THE Garden Grapevine

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

Vol. 3 No. 2

April 2026

Letter From The Editor

Welcome to all our new Members, Volunteers, and Donors. The Garden Grapevine is published quarterly to keep you up to date on the latest happenings at the Garden.

WOW! Our Garden, Your Garden, has just acquired 5.5 new acres of land adjacent to our current property! The property runs from County Road 13 South to the Moccasin Branch of Deep Creek, which effectively doubles the size of the Garden on this side of the creek! A large portion will remain preserved, but ultimately, we plan to build a needed welcome center with a classroom/meeting room, restrooms, a lab, and a gift shop!

How can you help us grow? Firstly, please renew your membership, if you haven't done so! Secondly, consider making a tax-deductible donation or becoming a corporate sponsor!

This really is a wonderful and exciting new addition to the Garden.

Dr. John Rossi

Founder and Resident Biologist

St. Johns Botanical Garden & nature preserve

8310 County Road 13 South
Hastings, FL 32145
(904) 540-3294
stjohnsbotanicalgarden.org

Hibiscus brighten the understory

Latest Happenings at the Garden

YOUR GARDEN IS GROWING! YES, WE HAVE JUST PURCHASED THE 5.5 ACRES TO OUR EAST!

And so is the excitement growing about the possibilities for this new addition! A bigger Nature Preserve! A larger area for plant displays! New Hiking Trails! Perhaps A New Welcome Center with a classroom/meeting room, restrooms, lab, and a gift shop!

A Ceremony was held at the Garden on March 9th, where "JJ" Jessie Johnson, owner of the land, signed the documents to sell the beautiful property to the Garden!

On hand were many of the **Green Thumbs** who applauded as the final documents were signed by Garden President John Rossi and Treasurer Adam Halstead and witnessed by Nature Preserve Docent Dana Wiest. Adam is a Notary, and his hard work behind the scenes was instrumental to closing on the land.

Signing for the new land purchase J.J. Johnson (left), Adam Halstead (center) and John Rossi (right)

After the signing, JJ shared the family history of the land, and how it had been in her family for over 100 years! She told how her Grandfather walked from South Carolina and settled here. She said that he built a sawmill on the property and that their family lived like the "Waltons," referring to the popular television program! **We are fortunate to have been entrusted with this land. Thanks, JJ for believing in the Garden's vision!!!**

The property itself is a gorgeous, heavily wooded piece of land that is adjacent to the Garden and runs from County Road 13 South to Deep Creek

We are planning a scouting day, when the Green Thumbs and other interested parties may help us explore the unexplored property. We also would like to schedule a fundraiser for the new area. Our immediate needs will be for a fence, gates, and new signs, as well as money to build new trails, all of which are expected to cost about $20,000.00.

Rapidly expanding St. Johns County and Northern Florida deserve a World Class Botanical Garden, and the only way we can get there is with your help! The Garden needs donations right away to develop the infrastructure. See our donation page at the end of this newsletter.

SEVERE COLD WEATHER DAMAGED MANY GARDEN PLANTS!

The extreme cold weather this year drastically affected many of the Garden's beautiful tropical plants. Our Garden was not alone in this damage, as severe damage may be seen over much of our beautiful state! ***Garden volunteers worked for days to protect many plants***, but temperatures in the low twenties for two successive nights, and high twenties for two more, really caused quite a bit of damage. Even the ground covers, including hibiscus, scheffleras, crotons, cordylines, firebushes and others, normally untouched in our average winters, were damaged. And we lost many of our palms as well. On the bright side, far more survived than were lost thanks to strategic and defensive planting, an important part of the Garden's research! Many were damaged but appear to be recovering, as seen by new green leaves already arising from them!

The Green Thumbs are engaged in a massive clean-up campaign due to the freeze. Even during a regular year, spring cleaning is the norm. But this year, we really needed major trimming and planting. If you like gardening and want to make great friends, come on down to the Garden and sign up as a Green Thumb! Mondays and Fridays are the days when they are busiest!

In other news, the Gardens' Officers and Volunteers have been extremely busy!

