



Letter From The Editor

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times! To borrow an introduction from Charles Dickens seems appropriate to describe the last few months at the Garden!



Yellow shrimp plants in a stunning display near the entrance to Tropical Trail

The purchase of new land next door was an exciting and monumental acquisition for the Garden, and a gateway to future growth and additions. However, the record Florida cold weather in late January and early February damaged or killed more plants than the Garden had ever experienced.

The remnants of that cold can still be seen throughout much of the State, not just our young Garden. But it has been designed for years to handle colder than might be expected by planting thick, dense beds, utilizing some plants to shield others, and

minimizing trimming. As ever, this also results in a lush tropical look different from the average garden.

In spite of this design, and a massive effort to protect many of our plants, repeated intense and long lasting cold, down to 21°F, compounded by the strong westerly wind defoliated or killed not only a large number of palms, but also many of the usually resistant tropical perennials, such as bananas, birds of paradise, cordylines, crotons, dracaenas, hibiscus, philodendrons, gingers, scheffleras, and many other understory plants.

With these plants gone, and many palms showing brown leaves, our typically verdant Garden admittedly wasn't so. Yet, many visitors said that it was still beautiful! No doubt because the Green Thumbs and everyone worked incredibly hard to clean up afterwards. It has taken months, and we are still working. Many plants are recovering nicely, and many had to be replaced.

The Garden spent thousands of dollars on this effort, similar to what the botanical gardens up North spend on their annuals every year, but in our case, it was replacing perennials. So, the

tropical splendor is returning! The new foliage combines with the late Spring flowers to whisk a visitor away once again into a canopied tropical rainforest! Come check it out!



The garden is returning to its tropical splendor slowly but surely

Dr. John Rossi

Founder and Resident Biologist



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Latest Happenings at the Garden

A plethora of events have occurred at the Garden in the last few months. The largest was our annual Spring Fling, which was held in late March, and attended by hundreds of excited gardeners looking for that plant they couldn't live without! The parking lot was completely full, and parked cars lined the street. There were many excited folks outside of the Welcome Center waiting to get in for the fun! There were lots of plants, a number of vendors, live music, and great food! Overall, it was a smashing success, with the Garden having a record day!



The Spring Fling was a major success!

On April 18th, Board Member Carol Mini gave an introduction to trees found in our area. It was well attended and many said that they learned a lot!

The First Annual Palm Sale and Show, sponsored by the Central Florida Palm and Cycad Society, was held at the Garden on Saturday, May 2nd. Five vendors from around the state were here with their fantastic collections of palms and cycads. Some of the rarest and most difficult to find species were on display and for sale. Despite the afternoon rain,

the vendors all did very well and expect to make the trip again next year, bringing things typically only found in South Florida!



Thousands of palms were offered for sale at the CFPCS FIRST ANNUAL PALM SHOW AND SALE

Our own Volunteer & Master Gardener Dena Shafer gave a wonderful presentation about orchids on Saturday, May 9th, to many dedicated orchidists! One of the largest local producers of orchids, Joshua Jones from Jacksonville, was on hand and the attendees had an opportunity to purchase a variety, as well as homemade orchid pots and mounts on site.

On May 25th, the Garden celebrated with its wonderful volunteers another **Volunteer Appreciation Barbeque** and potluck party! Doc worked the grill, and the whole Gang got to just relax for a change and enjoy those delicious hot dogs, hamburgers and treats!

On June 20th Connie Gladding, President of the North Florida Daylily Society, educated attendees on "How to Grow

Daylilies, the Perfect Perennial". She and her team brought potted daylilies for sale which many people purchased to bring summer color to their gardens.

On June 21st (Father's Day) Dads got \$2 off admission. Many families came to spend time with their children who participated in games to find various items in the garden.

