

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, donors, and those who have requested newsletters from us! The Garden Grapevine is published quarterly to keep you up to date on the latest happenings at the Garden. The newsletter features not only the latest news, but also coming events, and it spotlights volunteers and their projects. We encourage Board Members, Committee Chairs, Advisors and Volunteers to contribute articles to the newsletter.

The St. Johns Botanical Garden is now two years old and is really beginning to gain a reputation as a beautiful place! Visitors are often heard exclaiming, "Wow!" as they view some beautiful flower or plant. The time visitors spend here has also been steadily climbing as there are many more plants on display. Fun Fact and informational signs are popping up everywhere, helping people to better understand the plants they are viewing. New beds are appearing, and old ones are being reworked. And the plants are growing and looking ever more beautiful.



The African Bush Hydrangea is beginning to put on quite a show at the Garden!

Meanwhile negotiations are continuing as we try to add more land and expand the Garden. Also, we are making more connections with colleges and universities regarding doing research here. Several Engagement Proposals have occurred and now people are starting to plan Weddings here! Our Gift Shop and Nursery continue to add new and exciting things for gardeners. Our baby botanical Garden is growing.

Dr. John Rossi
Founder and Resident Botanist



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But while we have made great strides, and are constantly working to improve things, there are so many things that still need to happen, in order for our Garden to become the world class botanical garden that this part of Florida deserves. We want to create that great Welcome Center that has Classrooms, a Lab, a Gift Shop, Restrooms and a Lounge.

We need more and better parking areas. And yes, we need more and better exhibits, and trails and benches and a play area for the children. There are so many plans that we have to make this a destination location, right here in St. Johns County. But to do so, we need donations, and some sizeable ones if possible. ***So far, we are too young to have received grants or any funding from the County, State or national benefactor/agencies.*** Everything we have achieved has been due to our admissions, memberships and donations. In short, we need your help.

In this season of giving, won't you please consider giving a gift or donation to your Garden? Or renew your membership. Or give the gift of membership to someone else!

In this time of rapid development in Northern Florida, give a gift that will make a difference in peoples' lives, the gift of a wonderful, tropical, green space right in their backyard!

It will be a place where people can go to decompress, to get back to nature, and learn as well. Children that are never exposed to nature grow up to be adults that never appreciate nature. Don't let that happen. Help us to preserve and expand this great place for them too.

And don't forget, we need Volunteers as well. We need gardeners, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, lawyers, artists, handymen and handywomen. Please join us. Make friends and help build a living legacy.

Thank You! --John Rossi, President, SJBGNP

Animal Sightings

One of the most spectacular birds in the United States was spotted in the Garden again in early December, the Painted Bunting! With a blue head, lime green back and orange belly, it is hard to miss! Other birds have also been returning to the Garden, as they find it to be a great winter haven when they escape from the brutal cold and shorter days seen farther north.

Several more beautiful and rarely seen secretive snakes were found in the Garden in the last several months. A Pine Woods Snake, also known as the Yellow Lipped Snake *Rhadinea flavigata*, was found under a flowerpot near the lounge area of the entrance building. The Pine Woods Snake is a small attractively colored snake that is usually not seen because it is nocturnal and semi-fossorial (burrowing). The body is a rich orangish brown color with a light brown head. The belly is often yellowish white, and that color extends to the chin of the snake and the lips, which is why it is sometimes called the Yellow Lipped Snake. This snake is actually venomous but considered harmless because it only bites small frogs.

The other snake seen recently in the Garden was a Florida Brown Snake *Storeria victa*. As you might expect from the name, this small secretive snake is basically a cocoa-brown colored snake with a double row of small dark brown spots outlining a lighter colored stripe along the back. It also has a broad light-colored patch at the back of the head. These snakes eat mostly earthworms and slugs, although they have been known to consume small frogs, lizards and insects. Their closest relative, the Red Bellied Snake, has also been found in the Garden. Interestingly, these snakes are known to curl their lips when they are disturbed, as if they were growling, and if you look closely at the picture of the brown snake, you will see that it has its mouth open!

