

# The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Sep. 08, 2009

## Coral Gables research garden hosts ancient plants

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CHRIS CUTRO / CHRIS CUTRO

Laurie Danielson searches for the fruit of the Lollipop palm, a native of just three hills in Cuba, at Montgomery Botanical Center in Miami.

Plants that shared the prehistoric landscape with dinosaurs like herbivorous sauropods and meat-eating allosaurs can be found today in South Florida -- in a little-known Coral Gables research garden celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

Botanists in other continents are far more likely to know about the Montgomery Botanical Center than local residents. "We're hoping that will change," said M. Patrick Griffith, who joined the staff as executive director in May 2005.

More than 1,000 plant species -- including more than 620 species of cycads and palms, the center's two specialties -- thrive on Montgomery's 120 acres at 11901 Old Cutler Rd. The American Public

Gardens Association has accredited the center's holdings as Collections of National Significance.

Conserving rare and endangered plants and sharing information with scientists and plant enthusiasts around the world is the mission of the garden's employees and volunteers.

Shortly before Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the garden began launching expeditions in search of replacements for plants lost to storms and new rare specimens.

Few get more rare than *Hemithrinax ekmaniana*, commonly known as the Lollipop Palm, which grows only on a set of three limestone hills, or *mogotes*, in northern Cuba. Then there's the Wollemi Pine. It's what's known as a Lazarus species, only seen as a fossil until 1994, when scientists found living specimens in a ravine outside Sydney, Australia.

"People thought it was extinct, and now it's a whole new genus," noted flowering tree and conifer biologist Chad Husby.

### ENDANGERED

Montgomery center scientists also look for endangered plants to conserve.

"This is a species from Guam and Rota and Palau in Micronesia," said lead cycad biologist Michael Calonje, pointing at a *Cycas micronesica*.

Reaching 36 feet high, it's threatened in its natural habitat by a plague of tiny sap-sucking bugs. "They haven't gotten to Yap or Palau yet but they've absolutely decimated the native population of cycads in Micronesia," Calonje said.

*Attalea crassipatha*, a small oil palm native to Haiti's southwestern region, also could use help.

“There's fewer than 30 of those palms left in the wild,” said Montgomery's lead palm biologist, Larry Noblick, adding that Haiti's extreme deforestation is the main reason.

The history of the Montgomery center goes back to 1934, when Col. Robert Montgomery, an accountant, lawyer and botany buff, bought 65 acres in Coral Gables.

Montgomery, who already had amassed a vast lot of conifers in Connecticut, cleared the wild hammock and began establishing the palm collection he would dub the Coconut Grove Palmetum. Cutting through the garden is the original Old Cutler Road, a rocky path flanked by tangles of vine and scrub.

“Col. Montgomery had Old Cutler rerouted to go around his property back in the '30s,” said Husby as he steered a golf cart along the path. “This was originally pine rockland.”

Humans aren't the garden's only visitors. A resident crocodile patrols the pools while a few peacocks and even the occasional fox roam the grounds.

## DONATED LAND

The Montgomerys donated the land to Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, which opened in 1938. Six years after the colonel's death in 1953, his widow, Nell, established the Montgomery Foundation, which was given its current name in 1998.

The center may be 50 years old, but in front of “Nell's House” stands a *Microcycas calocoma*, native to Cuba's Pinar del Rio province, that beats the Coconut Grove Palmetum itself in age.

“This is probably the oldest *Microcycas* in the U.S., and definitely the largest one,” Calonje said of the centenarian plant.

According to Noblick, industrialist James Deering installed the cycad on the grounds of Vizcaya, his home, in 1915. He sold it to Montgomery 15 years later. “It was already four or five feet high so it was probably several decades old at the time.”

Scientists assumed for a long time that cycads are wind-pollinated -- until they discovered in the 1980s that insects pollinated them, Noblick said. “Since we don't have many of the insects here, our seed bank coordinator has to be the bug that spreads the pollen,” he added.

That “bug” is Judy Kay, who says she has “the best job in the world.” Kay spends many of her days flitting from plant to plant, applying dry or wet pollen to female palms, cycads and pines.

She collects between 700,000 and 900,000 seeds yearly. “I'm hoping to hit a million some day,” she said.

Seeds from the Montgomery Center have been distributed to research institutions, botanical gardens and plant societies worldwide. The tough economy seems to have mostly spared the donation-funded center, which has a \$2 million yearly operating budget, Griffith said. “Actually, 2008 was our best fundraising year in a while,” he added.

But Griffith is still being careful. “We're working on raising funds for the next five years in order to increase capacity,” he said.

The center also applies for grants from organizations such as the South Florida Palm Society, the

Association of Zoological Horticulture and The Villagers, a Gables-based historical preservation group.

“The main thing is to increase the diversity of the collection.”

While the center is open to the public, visitors should call to make an appointment for a tour. Admission is free, but donations are encouraged.

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