COMING EVENTS

On the 4th of July, long before the fireworks get started, celebrate our Nation's 250th birthday with a walk in the park! It's **Family Scavenger Day!** Have the kids find things in the Garden, including those red, white, and blue flowers, and win a Prize! See if they can find the dinosaur statues! Hot dogs will be available while supplies last! Wear red, white, and blue to get a dollar off admission!

On July 18th, from 10:30am to 11:30 am, the Garden will host **Botanical Bliss: Move, Melt and Meditate with Danny and Carla from Bova Yoga and Wellness.** Join them for a gentle guided stretch to help you unwind and settle into stillness before melting into a soothing sound bath. Price: Admission Fee + \$15 event fee. To RSVP please call: **904-540-3294.**

On August 22nd - 23rd, the Garden will host the **Annual Southeast Pollinator Census** (free with Garden Admission). Join in the fun and count butterflies and bees visiting flowers for 15 minutes and then move to another flower and

continue the count. Your results will become a part of a research project on pollinators.

In September, the Garden will present another of its great workshops: **How to Make a Succulent Bowl**. Make one and take it home! Date and fee to be announced.

On October 10th, the **ANNUAL FALL PLANT SALE**. Lots of cool plants, Vendors, Food, and Live entertainment!

On October 24th, **Pumpkin Decorating and Kids Story Time**. Bring the little ones and a pumpkin and enjoy a classic Fall activity with the family and others. Cost to be announced and determined by supply costs.

On November 7th, the Garden will celebrate with its **THIRD YEAR ANNIVERSARY BASH!** Lots of Vendors, Live Music, Wild Wonders Animal Show, Speakers, and Great Food! Come celebrate with us, see how our Garden is changing and hear about future plans!

What's New and What's Blooming Now!?

Don't be frightened by the large Tyrannosaurus Rex as you round the bend on Tropical Trail! A new concrete statue appears to be peering right at you as you walk in that direction.

A small but very lifelike Brontosaurus has also been added within Cycad Cove that will catch your eye as well. The purpose of these statues was originally to show the connection between cycads and dinosaurs, since cycads are ancient plants

that were around during the age of dinosaurs, but the kids just love it!



A new Tyrannosaurus Rex statue is thrilling children near the entrance to Cycad Cove

The African area has also had several small statues added to remind us that plants don't grow in a vacuum! They live with and support animals! A small giraffe and hippopotamus have been added along the trail near the African area, where they join an elephant and lion statue. And speaking of cycads, several large African cycads have been added to this area as well.



A small giraffe stature has been added to the African area

Many more fun fact educational signs have been added to the Garden, especially along Fan Palms of the World Trail. These unique signs don't just tell you the name of the plant and where it comes from, but also an interesting fact about

each plant. What animals are associated with them? What do people use them for? What is different about that plant? It brings the plants to life, and teaches you at the same time. Come check it out!



Fun facts and informational signs bring the plants to life!

In addition to the large blue signs, which provide interesting facts about some of the Garden's phenomenal palm collection, Vice President Jane Villa-Lobos has been working extremely hard to replace the small white plastic signs used for identification of many plants with the extremely professional looking metal tags that seem to last forever and look fantastic! Thank you, Jane!!!

The Garden is adding a large number of different kinds of bamboo! All of them are super tropical looking and very cold tolerant. In addition to their natural beauty, it is hoped that by strategically locating them, they will help block the wind and winter cold that sometimes threatens the tropical heart of the Garden. They are also being used to beautify the front fenceline and enhance our tranquility.

New species of ferns have also been added to the Garden. The Kangaroo Foot Fern from

Australia is now found in the Australian area, near several other species. The Button Fern has been added to the New Zealand area, and some Brazilian Dwarf Fern Trees have been added to the peaceful area behind the Palmvilion!



The unique button fern in the New Zealand plant area

The plumbagos (sky blue) and yellow shrimp plants are really popping right now, as are the hibiscus (orange, reds, and yellows). Many other flowers are just getting started as well!

