves which the Cowles have not been able to obtain for the past few years because there is not enough moisture in the air to support the bug life that creates them.

"You have a different appreciation of how people are treating outdoor spaces when you're out collecting and you're looking for pieces and you're stepping over people's tossed out hamburger wrappers or aluminum cans when you're 50 miles from where the closest humanity should be," Ovie said. "We don't want to be the only place people can find leaves 30 years from now."

The couple is also very aware of their environmental impact at home and have a long list of things they do to be green. Their devotion to this has even affected their art, such when they made the decision to trade the urethane varnish on the outside of their Kandle Kuffs for a finishing varnish that does not offcast when heated.

The Cowles are seeking to further develop their fresh collage print line and are starting two new collections, one of cottonwood leaves sandwiched in Plexiglass and a simple, yet elegant assortment of jewelry composed of ceramic leaves, silver and leather.

On Oct. 10, Catherine will be helping with Art on Palm, a show by local artists at a private home in Altadena. The show raises money for the Fisher House Foundation, a organization that provides free "comfort homes" on the grounds of military and VA hospitals for families of hospitalized military personnel.

To learn more about Leaf Motif, visit www.leafmotif.com or call (626) 827-7870.

michelle.mills@sgvn.com

(626) 962-8811, Ext. 2128

LIVING THE GREEN LIFE

Catherine and Ovie Cowles of Leaf Motif aren't just preaching when they tell others they should care about the environment, they're practicing.

Here's what the couple does to be green:

Capture rainwater.

Turn off sprinkler system when possible.

Use native plants in the yard, which welcomes insects, birds and wildlife.

Maintain "landfill" on the edge of property: Everything that is not protein-based goes into the pile at the end of meals. It is not worked like a compost pile, but is used for fertilizer.

Mulch.

Refrain from using pesticides, herbicides or other fertilizers aside from their own "landfill" fertilizer.

Use compact fluorescent lights.

Turn off the gas pilot of the furnace during the summer.

Wash clothes in cold water.

Refrain from flushing toilets unless necessary. They use buckets of water collected in the shower to flush; that water is the stream that comes before the water is warm enough.

Use and re-use fabric shopping bags.

Drive a planet-friendly car. The Cowles say their primary vehicle is a Honda Civic hybrid.