Of note, Eastern Glass Lizards were spotted near Silver Palm Way in late October. These intricately marked legless lizards are often mistaken for snakes, but they are harmless insect eaters that will help your garden!

Quite a few amphibians have also been seen in the Garden lately as well. Southern toads, Oak toads, and Greenhouse frogs have all been observed during the last month as the temperatures have cooled down. The Southern toads are the ones that most people are familiar with, as they are common and active diurnally.

The Oak toads, however, are much smaller and are recognized by a white stripe down the center of their back. The Greenhouse frog is an introduced species, but it is widely distributed in Florida, because it travels in flowerpots from one place to another and they lay their eggs on land (or in flowerpots) rather than in water. People commonly mistake their cheerful whistling chirp for an insect call because they frequently sing at dusk or after dark.

Latest Happenings at the Garden

The weather is now officially beautiful, and many plants are in bloom! Now is one of the best times to visit! One of the grandest plants that flower in bloom at the Garden is the African Bush Hydrangea (aka Tropical Hydrangea or Pink Ball Tree), *Dombeya wallichii*, at the South Entrance to



The Bat Flower has been extremely popular with visitors! It is one of the many flowering plants right now.

the left of the Pavilion, now exploding with a gorgeous display of pink flowers. Called Florida's answer to hydrangeas, it is a large shrub or small tree with rounded flower clusters up to six inches wide! They usually start blooming in December and are finished blooming by January, so come check it out now!

Other flowers are putting on a spectacular display as well. Some of the aloes in the Cactus area are bursting with their brilliant orange spikes! And the long-awaited Chinese Hat Plants are finally blooming near Paradise Pergola, the first pergola you see to your right as you enter the Garden. And don't forget that the "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" Plants are also blooming right now. There is one blooming in the entrance drive that is putting on quite a show with its winter purple, pink and white flowers!

Meanwhile a flurry of activity is occurring at the Garden! **New statues**, from the whimsical white rabbit from Alice in Wonderland checking his stopwatch, to the incredibly cute meercat peering from his mound opening have made their way to various places. A raccoon munching on an apple is seen at the edge of one bed, and a guardian King Cobra statue joined another in the Asian area.



A cute Meercat peers from its burrow near the African area. The Garden is constantly adding new statues.

The **Green Thumbs** have been planting, potting, and relocating plants in many areas of the Garden. This results in healthier, more beautiful, and more likely to bloom plants later. Some are pulled and go to Rehab, where they have a chance to recover before they are planted again. They have also been removing a mountain of trimmings from certain areas of the Garden. Clearing out some of these areas not only beautifies the Garden and improves air circulation around the plants in the Garden as well.

But they are careful not to remove too much in the tropical areas, however, as the dense vegetation provides microclimate protection for all of the plants in the beds when cold snaps come in the Winter. In these areas, major trimming occurs in the springtime, **after** the danger of frost is over. They are also mulching the beds, which has so many benefits for the plants there. It helps to hold more water in the soil, protects the base of the plants from cold, and lastly, helps to control weeds!



A Chinese Hat Plant explodes with flowers near the Paradise Pergola in the courtyard area.

Our Second Anniversary Bash was held on Saturday, November 1st and was well attended. The day started off with a presentation by well-known Fertilizer Expert, Keith Santner, who gave us an overwhelming amount of information and a deeper understanding for the value of certain nutrients in plant fertilizers. He showed many pictures of what certain deficiencies look like and pointed out the specific needs of certain plants.

Shortly afterwards Mike Rossi of Wild Wonders thrilled the youngsters with one of his famous animal shows! After lunch, the crowd was entertained by Skin & Bonz, the popular old time string band band! Lots of Craft Vendors and a Food Truck were present all day as well.

The Garden hosted the New Smyrna Beach Garden Club in mid-November and were led on a tour by Dr. Rossi. They asked some great questions and learned a lot more about palms than they ever dreamed! Quite a few signed up as members afterwards, and many of them bought souvenirs in the Gift Shop! It was a fun group, and they are always welcome back!

Dr. Rossi travelled to the **Fairchild Botanical Garden in Miami** in November for the South Florida Palm Society's Show and Sale, where he made some connections and purchased several new palm species for the Garden. Some of these plants are already appearing in the Garden in a new display dedicated to one particular genus, the *Chamaedorea*, which means the Ground Gift Palms!