And a brand new "History of the Land" kiosk was built by friend Mark Elliott! It is erected along Hope Oak Crossing, directly across from the Hope Oak, our largest tree in the Garden and estimated to be between 400-500 years old!



A new History of the Land Kiosk has been constructed along Hope Oak Crossing

Volunteer Spotlight: Katie Molinaro



Katie Molinaro, one of our hard-working volunteers

The Spotlight this time around is on Katie Molinaro! Katie joined the Garden crew in June of 2025 and has been coming regularly ever since. Katie works hard wherever she is needed, watering, mulching, repotting, weeding, etc. She loves to learn from all of the gardeners. She graduated from St. Johns County Extension Master Gardener school in June and is now a Master Gardener Intern! Prior to finding gardening, Katie, a devoted wife and mother, had a long career as a Clinical/School Social Worker. And while she loved her job, she understandably found it to be very stressful. But she found peace in a garden, and she gardened in Connecticut for 20 years before moving to Florida. So, if you see a tall blond gal working when you come to visit the Garden, congratulate Katie and thank her for her hard work!

Our Garden is run almost entirely by Volunteers, and we would love to have you join us! The busiest days for Volunteers are Mondays and Fridays, but

other days are available. If you want to become one of the Green Thumbs, like Katie, come over to our Office on any day we're open and talk to us about it. Learn a lot! Make new friends! Help the Garden improve! We are looking for a hard-core cactus lover right now to help us bring our Cactus Garden to the next level, but if you have any special area of interest or skills, our young Garden could use your expertise and enthusiasm!

Animal Sightings

White-tailed deer have been spotted in the Nature Preserve by several visitors and have also shown up on our wildlife trail cameras in the last few months. There are three sub-species of white-tailed deer in Florida. The subspecies in this part of Florida is called the Seminole White-Tailed Deer, and it is recognized by its darker brown coloration and chocolate-colored antlers.

Deer often occur in a wide variety of habitats, and since they frequently browse on leaves as well as grasses, it is no surprise that they would like our Nature Preserve, which is dominated by a variety of hardwood deciduous trees, such as elms, maples, oaks, sweetgum, ashes and other very soft leafed trees. Of course, their favorite food is acorns!

Seeing them is a treat as they are both secretive, and crepuscular, which means that they are primarily active at dawn and dusk. Their natural predators include coyotes, bobcats, and

bears, all of which have been observed in our Nature Preserve. The Florida Panther is also a major predator of deer, but these have not yet been observed here.



A red winged blackbird seen in the garden recently

The birds in the last few months have been phenomenal! A variety of warblers, chickadees, nuthatches, tufted titmice, cardinals, wrens, and so many others have been making a wonderful racket the last few weeks! Even blue jays chimed in with their raucous calls! Grab your binoculars and take a look!

Reptiles and amphibians are making their presence known as well. Late Spring rains have brought on the calls of the bullfrogs during the day and the southern toads and treefrogs at night. Lizards are commonly seen, particularly skinks or anoles as they go about hunting for insects. Garter snakes and black racers may be seen occasionally poking around looking for their prey, toads or lizards, respectively. And box turtles are occasionally seen in the Nature Preserve or in the Garden proper. Sliders, chicken turtles, softshell turtles, mud and musk turtles and snapping

turtles may also be seen happily basking along the edge of the Blue Lagoon.



Many reptiles are found in the garden. Here, a black racer was seen “periscoping” or raising up to look for potential prey or predators

 **Plant of the Month**
By: Libby Leudeke

Hello All,

As we move forward from the devastating winter, we are very excited about the plants that were hardly phased. I am featuring the *Encephalartos hildebrandtii* commonly known as the Safari cycad. It’s native to Kenya and Tanzania and is lovely for its tall stature. It belongs to the family Zamiaceae and is part of the cycad group and survives from sea level to 2000 ft. It can grow to 20 ft tall. The leaves are long and feather-like and can grow to 10 feet long, forming a crown at the top of the trunk. The leaflets are dark and stiff, adapted to handle harsh weather conditions. It is dioecious, meaning it has separate male and female plants. Males produce cylindrical cones that are green or yellow and the female get larger yellow cones. The cycad prefers well drained sandy soils and can tolerate a lot

including coastal environments with salty conditions.

