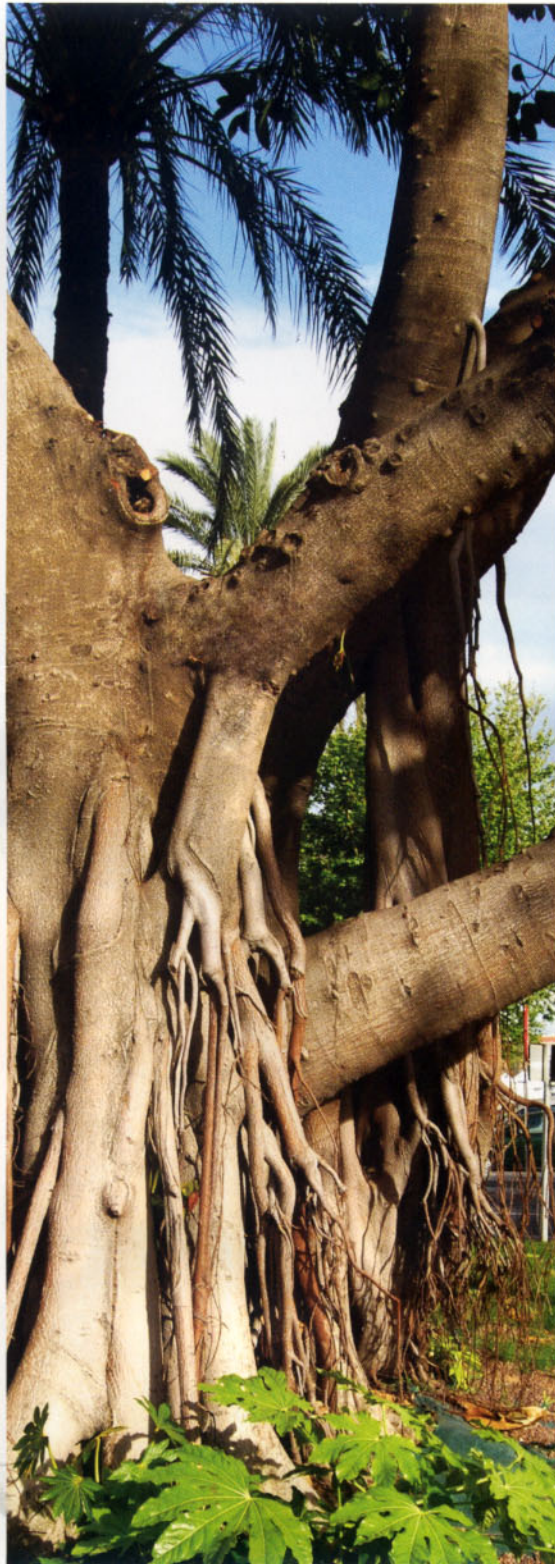


TREMENDOUS PLANS



The Naples Botanical Garden has been acquiring unique trees and tropical rarities to create a living legacy.



The vision for the Naples Botanical Garden is so grand, planners have gone to extraordinary efforts to save big trees and plants.

BY SHAWN HOLIDAY

There truly are things that money can't buy, where time and space are the real assets, and bigger is better. The Naples Botanical Garden, a \$50 million project that breaks ground next month, has been growing since the idea was first discussed in 1993. For the past several years, the garden has been acquiring unique trees and giant tropical rarities from around Southwest Florida, serving as a nursery for foliage to grow until plants become a living legacy within the garden.

The efforts ensure that the new garden will open in late 2010 with mature and specimen plants, the likes of which usually take decades to create. "They're worth their weight in gold to us," says Brian Holley, executive director of the garden. The plant-saving program will provide large, unusual and lush landscapes in the new gardens.

TREE LUGGERS

Moving a colossal gumbo limbo from Marco Island to the docks off Hamilton Harbor Yacht Club shows how serendipitous some of the Garden's acquisitions can be. Transporting a 40,000-pound, 30-foot-tall tree with a trunk so big it takes two people to get their arms around it was a delicate operation in which timing was critical.

Marco Island native Chris Curle, whose parents planted the tree 30 years ago, suggested that the trees's owners contact O'Donnell Landscapes Inc., Estero—a firm known for moving large trees—when the waterfront home was to be torn down, the tree along with it.

Landscape Architect Ellin Goetz saw the availability of the tree as the chance—although also a challenge—to get a centerpiece tree for the Florida Garden she is designing, one of five themed gardens within the Naples Botanical Garden.

"The waterfront opportunity was quite attractive to me. The logistics of the whole thing was not easy," says Goetz, a partner in Goetz + Stropes Landscape Architects and Naples resident since 1984. "We are always on the lookout for things like this, and this came along."

To be saved, the tree had to be taken by boat to Collier Enterprises' Hamilton Harbor—but only after the land was cleared for construction of condominiums on the property—so that a 120-foot crane could lift the tree off a barge and place it on a truck. The tree, dubbed "Gumby" by the nursery staff taking care of it, now thrives at a staging area at the garden, where it will stay until it is planted in its permanent spot.

Moving the tree was such a big event, the Naples Botanical Garden had a reception for dignitaries and media, and Collier Enterprises showed up with a check for \$1 million for the garden's capital campaign. As straps were attached to bolts inserted into the tree's trunk, the crane slowly lifted the tree to applause from witnesses.