They were called that because they are mostly small palms that produce edible fruit that is easy to reach. We already had quite a few of these palms on display along the Tropical Trail, but most of them were not doing well there due to the lack of protection from the wind and cold, so many of the more sensitive ones were moved, and new species were added to create an entire new exhibit behind the Palmvilion. There is a short trail there with numerous species of the genus on both sides, and they are all labelled. It is one of the nicest collections of this particular group anywhere that is open to the public! Oh, by the way, at least two of these species are very cold tolerant and great for adding a tropical touch to small areas in your own backyard if you live in **Zone 9 or 8b**. A few other rare and beautiful palms may also be seen in that area as well!



The state herpetologist Kevin Enge and former state herpetologist Paul Moler visited the Garden last month because of our rich reptile and amphibian populations.

And after searching for nearly ten years, the Garden has acquired one of the most beautiful palms in the world, *Syagrus botryophora*, or a Pati Queen Palm. These palms come from Northeastern Brazil, and are known for their gracefully recurving leaves, thin trunks, and extremely rapid growth. This species is believed to be at risk for extinction over much of its range due to habitat destruction for agriculture.

The young trees require some protection from wind, which is provided by overhead canopy in their native habitat. Fortunately, our Garden has lots of canopy cover, thanks to our large oaks! Hence, our young VIP (Very Important Palm!), should feel right at home. We are hoping to have it on display very soon.

Another palm that has been recently acquired is the Ballerina Palm, *Dypsis plumosa*, so called because the crown shaft of the palm is pinkish in color and the fine leaves seem to dance in the wind! Right now, our new baby is located near the north end of the Island Palm collection, guarded by two newly added Queen palms and some small shrubs to protect her until she gets a little larger! Come check out our new additions soon!



Arizona! No. Fiery aloes blooming in one of the desert areas of the SJBGNP!

The Garden continues its outreach programs, and Dr. Rossi presented a talk to the Democratic Environmental Caucus of St. Augustine in late October. A number of the group have visited the Garden since, and they have scheduled an upcoming holiday party here!

Meanwhile, Outreach Coordinator Ephraim Badea has been communicating with researchers at several educational institutions regarding conducting research here at the Garden. We may be trying to do some cell culture propagation of some rare orchids and palms here very soon!

Vice President and Executive Director of the Garden, Jane Villa-Lobos, and Dr. Rossi attended the District VI Fall meeting of the **Florida Federation of Garden Clubs** hosted by **The Garden Club at Palm Coast** in November. It was enjoyable to meet so many great people who love gardening and hear about all the wonderful things that they are doing for their communities. The SJBGNP was honored to become an affiliate member of such a special organization.



Mike Rossi of Wild Wonders captures the attention of the crowd with his famous animal show at our second anniversary bash.



Keith Santner, authority on plant fertilizing, gave a phenomenal talk to open the festivities at our second anniversary bash!



In Other News...

Invasive weed control in our Nature Preserve is of great concern to our Board of Directors, and a second **Invasive Weed Control Day** was held on Saturday, November 29th. Organized by Garden Outreach Coordinator Ephraim Badea and Nature Preserve Docent Dana Wiest, with Biochemist turned Botanist Nick Rust, the group attacked the invasive weeds in the Nature Preserve for the second time this year! Three of the most invasive species were targeted, including the *Mexican petunia Ruellia* sp., the Air Potato Plant *Dioscorea bulbifera*, and the Caesar Weed *Urena lobata*. But two small Chinese Fan Palms *Livistona chinensis* were also removed! Chinese Fan Palms are on the short list of palm species that are considered potentially invasive by the State of Florida, and it is common for them to show up in areas near botanical gardens..

Behind The Scenes...

Adam Halstead, our Treasurer and IT expert has been solving one problem after another, typical of technology! One of the biggest problems we have had lately has been the phone service. But with a new system in place, we hope we are finally resolving that issue.

And Dr. Rossi is continuing to negotiate to acquire land to expand the Garden. He says he is making progress, but as is common it is a slow process.