When you come to visit us, make yourself acquainted with this and many more cycads that you will see throughout the Garden. They come from all over the world, and we have a large assortment to enjoy ranging in colors from light to dark greens and blues. Yes, we have Florida native varieties as well. In fact, the only cycad native to the United States. You are probably familiar with coonties which are in the *Zamia* family. The Seminoles used them for medications and certain foods. So, come discover a new favorite at the Garden!



Encephalartos hildebrandtii, a beautiful and hardy Africa Cycad



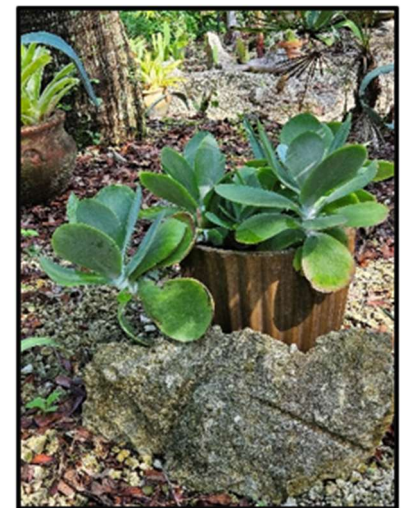
 **Plant Donations**

A large collection of mature plants was donated by a friend of Jane Villa-Lobos, Scott Munro, who had passed away. One Sunday Jane and Volunteer Nicholas Longo brought back a truck and carload of plants, and the following day Doc Rossi, Nicholas, and Sol Looker (a friend of Jane’s) and Volunteer Dena Shafer and Jane transported the rest to the Garden.

There were about 30 ceramic and resin pots, hanging baskets of bromeliads, and a hanging Staghorn Fern. Most of the pots were succulents and were placed in the three Desert Garden areas. Many succulent cuttings and bromeliads were obtained, which will be propagated for plant sales for the Garden, as well. Jane will donate a memorial sign to honor the memory and generosity of her friend, for whom we’re grateful.



Doc and his crew



Donations

Our Garden needs your help to survive and grow! We are a young Garden, nearly entirely run by volunteers, and as such we cannot apply for many grants, so we must operate entirely upon admissions, membership, sales, and donations.

--WE ARE NOT PART OF, NOR FUNDED BY ST. JOHNS COUNTY. --

However, it is our goal to become one of the best botanical gardens in the Southeastern United States! Imagine that! How amazing would it be to protect this Garden and its phenomenal Nature Preserve, and to expand that protected area for years to come!

Look at all the benefits to helping the Garden Grow!

- It would **preserve more green space** in a county that is growing faster than anywhere else in Florida!
- It would be an **economic boon** for this area and attract people from all over the world! It already has!
- It would become an **educational resource** for the area and **research** conducted here could help guide the direction of landscapers in the future to use new and better water conserving pest resistant plants that don't require much fertilizer.
- It would be a force for the **preservation of endangered species** of plants from around the world. Research on such things is already underway at the Garden.

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation today. And either become a Volunteer, Member, renew/auto renew your Membership, or gift someone with one!

The new 5.5 acres we just acquired needs trails, signs and fencing and we can't do it without your help! In addition, we want to build a welcome center with classrooms, a lab, gift shop, and restrooms! **We need your help to make this happen!**

*If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation,
Or to volunteer*

Please call us at: (904) 540-3294

Or email to: info@stjohnsbotanicalgarden.org

Or donate online at: www.stjohnsbotanicalgarden.org/donate

AND REMEMBER, YOU HEARD IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE!

