The scoop on a sculpture of shovels? It’s about stories

By Cory Golden

The way Christopher Fennell explains it, bits of ideas and images are loaded into his mind — his “gumball machine,” he calls it — and, once he’s slept on them, pop out as sculptures designs.

You can help

What: Donate used shovels, spades, gardening trowels
When: Friends of the UC Davis Arboretum spring sale Saturday 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

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Sometime in late summer or early fall, Fennell will weld together a 17-foot-wide, 16-foot-tall and 10-foot-deep gateway at the east end of the UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden as part of a joint project with the city of Davis.

Fennell, an Alabama native, had loaded up shovels, swirling schools of fish he saw in an aquarium, vine leaves, trellises and gardens into his gumball machine by the time he saw a call for designs for the Davis project. That’s when it clicked:

“When you garden, you use shovels to move dirt around. I was looking at shovels one time and noticed they looked like a vine. If you could take a shovel and curve it, it would look like a vine leaf and it would look like an arrow. So in the gateway you have all the shovels, all these arrows, all pointing the garden, that are moving around.

“It’s also like schools of fish I saw in an aquarium. I saw how they all move and I thought, ‘Oh, I’ll do my shovels like that — like fish schooling, so that all of them are moving to the left or the right but off about 20 degrees. Like gardeners using shovels, they’re all doing it their own way.’”

In 2011, at the recommendation of the Davis Civic Arts Commission, the Davis City Council unanimously approved spending $40,000 toward a gateway, which will be the first city art project on university property.

A committee of campus, city and community representatives liked what they saw in Fennell’s design, plucking it from among 66 submitted.

Depending on which way a pedestrian is headed, the gateway will open to the growing Arboretum or into downtown, as part
of the ongoing effort to make it an arts destination.

Fennell likes that his metal trellis will echo another with live vines in the Davis Commons shopping center at First and E streets.

He envisions it as a pretty, interesting form from a distance that, as it's approached, reveals what it's constructed from: twisted metal pipes and shovel heads.

Those who donate a shovel will receive a coupon that can be used toward the purchase of a new one from Davis Ace. It's the old ones Fennell is interested in.

"Things that are used have their own patina to them, and that patina tells of all the times it's been used. As a sculptor, you're communicating through objects. If you use an object that has a past, it's like using more adjectives, more adverbs.

"You put them together, and they tell a bigger story. Hopefully, you'll come into this garden thinking of your own past and how you're tied to this."

The reuse of old objects is an idea Fennell has returned to again and again with success, using donated lawn mower blades to make blades of grass, for instance. He did that in Maine. There, folks even stopped to bring him more blades as he worked, taking time to tell him about their city.

One of his first sculptures in that vein was a temporary one: a tornado made of bicycles. Fennell had "The Wizard of Oz" in mind as he welded it together. But as he hung out near the finished sculpture, though, a different kind of magic happened.

He heard the curious who'd come close to investigate and point out this bike or that and tell one another about a bike they'd once ridden as a kid or pedaled in a race.

Turns out, they had gumball machines all their own, filled
with colorful memories.

— Reach Cory Golden at ogolden@davisenterprise.net or 530-747-8047.

“Steel Guitar” is the title of this large sculpture by Christopher Fennell, built in Memphis, Tenn., where Elvis Presley played his first concert. The 67-foot-long guitar is made out of truck frames. Jamie Harmon/Courtesy photo

Artist Christopher Fennell poses proudly with “Canoe Wave,” which used 60 aluminum canoes for a Lewiston and Clark monument in Lewiston, Idaho. Courtesy photo

Artist Christopher Fennell is dwarfed by the “Rail Fire Ladder,” a fireball of decommissioned fire ladders in front of the fire station in Allen, Texas. Courtesy photo

Cory Golden

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