A Southern Toad. A common bug controlling resident of our Garden. And no, they won't give you warts!!



A Pine Woods Snake was recently found in the Garden. They are rarely seen but may be common in some areas. Harmless.



A Florida Brown Snake growling at the Garden. This is a bluff. They are harmless unless you are an earthworm!



The Eastern Glass Lizard may be mistaken for a snake but unlike snakes, it has eyelids and ear holes.

Spotlight on a Volunteer

One of the unsung heroes (or heroines) of the Garden (and there are many) is Cheryl Smith. The other volunteers refer to her as the Mulching Queen! Like lightning, she weeds and mulches beds in the Garden wherever it is needed. We have discussed the benefits of mulching above. She also helps the other volunteers with many other projects, such as vine control and planting beds. **Thank you, Cheryl!**

Join Cheryl and the other volunteers at the Garden on Mondays or Fridays. Make friends, get some exercise, and help our baby Garden grow!



*Cheryl Smith, the volunteer of the month!
The other volunteers call her the Mulch Queen!*

Coming Events

Due to the rapidly changing and increasing number of events, please check our website frequently or look for emails announcing such events.

January 10th, 2026: Nature Preserve and Bromeliad Tours

February 7th, 2026: All About Roses

February 14th, 2026: Lovers' Day at the Garden

Date To Be Announced: Palm Show and Sale



One of our new statues in the African area!



The beautiful Painted Bunting is one of the many birds seen in the Garden.

Plant of the Month by Libby Luedeke



I am going to introduce you to yet another cycad, that primitive tropical group that I introduced you to in the last issue of the Grapevine. This time I want to introduce the Bushman's River Blue Cycad *Encephalartos trispinosus*, another amazing plant from South Africa. It has pinnate (feather shaped) leaves that form a crown at the top of the stem, ranging in color from greenish gray to blue, which make it very attractive. The leaves are fairly long, reaching a length of up to four and a half feet. These leaves are composed of numerous pairs of obovate, leathery, hairy leaflets. This species is dioecious, meaning that there are separate male and female plants. Male specimens bear one or two erect sub-cylindrical cones measuring 12 to 13 inches in length and about 3 inches wide, ranging in color from yellow to green, while female specimens have solitary cylindrical ovoid (egg shaped) cones.

This is a slower growing species that will live a long time. It does well in containers or in rock formations. This species is not tall growing, and suckers freely to form large attractive, gray leaved clumps. It is very hardy, withstands frost and does not require a great deal of water.

Cycads require regular feeding; a thick layer of well matured compost spread around the plant in Autumn improves the condition of the soil and benefits the plants. An annual application of a well-balanced mixture of fertilizer applied in Spring is also essential to maintain healthy cycads. A balanced inorganic fertilizer mixed with bonemeal and an organic fertilizer is ideal.

The main pests you may encounter when growing cycads are scale, mealybugs and snout beetles. The scale and mealy bugs occur on the underside of the leaves and can be eliminated by using a systemic insecticide. The snout beetles, which destroy the seeds, are nocturnal and can be eliminated by applying contact insecticide.

New leaves, as they emerge, can also be damaged by tiny mites. To prevent this damage, spray the newly emerging leaves with a contact insecticide every 2 weeks. Regular spraying while new leaves are emerging will eventually eliminate the mite.

This species and all of the cycads are amazing additions to your garden. Come see this species on the berm along Sunshine Trail at the SJBGNP and see many other species of cycads around the Garden as well.

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, memberships, 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 potential benefits to helping the Garden grow:

1. It would 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 area and attract people from all over the world, by becoming a destination attraction. It already has!
3. The Garden is becoming a fantastic educational resource for this area, and research conducted here could help guide the direction of landscapers and private homeowners in their selection of water conserving and pest resistant plants, thereby saving millions of gallons of water! Furthermore, by selecting plants that don't require much fertilization, we would also be helping to maintain water quality for generations!
4. We 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 your Garden!

But, as mentioned above, our Garden can't grow without your help!

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

We need better trails, more benches, improved bathrooms, a bridge, a new Welcome Center and Outreach classrooms, a Conservatory, more educational signage, 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!