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Brightly colored fish and sea creatures add a festive touch to Bill and Kai Long's pool motif. The pieces were painted by neighbors and friends during a "happy hour" party hosted by the couple.

COLORFUL, CHEERFUL & BEACHY

» VILANO BEACH HOME SHOWCASES THE BEST IN FLORIDA LIVING

BY LAURA HAMPTON

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When it comes to creating a stunning yard, Bill and Kai Long are the perfect couple. Bill builds, and Kai nurtures.

A woodworker by trade, Bill's handiwork is evidenced throughout the house — in the dining room table, in the shelves that hold photos of big catches and in the 16-foot canoe that hangs on a wall in the living room.

It was only natural that hand-crafted creations would overflow into the yard.

"When Bill retired, he just started doing things out here," Kai said. "All of a sudden more things would happen. It was time to paint our house, so he did all the gussets, and next comes the mailbox."

Turquoise corner braces with seemingly free-standing orange circles accent the front and back of the house, drawing the 1950s old-Florida seaside village of Vilano Beach right into the Long's yard.

The Longs built their Vilano Beach home in 1978 when there were only 12 houses in the neighborhood. They purchased the land from Mary Usina, one of the North Beach civic leaders after which the Usina Bridge was named.

Bill tells rich stories about the colorful characters he has called neighbors. But after 37 years, they're more than neighbors; they're family.

Love for their community is evident throughout their outdoor living space.

In addition to the turquoise and orange gussets, Bill surprised Kai with a new arch over the pool gate he calls "Vilano Sunrise" — a yellow sun with a turquoise wave crashing over it.



➤ Kai experiments with easy-to-care-for succulents. The pots were attached to a copper pipe creating an appealing collection of greenery.



➤ TOP: A weeping hibiscus adds a touch of the tropical to the backyard. The Longs transported the hibiscus from south Florida. BOTTOM: Bill and Kai Long beneath the "Vilano Sunrise" arch built by Bill.

"It was my birthday," Kai said. The Longs frequently host pool parties, inviting their extended family to drink lemon drop martinis made with Meyer lemons from a tree that grows in the front yard, and, sometimes, to work.

By the pool, dozens of brightly

colored fish and sea creatures hang on the walls of the garage, on the eaves of the carport and on the backyard fence, from which a weeping hibiscus drapes with tropical pageantry. Each fish is unique in color and design — for good reason. They were all painted by different people.

To create the look, Bill cut the fish out from wood he found at Home Depot, and the couple sent invitations to friends, family and neighbors for happy hour. Little did they know, they would be involved in a community art project.

Kai supplied the paint, and guests were invited to paint whatever they wanted.

Kai's brother, a retired professor of art from the University of North Florida, painted the one fish the Longs call "professional." The others were created by amateur artists with a flair for the festive and fun.

"A lot of them were just here for the beer," Bill said.

In addition to decorative fish and brightly colored trim, chairs and benches, Kai adds even more drama with her gift for nurturing plants.

Potted flowering foliage lines the edges of the pool, though she threatens to replace the potted flowers with shrubs next year.

"They're beautiful, but they're a lot of work," Kai said.

As another alternative, Kai is experimenting with succulents. In one corner of the yard, she stacked different sized pots on a copper pipe creating an appealing collection of greenery that accents the yard and requires little work.

"I'm trying to get more toward the carefree," Kai said. "You don't have to fertilize or cut them back — just maybe pull a weed out."

Together, the couple has created a cheerful, welcoming environment that perfectly represents their love for the beach, the community and life.

Visiting the Long's home is like walking into your favorite beachside bar.

You know instantly you're in a tropical, seaside village where the proprietors shut down occasionally for a day of deep-sea fishing. But when it's open, the bartender will serve you a mean lemon drop martini.