

LEISURE & ARTS

Paradise Regained at Storm-Ravaged Fairchild Garden

By LARRY WALLBERG

Coral Gables, Fla.

Don Evans is the Gary Cooper of the Plant World. The rugged director of horticulture at the Fairchild Tropical Garden here, he is the last man you'd expect to see getting tears in his eyes as he tells a story.

But as he relives the early morning of Aug. 24, 1992, his emotions get the better of him. When Hurricane Andrew swept through Coral Gables that day, more than two-thirds of the 83-acre garden's specimens—palms, cycads, fruit trees, rare ferns, warm-weather flora of every shape and size and description—were severely damaged or destroyed. Yes, the garden had been hit by other hurricanes since it opened in 1938 in honor of the legendary botanist David Fairchild. But none of those storms had the 170-mph gusts that wantonly laid waste to over a half-century of growth and educated nurture.

Despite Mr. Evans's wistful reaction, today—just two years after the event—Fairchild Tropical Garden seems as lush and green as it could be. To Mr. Evans's eye, and in the vision of other old friends of the Fairchild paradise, the current vistas will be forever superimposed over an idyllic lost Eden. But to a new visitor, the garden appears to be flourishing.

And it is, due in large part to Evans's rescue efforts. As head of the Andrew clean-up crews—the “storm troopers,” they were nicknamed—the director of horticulture went right to work after the hurricane, salvaging what he could.

He, along with the rest of the staff, tons of volunteers from near and far, and then-

director of the garden, William Klein, realized immediately that it wasn't going to be just a cleanup, despite what dozens of botanical Philistines might have thought.

“Some people were coming in,” Mr. Evans says, “asking for contracts to clear and haul the debris. One fellow stopped by, surveyed the garden and said, ‘Aw, hell, I can clear this place in three days.’ It took us a year to do that. But, of course, we did a different kind of job.”

Three different kinds of jobs, in fact.

First of all, Mr. Evans says, there was the “stuff that could actually be saved,” which ultimately amounted to about 65% of the injured plants. The immediate danger was not only to those that had fallen during the tempest. The leaves of the shady canopy of tall trees and palms were gone with the wind; for many of the understory plants, scorching to death in Florida's hot August sun, tomorrow might not be another day. To add cosmic insult to injury, Andrew had contrived to completely ruin the garden's underground irrigation system, and water had to be trucked in from fire hydrants. “It was painfully slow,” Mr. Evans recalls, “to water the garden by hand, tree by tree.”

The palms were the easiest trees to handle. Fairchild is home to one of the world's largest collections of palms; fortunately, both for themselves and for their shorter, shade-hungry neighbors, those plants are particularly tolerant of knock-downs, because their small and stubborn root systems make them easy to upright again. In fact, only one species seems to have been completely lost in the storm: the *Scheelea fairchildensis*, a native of South America, the world's only known specimen

of which was killed. “But there are folks out there right now looking for it,” says the horticulturalist. “And we do have hopes of finding it again.”

Along with the palms, the globe's largest assortment of cycads—the fern-palmy plants once munched on by vegetarian dinosaurs—came through quite well, primarily because of their low profile. “They're close to the ground,” Mr. Evans says. “So, although leaves were broken, they weren't blown over.” Just a few individual specimens were killed, replacements for most of which miraculously survived in Fairchild's nearly ruined nursery, about a mile south of the garden.

The second kind of salvage work was to scoop up those items that would be a surprise boon to research. Living plants, particularly rare ones, can't just be pulled from the ground at random for experimental work. But with so many of its botanical denizens newly dead, Fairchild Tropical Garden suddenly became an intellectual playground for inquisitive scientists. The National Cancer Institute asked for some samples. Other medical researchers thought that a cure for AIDS might lie somewhere in the garden's rubble. As Mr. Evans recalls Dr. Klein saying at the time, “It's like a library has suddenly become available. We have to read the books and get their information before they self-destruct.”

The third kind of operation was to gather the felled trees for a rare-wood auction and sale to benefit the gardens. This effort was greatly aided by a retired forester from Oregon who offered to spend a month camped out at Fairchild, assessing and labeling the wood, training and working with chain-saw gangs, and treating the dead

trees to reduce premature drying.

That man was only one of many unsung botanical heroes. Volunteers came from everywhere to offer physical help and emotional support. Chuck Pezoldt, then deputy director of Metro-Dade Parks and Recreation, a local public agency, offered trucks and cranes and housing. A pair of researchers from the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis arrived and began collecting herbarium specimens.

It took about a month to complete a good inventory of the damage. Mr. Evans remembers: “There were such piles of tangled devastation, you had to peel it off by layers. Assessment teams would go through and do their studies. Then they'd wait for a work team to uncover the next tier so they could go back and assess the situation again.”

On Oct. 3, 1992, the garden was reopened to the public. Mr. Evans says it was still a mess: The replacement of mourned plants had hardly even begun. “But,” he adds, “we never had the idea that we would just dash in and replant everything. We wanted to use wild, collected and documented specimens rather than nursery-grown plants. And after all, we'd been nurturing the garden for over 50 years”—he himself joined the staff nearly 25 years ago, as foreman of the grounds crew—“and a botanical collection comes together very slowly.”

He agreed with Dr. Klein, though, that it was important to spread the word that Fairchild had weathered the worst. “The initial huge amount of media coverage about the storm was good for us,” he says. “It got our plight out to the public. But it did too good a job: A lot of people didn't come for a long time because they assumed we were gone for good.”

Sue Fairchild
Tropical Garden
- Hurricane Andrew '92

Hardly. One recent Saturday morning, Fairchild played host to a show and sale of the International Palm Society; cars began lining up in the parking lot at 7:30 for a 9:30 opening. Next week, there might be a similar convocation of bromeliad fanatics or orchid nuts or bamboo zealots. Each day, hundreds of avid plant-lovers and casual tourists enter the grounds to take the 45-minute tram tour, or stroll through one of the three self-guided walks, or just wander through the park and commune with the natural spirits. By Christmas, the last bracings were gone from the weakest of the trees. Within a few months, the totally wrecked vine pergola will be replanted according to a new, improved design. In the spring, the rare plant house will get a modern plastic roof. The exhibit called "Andrew's Garden: Order Out of Chaos" has lost most of its impact; although it's the only plot that was not restored by man, the tangled mass is clearly thriving, revived by Nature herself.

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