VP and Chief Botanist Jane Villa-Lobos has been organizing and attending many events both in and outside of the Garden. In addition, she has purchased many of the plants needed for those events. She has also been organizing the Nursery and labelling plants there. She has also been adding some new and very professional looking identification tags to some of the smaller plants in the Garden.

Treasurer Adam Halstead continues to amaze everyone with his hard work and skill, as he replaced the computer in the office and solves numerous other IT issues. Just keeping up with all the filings, insurance, permits, and other responsibilities is a daunting task, which he handles incredibly well!

Board Member Libby Luedeke has stepped back temporarily into the role of acting Secretary while we search for a volunteer who can fill that seat on a permanent basis.

Dr. Rossi has been travelling to south Florida to acquire new plants for the Garden and is excited to add several new species of palms that he never thought he would find.

Included in his recent treasure hunt were several Bamboo palms *Chamaedorea* species,

which come from an altitude of 7,000 feet in the mountains of Central and South America. He is hoping that these high-altitude plants will be able to handle some cold! In addition, he found some of the rarely seen all Green Bismarck Palms! And he was especially excited to bring back three specimens of *Livistona boninensis*, a rare cold hardy palm found on Japan's Bonin Island! And there were many other unusual species that will be added to the Garden collection and also were purchased for sale in our Nursery.

Speaking of things for sale, Gift Shop Manager Sue Wilson has been adding tons of new plants and merchandise to our Gift Shop! If you like plants, gardening, or nature in general, you need to check it out! Sue knows her stuff and it shows!

Ephraim Badea, the Garden's Educational Outreach Coordinator, is planning to establish or re-establish a population of native orchids back into our Nature Preserve. We are all very excited about the opportunity to restore and enrich our Preserve.

Numerous talks and tours were given in the last several months by Garden Officers and Volunteers. In February, our Volunteer Gardener, Elaine Prisby gave a wonderful talk and demonstrated hard cutback techniques for roses. Several attendees returned to the Garden to inform us how successful they were in cutting back their own roses.

Elaine Prisby pruning roses

The Garden is very pleased to announce the addition of new Board Member Carol Mini, who has a wealth of experience in all things tree, plant, and garden related... We look forward to her advice and guidance in the years to come!!!

🌿 Volunteer Spotlight: Nicholas Longo

Nicholas Longo
A great volunteer in the garden

Born in Sleepy Hollow, NY, Nicholas Longo now lives in Elkton on 54 acres shared with a sandhill gopher tortoise community. He's a proud father of four and grandfather of six. After a hands-on career installing solid-surface materials, renovating hotels nationwide, and working as a Sanitation Technician in Jacksonville Beach, he retired about five years ago and discovered a love for gardening.

Nicholas became a volunteer after spotting Elaine and Cheryl working in the Cycad collection during a Garden tour. When he offered to help, they encouraged him to join the team—and he returned the very next day as a new member and volunteer! He now works with us as a Green Thumb every Monday and Friday.

Nicholas has been invaluable with heavy lifting, digging, pruning, cleanup, and even organizing the workshop—one of his favorite tasks. He's also a natural ambassador, chatting with visitors at the Ravine Gardens State Park Festival and helping with parking and event setup during Spring Fling.

We're grateful for Nicholas' energy, enthusiasm, and willingness to jump in wherever he's needed, THANKS NICHOLAS!!!

Spring Fling & Plant Sale

By all accounts, the **Spring Fling held on Saturday, March 21st**, was a smashing success! Hundreds attended, new members joined, and the Garden was packed! The parking lot was completely full, and people were parked along the road on both sides.

Vendors did fantastic

Our vendors were the busiest they have ever been and are looking forward to the next event! Tours were led by Nature Preserve Docent Dana Wiest, and two talks on butterfly gardening were given by Member Katie Tripp! By the end of the day, the Board Members, Staff and Volunteers present were happily exhausted, and ready for a well-earned night's rest!

Katie Tripp presents butterfly gardening

Future Events at the Garden

On Saturday, April 18th at 10:30 am, new Board Member Carol Mini will present an engaging and informative class covering everything from proper pruning techniques and planting practices to selecting the right tree for your specific site. Whether you're a homeowner, gardening enthusiast, or simply curious about the trees in your neighborhood, this is a wonderful opportunity to learn from a local expert.

