THE Garden Grapevine

The Official Newsletter of the
St. Johns Botanical Garden and Nature Preserve

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Letter From The Editor

Welcome to all of our new Members, Volunteers, and Donors. The Garden Grapevine is published every two months to keep you up to date on the latest happenings in the Garden. The Newsletter features not only the latest news, but also coming events and spotlights volunteers and their projects. We encourage Board Members, Committee Chairs, Advisors and Volunteers to contribute articles to the newsletter.

Can you believe it? The Garden is about to be one and a half years old! And like a toddler, we still need help, lots of it! While we have made many strides in the right direction, there is still so much that we need in order to grow and improve. The gorgeous, lush, and beautifully adorned Garden, with all of its statues, mini waterfalls, flags, dinosaurs, benches, and structures, is just a humble beginning. Yet, it represents a massive and continuing effort on the part of our Volunteers and Staff. Every week plants need trimming, lawns need mowing, weeds need pulling, and trails need cleaning. We also need more Volunteers to step forward in order to nurture our Garden into its potential at this crucial time!

Dr. John Rossi
Founder and Resident Botanist

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Can you build a kiosk to demonstrate artifacts found on the property? How about building a cover over a bench in a sunny spot? And we really need help building some attractive water features, adding lighting, and so many other things! Even if you can't build, we could use Volunteers in the Gift Shop, for Community Events, and others to work in the Barn Office to greet and guide people as they arrive, or other special niches you think could help! Please join our group of dedicated Volunteers by calling us at: **(904) 540–3294.**

Aside from donating time and talents, the Garden also needs funding!

In order to become a world-class Garden for our residents and visitors, which this area of Florida deserves and needs, it requires significant donations.

These donations will help us acquire more land (while still available!), create an enclosed Welcome Center, bathrooms, an inside Gift Shop, and one day we hope, classrooms. It will help make the Garden more handicapped accessible, add new areas for exhibits, provide new trails in the Nature Preserve, acquire more plants for display AND research, and hire more critical employees, etc.

The Painted Bunting has to be one of North America's most beautiful birds

We are a young Garden, nearly **ALL** Volunteer run, and as such we cannot yet apply for many grants, so we must operate entirely on Admissions, Memberships, and Donations.

We are **NOT** a part of, or funded by, St. Johns County.

JOIN US!! Help us by renewing your membership, donating if you can, or volunteering.

The Garden needs you! – **Dr. John Rossi**, Founder and Resident Biologist

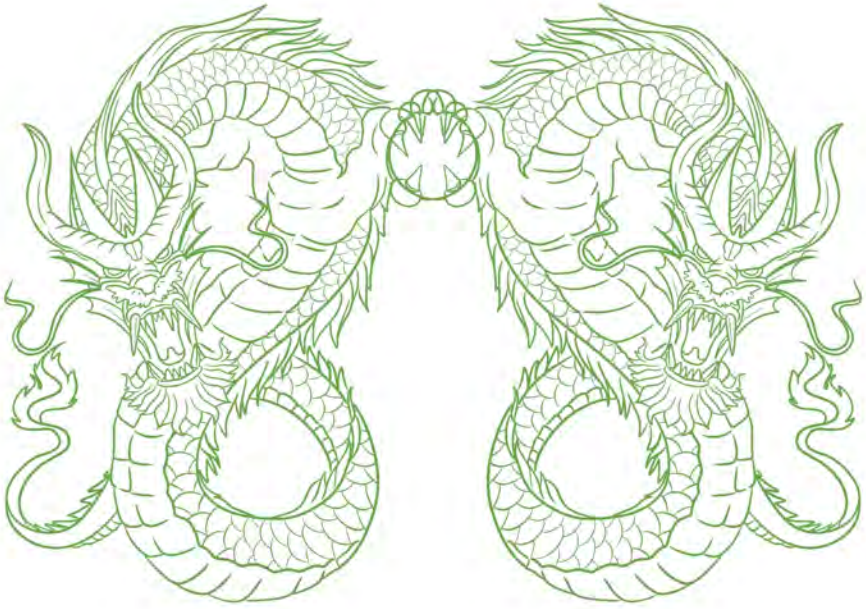
Latest Happenings

The visits to the Garden have increased dramatically in the last two months! People from all around the country, and the world, have strolled around our young botanical treasure-land , and so many appear to be very impressed! Even those who visited the Garden just last year admitted that they were "stunned by the progress" they had seen and stated that we must "stay very busy!" People from Maine to Miami, and west to Alaska, and southwest to San Diego, have walked through our tropical paradise in the last two months, immersed in its lush variety of colors, shapes and sizes of plants. And, they have strolled along our cool, rapidly flowing creek, under the rich, thick canopy of ash, elm, oak, maple, tupelo, and cypress trees in our Nature Preserve. Most of them apparently love it, because at the time of this writing, the SJBGNP has a 4.6 rating on YELP!

