The two grow together

By SEBREANA DOMINGUE
Acadiana Writer

ST. MARTINVILLE — No one ever promised Tim Hebert a rose garden, so he planted an iris garden instead.

And no one ever said he should use waste water to fertilize his award-winning irises, but he did it anyway and it is “working just great,” he said.

Where does the waste water come from? The source is the 970 alligators that Hebert has housed on his farm in St. Martinville.

Hebert, 43, who retired in May, 1990, after 20 years of teaching in the St. Martin Parish School system, is a biologist, zoologist, horticulturist and waste management expert who enjoys “getting into the wild collecting things.”

“I’ve always enjoyed working with both plants and animals,” said the St. Martinville native and former irises to alligators was an easier transition than one might think, he said.

Every day Hebert travels down a dusty gravel road, a short distance from his house, to feed his alligators.

As if he were handling a puppy or a kitten, he climbs into the stalls and gently picks them up, encouraging visitors to come and pet their smooth bellies. But these pets don’t fetch slippers or play with yarn balls.

The saurians are housed inside a metal building. Even though there are four stalls in the building, the gators are contained in one of the areas, but will be separated according to size as they mature, he said. They’re enclosed within a concrete fence that is six inches thick and 42 inches high, in accordance with Wildlife and Fisheries Department guidelines.

When the door of the building is opened the alligators, which are three to four feet in size, scurry to the opposite end of the stall and pile on top of one another.

“They are pretty shy and timid,” said Hebert, who describes them as “not naturally aggressive animals.”

Despite their size, the alligators appear menacing — more so because there are so many of them in one place — but are not “real active,” said Hebert, who often climbs into a stall to feed the gators or measure their growth.

“Most of the time we find them lying around all day enjoying the warmth or swimming in the middle of the pool,” he said, where there is six inches of water to swim in. “They are nocturnal creatures. They like the dark.”

Warmth is something these animals get a lot of since the temperature in the building and in the water must be kept at 89 degrees. Alligators are naturally cold-blooded creatures and need heat to grow, Hebert said.

Normal chores involved in operating an alligator farm include washing the stalls out every day and feeding the alligators a mixture of fish and dry feed in the evenings, he said.

Approximately 2,000 gallons of water is used in a day to wash the stalls; however, the waste water is collected in a holding tank, pumped into a treatment plant and then is drained into a pond (which can hold 70,000 gallons of water) for future use as fertilizer, Hebert said.

“It is a lot of work — a seven day a week job,” he said.

Hebert is running the farm with help from his 22-year-old son Scott. They are partners in this venture and hope the farm will be a profitable business.

“Alligators are expensive to maintain,” Hebert said.

Approximately $100,000 is needed to pay for the heating bills, electricity bills, water bills and food bills for the animals a year, he said. That cost includes buying eggs, land and building maintenance fees for the first year.

“It’s a living,” Hebert said. “But you won’t get rich quick like some people think.”

Some residents, however, don’t want Hebert to make his living in their neighborhood.

The farm, located between Reams Boulevard and Mimosa Lane, has been the target of two lawsuits that claim it is a health hazard and will cause property devaluation in the area.

The court has ordered Hebert to put airlocks on the doors of the farm to prevent the emission of foul odors but said it has no right to halt his business.

“I am just happy I can keep doing what I’m doing,” he said. “And I will do whatever I can to make the people in this area comfortable.”

With the alligator farm, Hebert hopes to market the meat of the animals to processing plants for sausage and other meat products; sell the skin for shoes, belts, wallets and other items; sell the
Iris

Southwestern Louisiana is where Hebert’s love for irises began. After several years of collecting, growing and researching the flowers, Hebert said he noticed that the irises prospered in Louisiana swamps and marshes.

From here he formulated the idea to use waste water from his alligator farm to enhance the growth of his irises, he said.

As he began work with hybridizing the flowers, Hebert came up with several different plant varieties and has thus had these named as unique creations. As a result, he has sold several of the irises throughout the state and the country.

“We have sold them to Yves St. Laurent’s estate for his gardens and the late actor Yul Brenner,” Hebert said.

In April and May, Hebert’s garden can rival any in the area with row after row of colorful and exotic flowers and plants.

“If you can get them to grow in your yard you feel like you’ve done something,” said Hebert, who has several rare Louisiana flowers, plants and weeds in his collection.

Hebert plans to continue expanding his garden and adding exotic plants and flowers.

“I would like to come up with one that won’t need much water to survive,” he said.

For Hebert’s son Scott, the most exciting part of alligator farming was gathering the eggs, he said. “We went into the marshes and collected eggs from the nests,” Scott said. “We collected about 2,550 eggs.”

These eggs, which took over a month to collect, are being kept by a facility in Iota, Hebert said, and have recently started hatching.

Collecting the eggs from the alligator nests was not always easy. According to Scott, one of the mothers tried to climb in the boat and retrieve her egg.

“Dad had to hold one of the mothers down while I got the eggs,” Scott said. “We have had a lot of the mothers come after us.”

Hebert said he loves what he is doing and hopes to expand both his alligator farm and his iris garden.

“I hope to start breeding them (alligators) myself,” he said.

A college course in plant taxonomy at the University of Southwestern Louisiana is where Hebert’s love for irises began.