Goetz initially intended to use four or five smaller nursery-grown trees to create the Florida Garden's focal point. Instead, the giant gumbo limbo will live out its days as the centerpiece of a colorful and fragrant garden with wildflowers, shrubs and landscapes that can be replicated on the lawns of homeowners.

Goetz hopes that the garden will serve as a model for people wanting to install plants that are easy to grow and maintain without irrigation and chemicals, like the gumbo limbo. "When you enter this garden you'll be plunged into a Southwest Florida environment," Goetz says. "I wanted a gumbo limbo because it's native to Florida. The shape and the character of it is so beautiful."



NURSERY FOR GIANTS

The gumbo limbo is not the only plant awaiting the new garden. Twenty-two palm trees—some more than 40 feet tall—were donated by the First Presbyterian Church of Naples and moved to the Naples Botanical Garden property. The trees, including an American oil palm, beach palm and Montgomery palm, will spend a few years in a staging area, and then be used to create a living wall of rare specimens that took decades to mature. Once arranged, the trees will look as though they grew there and will give the garden a mature look.

Rescuing trees can be affected by the forces of nature. Soon after 50 large royal palms (from Port Royal, naturally) were added to the collection in late 2005, Hurricane Wilma struck. Trees as high as 60 feet littered the ground like giant matchsticks until they could be planted again. One tree lost its crown during the storm, but was replanted anyway to become a home for woodpeckers.

Keeping the dead tree is part of the plan to keep the garden natural. Dead plants provide shelter, nutrients and diversity to the evolving landscape, which already has more than 1,000 varieties of tropical plants and 90 acres of preserve with seven different ecosystems. Prior to removing exotic plants that had invaded the 70-acre site, planners saved trees, shrubs and small epiphytes (air plants), inviting the public to go on the search-and-save missions



Clockwise from left: Gumbo arrives. One of many palm species. The planned garden entrance.

that collected more than 4,000 native plants.

“I hate to see anything die,” says Brian Galligan, horticulture manager. “Each [plant] is unique, and we have to work within its environment.”

Galligan takes into account many variables when assessing an acquisition: rarity, size, location, logistics and timing. When the famous century-old banyan tree at the Lee County Courthouse seemed destined for the chainsaw, Galligan considered saving it for the garden. However, he declined because the effort would have required cutting the tree into several pieces, transporting it, and then piecing it back together, a monumental task.

Galligan admits that space constraints make it hard to be the area’s only repository for unwanted plants, so volunteers and visitors have been encouraged to take gumbo limbo and cypress seedlings to grow at home for future placement in the garden.

In the meantime, the nursery shelters plants, including a silk floss tree from the



Ave Maria site and a rare sealing wax palm from Old Naples that has managed to survive freezes and development. Donated staghorn ferns will be mounted on new trees in the garden to give them a mature look. A Naples Garden Club donation allowed 450 plants of 60 different species of heliconia and ginger to be purchased. Dozens of pond apples that were rescued on property keep the staff and volunteers busy, long before the first spade is turned for the new gardens.

“The more people are hearing about it, the more they are donating,” says Galligan. “A lot of people who have really neat gardens are saying, ‘What do I have that I can donate?’” **NI**

GREEN DREAM TEAM

Through stellar fundraising and solid planning, the Naples Botanical Garden has attracted world-renowned landscape architects to fulfill its mission, a “design coup” according to the *Miami Herald*. This Green Dream Team will take 70 acres that were mostly filled with invasive species, including melaleuca and Australian pine, and turn that land into lush gardens with plants, lakes, hills and views. The entire 160-acre oasis will be one of the largest botanical gardens in the subtropics.

“Gardening implies that one is changing the natural environment,” says Ellin Goetz, one of five lead designers on the project. She hopes that the conservation principles guiding the designers—Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold Certification—will inspire visitors to create more environmentally friendly spaces at home. “We want visitors to learn about native plants, which will be the bulk of the garden. People always grew natives. Now the garden will showcase a lot of examples to copy.”

The designs are inspired by Naples’ location at latitude 26 degrees north, and will explore the cultures and ecosystems along the 26th latitudes north and south around the world. The one-acre Children’s Garden will re-create seven child-sized Southwest Florida habitats.

The design team that will be transforming the gardens, expected to be completed in late 2010, include: the Brazilian Garden—Raymond Jungles, Jungles Landscape Architect, Miami; Asian Garden—Made Wijaya, PT Wijaya Tribwana International, Denpasar, Bali; Caribbean Garden—Robert Truskowski, RE Truskowski Inc., Laguna Beach, California; Florida Garden—Ellin Goetz and Gerry Stropes, Goetz + Stropes Landscape Architects, Naples; Children’s Garden—Herb Schaal, Fort Collins, Colorado; Garden Buildings—Ted Flato, Robert Harris and Tenna Florian, Lake/Flato Architects, San Antonio, Texas.

Although the Naples Botanical Garden is closed during construction, members will be given opportunities to visit and tour parts of the garden as it grows. The James and Linda White Birding Tower will be one of the first projects to be completed, with birding tours to begin in the fall. The Discovery Center, a joint research and educational project with Florida Gulf Coast University, is already under construction and will open in fall 2009 with two laboratories, five classrooms and offices for about 10.



The Naples Botanical Garden will showcase examples of native plants.