One tour group after another visited the Garden in the last two months! The Garden WELCOMES tour groups, and gives special rates. Garden Clubs from all over Northern Florida, as well as Photography Clubs, have visited us. In addition, Seniors from area communities have scheduled trips here as well. A large group from Coquina Crossing visited in early March and many stayed for a nice relaxing lunch afterwards. The Garden would like to thank our Education Director Dr. Susan Brenner for organizing that event!

Indeed, the Green Thumbs have been extremely busy, and botanical surprises constantly appear around the Garden. Newly potted plants, often donated by the Thumbs from their own gardens, get a new life as they are planted along a trail or in a pretty pot in a great spot! Members of the hard-working volunteer group are frequently seen travelling about the Garden on one of our two overworked golf carts with loads of trimmed leaves for disposal or newly received plants for a project they are working on. But while they work incredibly hard, they also take a little time off around midday. We love to see them relaxing together at lunch on Friday or Monday afternoons, laughing as they discuss their trials and tribulations tackling Garden and Nature Preserve tasks! They also use this time to plan future projects and get ready for upcoming events. AND THANK GOODNESS FOR THEM BECAUSE THE GARDEN COULD NOT EXIST WITHOUT THEM! Do you have what it takes to be a Green Thumb?

Dragons be here! Two awesome new dragon statues have been placed in front of the Palmvilion. In addition, a very regal appearing cobra statue, with a flared hood, has also been placed there. The Palmvilion is really beginning to take on the appearance of a Far Pacific tropical island retreat! And after you have relaxed there, you can pass through it to visit our Mexican Grotto, filled with cacti and other desert plants. Right now, the gorgeous powderpuff trees overhanging the area are in full bloom!



Latest Happenings continued from page 2

Speaking of blooms, the Spring flowers have been exploding in the Garden! The three stands of native azaleas Rhododendron canescens, put on a real show in mid-March! And the gorgeous, bright yellow Carolina Jasmine were seen everywhere, and their perfume-like scent made the entire Garden smell fantastic. In addition, hundreds of little Florida Violets are blooming in the Nature Preserve. They are a beautiful pinkish-purple color, come check them out. Plants are constantly blooming in the Garden, and every month is different!

The Desert Plant Berm and two small cactus display cases along Sunshine Trail are nearing completion, as plants and rocks are continually being added. Many of the dry loving plants are in bloom right now, and the next issue of The Garden Grapevine will feature a discussion about some of these plants and the importance of xeriscaping in Florida! Did you know that the average Floridian uses TWO-THIRDS of the water they use to maintain their lawn?! This is NOT sustainable, and we need to learn what drought tolerant plants will work well in Northern Florida! SJBGNP is committed to working on this important issue!

The new Pergola is finally being finished, as a beautiful paver floor, a fountain, furniture, and decorations are being added to the attractive cedar structure. Like the Palmvilion, it has a very inviting, tropical look, and will be another great place to "hang out" in the Garden! The Garden thanks Brandon Terrell for his skill and artistry in creating the beautiful new floor!

Several members have decided to call it "Paradise Pergola" because of its unique "Keysie" look. Indeed, the aqua-blue furniture adds an explosion of color to the sand-colored paver floor!

Latest Happenings continued from page 3

Across the Garden, Silver Hill is finally getting the attention it deserves! A rocker bench, placed between two large Coconut Palms, is the centerpiece of the "Hill!" In addition to being one of the highest places in the Garden, Silver Hill is a unique learning spot in the Garden. Now that new plants have been added, and the trail over it outlined with limestone and coquina rocks, it clearly demonstrates something called "Convergent Evolution." This is where plants, or for that matter, animals begin to look like each other when placed in the same environment, even if they are not related to each other!