On Saturday, May 2nd, the Garden will host our *FIRST ANNUAL PALM SHOW AND SALE,* sponsored by the CENTRAL FLORIDA PALM AND CYCAD SOCIETY from 9 am to 5 pm! The CFPACS is one of the largest palm societies in the world and there will be palm and cycad experts galore if you have any questions! This will be your best opportunity to see and buy some truly rare palms from around the world! Fantastic vendors from all over the state will be here selling some of their prized palms and sharing how to care for them! You'll never see plants like this at the big box stores or any local nursery, so come on over for a unique opportunity and support your Garden and Nursery! A food vendor will also be on hand!

On Saturday May 9th, at 10:30 am, our own fantastic plant propagator, Dena Shafer will present **"Orchid Basics and Then Some"** Dena has a collection of over 300 orchids and will share her experience on potting, fertilizing, and mounting these beautiful plants. She will also discuss common diseases! And as a bonus, there will likely be orchids for sale at the event!

On Saturday and Sunday, August 21st and 22nd, the Garden will participate in the **Southeast Pollinator Census**. Bring a comfortable chair and stake out a pretty plant for an hour or two and record what butterflies or bees visit! Compare and contrast different plants! Learn which plants attract the most pollinators!

Many Other Events are scheduled! Please check our website and Facebook page frequently and watch for text alerts about upcoming events and workshops!

Plant of the Month by Libby Luedeke

Native azaleas bloom every March

One thing's for sure, after this major cold snap we all just experienced, now we know what can roll with the punches and what can't! I will call her the **Queen of the South, the humble azalea.** Given regular watering and partial shade, it will thrive for decades. There are many colors and varieties to choose from and are readily available at most nurseries. They enjoy acidic soil, so they do well around oaks and pines. Some bloom multiple times a year.

But what we learned most importantly, they can handle cold and heat and even though they enjoy being pampered they can also handle being completely ignored. I've got azaleas in my yard that I completely forget that we have

until they start displaying bright, beautiful blooms.

Close-up of native azalea

Here at St. Johns Botanical Garden, we have some fabulous native azaleas, in addition to a variety of cultivated ones! Come see them before the season ends. Should you decide to add them to your garden, don't bury them too deep and give them plenty of mulch to help hold the moisture. Pine bark or straw is best. Just keep them out of full sun that lasts more than 4 hours. It can scorch the leaves and leave them vulnerable to pests. Great news for coffee lovers is the grounds can be great fertilizer, so recycle away. Bonus, hummingbirds love them. So, go out and get some!

Animal Sightings

Spring is here and so are the birds! Recently there have been a bunch of sightings here in the Garden! Because our Nature Preserve is dominated by hardwood deciduous trees, reminding one of a northern forest, many birds not usually seen in our North Florida pine flatwoods are observed here. And right now, the Warblers are outstanding! Vireos, Painted Buntings, and Nuthatches among others have also been spotted. So, grab your binoculars and come on over! **Remember, our Garden has been designated as a birding "hot spot" by the Audubon Society!**

The painted bunting is one of the most beautiful birds in North America

🌿 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!

St. Johns Botanical Garden & nature preserve

CENTRAL FLORIDA PALM & CYCAD SOCIETY

YOU'RE INVITED TO THE **CFPACS**

FIRST ANNUAL PALM SHOW & SALE

- **See and buy rare palms from around the world**
- **Replace plants lost in the big freeze**
- **Try something new and exciting for your yard**
- **Tour the Botanical Garden and learn what survives here!**

WHEN: Saturday, May 2nd, 2026 9am – 5pm

WHERE: St. Johns Botanical Garden

8310 County Road 13 S., Hastings, FL 32145

--FANTASTIC VENDORS COMING FROM AROUND FLORIDA--

- ***STEVE FARNSWORTH – FARNSWORTH FARMS***
- ***CLAY PORCH – URBAN OASIS PALMS***
- ***JEFF SEARLE – THE RAINFOREST COLLECTION***
- ***ALEX STEEG – TROPIC SHADE NURSERY***

ADMISSION: Free to CFPACS & SJBGNP Members

$15 Non-Members, $10 Seniors