The Coconut Palms provide some needed shade on top of the usually sunny Silver Hill

Silver Hill is a sunny, hot, dry spot in the Garden that receives early morning sun and remains sunny much of the day. Plants that come from this kind of environment often have certain characteristic: Firstly, their color is often light green, tending towards bluish or silver. Secondly, they often form rosettes, or a spherical pattern in order to conserve water. In the New World, which is North and South America, this includes Agaves, Bromeliads (some come from hot and dry places), Cacti, and Yuccas. In the Old World (Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia), that includes Aloes (that look like Agaves), Dracenas (that look like Yuccas), Euphorbias (that often look like a cactus), and Palms from both places that often have thick, silvery leaves. Check it out to see these patterns!

The Caroline Jasmine is blooming now in the garden and smells amazing

Events at the Garden (Past and Upcoming)

The Spring Fling and Plant Sale was a smashing success! The Garden was packed, with parking backed up into the street and standing room only at the presentations!
(EDITOR'S NOTE: We continue to work on optimizing parking, seating, hours, etc. according to evolving needs for YOUR Garden!)

Upcoming events will include a repeat visit by representatives of the **North Florida Land Trust** on April 4th, and again in late May, as they try to help us expand the Garden. This could make a huge difference for the Garden, and we are very hopeful!

At 1 PM, the Garden Founder, Dr. John Rossi, talked about how the Garden began. He talked about how he found the property 22 years ago. It was covered with trash, and old cars and trucks, and vines so thick he had to crawl on his hands and knees with a machete at times! But he immediately saw the natural beauty of the property and fell in love with it as he sat down on the bank of the creek, where large cypress roots had formed a natural mini waterfall that is at the center of the Garden today! He signed to buy the property within 15 minutes of emerging from the forest. He said that he was bloody, and muddy, but very happy to offer the previous owners their asking price for the land. They didn't know how much land it was, and it was a mess, but he still wanted it! His only written provisions for the sale of the property at their asking price were that a) They had to clean it! And b) that it had to be at least 10 acres! Well, they did, and it was, and the rest is history!

On Saturday, May 17th, at 10:30, **Master Gardener Elaine Prisby will be teaching a class on "Becoming a Better Gardener."** Elaine is a phenomenal gardener, and she will save you tons of plants and money! Be there for an enjoyable and tremendous learning experience, as mentioned above.

Then the ever-popular **Wild Wonders** took over with their Award-Winning Animal Program! The crowd erupted into laughter repeatedly, as Mike Rossi entertained and educated us at the same time as he brought out one neat animal after another. Mike really gets the crowd involved! And he will be back at the Garden as a regular show. so keep your eyes open for announcements that we send out via email!

Mike Rossi of Wild Wonders always entertains the crowd

Spotlight on a Volunteer

Our very own Elaine Prisby, Master Gardener, began the day with her phenomenal talk on, “Tips to Help Make You a Better Gardener!” Her talk was packed, and you could have heard a pin drop as the crowd listened intently to her words of wisdom about gardening tools, tips, and tricks that she has learned from years of experience and training. The talk was simply awesome! The Garden is blessed to have her as a regular Volunteer!

And it’s that time of year! An Easter Egg Hunt will take place on Easter Sunday, April 20th! Have the kids at the Garden by 12:30! The hunt starts at 1:00!

Plant of the Month

by Libby Luedeke

Yellow Bulbine! Remember this because if you have that spot in your yard that is full sun all day, this plant is for you. It is a succulent that blooms from mid-spring to fall, is drought tolerant, and not fussy about its soil, as long as it drains well, which makes care very simple. And get this, it can take cold temperatures down to 20 degrees F. Are you in love yet? Deadheading is encouraged for more blooming, but don't worry if you don't have time for that, because it's still going to have plenty of blooms. It doesn't mind being in a pot either. Come see it in the sunniest spots we have in the Garden, and enjoy the companion plants near it as well. See you there!

The plant of the month, the Yellow Bulbine, is blooming right now at the Garden!

Animal Sightings

The animal sightings this past few months have been astounding! So many mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians have been spotted in the Garden and Nature Preserve that it will be hard to mention them all in the limited space of the newletter!

Spring has sprung and animal sightings are on the rise! Both migrating and resident birds have become more active and there has been a flurry of sightings in the Garden and Nature Preserve. One of the most beautiful birds in the state, the Painted Bunting, has been seen regularly during the last two months, that we hope are a breeding pair! The male has a striking blue head, green wings, an orange chest, and a yellow patch on the back, while the female is uniformly dusky green, and both are graceful yet secretive birds. Meanwhile, the Northern Parula Warblers are abuzz, literally, as they flit from tree to tree, producing their characteristic buzzing call. Other warblers, including American Redstarts, Black and White, Yellow Rumped, Pine, and others, have been spotted, as well. Chipping sparrows are passing through this month, and have been seen in great numbers. Robins have also been spotted steadily as they gradually migrate through on their way North. A pair of raucous Northern Crows raided one of our bird feeders for a while, chasing off the other birds until they had their fill. A variety of Herons have visited the Blue Lagoon as well during this time.

In addition, all three resident members of the family Mimidae have been very active in the Garden. These include the Brown Thrasher, the Mockingbird, and perhaps the most common bird in the Garden, the Catbird! Birds of prey have been quite common in the Garden during this time. A Broad Winged Hawk was observed for the first time here in 20 years! Beautiful Cardinals are common in the Garden all year but are especially active right now. They are often joined by cheerful Tufted Titmice and Black Capped Chickadees as they move about. The strongest and most wonderful singer in our Garden is the ever-present Carolina Wren! Had Energizer Batteries© used a bird instead of a bunny, this probably would have been their symbol! Just watching them move about and hearing their powerful and beautiful song makes you wonder where all of their energy comes from! And multiple Bald Eagles have been seen flying over the Garden and Preserve, always a delight! A multitude of other bird species may be seen in our Nature Preserve. In fact, some of you may not be aware that our Garden and Preserve has been designated as a Birding Hot Spot by the Audubon Society! Come check it out!

Animal Sightings ...continuedt

A large Snapping Turtle was observed walking across the trail just south of the New Zealand Palms display. It looked like a female searching for a place to lay her eggs. The Garden and Nature Preserve is home to many species of turtles, and we suspect that Spotted Turtles may be found here one day!

Amphibians in the Garden have become more active as the temperatures rise, as well. The plaintive “Jug of Rum” call of the large Bullfrogs has returned to the shore of the Blue Lagoon, signaling that the summer is not too far away! Meanwhile, the alien sounding chatter of Southern Leopard Frogs fills the night and early morning this time of the year. Toads have begun to appear in the early evening, hunting for insects, but wary of the Garter Snakes that are hunting them! Young River Frogs have been seen down near our lovely creek, and if you get close to the edge, you will see them jump in!

A Deer Mouse, or White Footed Mouse, Peromyscus sp. was observed near the Entrance Building. These are the common mammals in North American. And the one we saw was apparently struck by a venomous snake because it had hemorrhaged internally. It has escaped the snake, but not its venom. Nature is beautiful, but also an important reminder of the cycles of life.

Butterflies, moths, and other important pollinators like bees & wasps are everywhere in the Garden right now! A flurry of color often gives them away! It was great to see our first Pipevine Swallowtail this year! Other species, which we can’t always immediately identify, abound.

If you are a butterfly or insect person, we need your help! We are in the process of designing a Butterfly Garden right now, but we still need help identifying things! ***If you are a butterfly expert, won’t you please consider becoming our Butterfly Advisor?***

The Gift shop continues to add new items for sale, as our Gift Shop Manager, Susan Wilson, constantly shops for and brings in new things. Decorative pots, watering bulbs, small tools, honey, artwork, and natural soaps are just some of the items that have been very popular. **Sue has a lot of experience in this area, and we are blessed to have her donate her time and energy to the Garden!**

Donations

Our Garden and Nature Preserve needs your help to survive and grow! We absolutely can't do it without you! It is our goal to become one of the best botanical gardens in the Southeastern United States. Imagine that! How amazing it would be to preserve this Garden and its phenomenal Nature Preserve, and to expand it for generations to come, as so many have around the country! Look at all the potential benefits to helping the Garden:

1. **It would help to preserve more green space in a county that is growing faster than anywhere else in Florida!**
2. **It would be an economic boon for the more rural area of the county, and attract people from all over the world. It already has!**
3. **The Garden could become a fantastic educational resource for this area, and research conducted here could help guide the direction of home gardeners and landscapers in the future, to use new and better water conserving and pest resistant plants, as well as those that need less fertilizer or cold protection.**
4. **It would become a force for preservation of endangered species of plants, both native and those from around the world! Research on such things is already underway at the Garden!**

But, as mentioned above, our Garden can't grow without your help! Please make a tax-deductible donation today. And either become a member, renew your membership, or gift someone with one! We need better trails, more benches, better bathrooms, a bridge, a new welcome center and classrooms, a large conservatory, and more staff. We need your help to make this happen! If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation, 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!