

PORT ST. LUCIE *Botanical Gardens*

Story and Photography Tom Hewitt

The entrance features a 1-acre lake with a fountain in the center.

When I first visited Florida, Port St. Lucie had a grand total of 250 homes. That was back in 1961, and just 53 years later it boasts a population of 167,000. I guess it was inevitable that such a vibrant, fast growing community would one day have its own botanical garden.

There's something to be said for a garden designed from scratch. Especially in this day and age. Careful planning allowed for the protection of sensitive wetlands and other natural areas. In fact, even though the gardens cover just under 20 acres, only 12 ½ are developed.

The property, bordered by the north fork of the St. Lucie River on one side and Westmoreland Blvd. on the other, was acquired through a joint venture of the City of Port St. Lucie, St. Lucie County and the Florida Trust for Public Lands. The six-year, \$3 million effort was paid for by a combination of grants, donations and money from a conservation pool funded by developers.

Groundbreaking was on March 4, 2009, and the gardens opened to the public a year later, with an official "vine" cutting by officials on March 6, 2010. It was an instant success, and residents of all ages have been visiting the grounds and using its facilities ever since.

The entrance itself is impressive, featuring a one-acre lake with a 100-seat amphitheater off to one side. On the far side of the lake stands a 4,100 square-foot nature pavilion that houses a gift shop, conference room and activities room. Various plant societies hold their monthly meetings here, and it's also used for Tai Chi classes, Master Gardener meetings and other activities.

The Garden is operated by the Friends of the Port St. Lucie Botanical Gardens, a nonprofit founded to help support day-to-day operations. With no paid staff, they rely entirely on volunteers to give tours, run the Gift Shop, pull weeds, propagate plants and do a myriad of other things. Stephanie Giarrappa, is President and Chairman of the Board. "We have some 130 participating volunteers," she notes, "and we couldn't run this place without them."



Wide walkways make the Gardens easily accessible.

Friends isn't the only nonprofit helping the gardens. In 2013, the Port St. Lucie Botanical Gardens Foundation was formed to find charitable funding to underwrite the cost of a large mosaic mounted in the butterfly garden. That same year, a small core group of local leaders and Gardens' activists got together to form the Art & Cultural Enhancement Project at the Gardens.

The butterfly garden was designed by Port St. Lucie resident and Master Gardener Phyllis Brown. "This area started out as a citrus display area," Giarrappa notes, "but the trees got citrus greening and it just didn't work." The garden is composed of four quadrants, and is chock-full of larval and nectar plants. Certified by the Florida Federation of Garden Clubs, it's loaded with butterflies, skippers, bees and other pollinators. This is due in part to copious amounts of passion vine, allamanda, coral honeysuckle, Queen's wreath and other vines planted on an 80-foot pergola that fronts the parking area.



The Butterfly Garden has the look and feel of a cottage garden.



The Orchid Room houses over 100 rare and exotic specimens.



(From L to R) Volunteers Bea Cooper, Stephanie Giarrappa and Josephine Telenko are just three of many volunteers that help operate the Gardens.

Nearly a mile of paved sidewalk winds around slash pines, live oaks and other natives to reveal "rooms" devoted to specific plants, like roses, cactus, bromeliads, natives and bamboo. The Orchid Room is located in a grove of live oaks west of the pavilion, and houses over 100 rare and exotic orchids planted and maintained by the Port St. Lucie Orchid Society. The Secret Garden, containing a 75-year-old live oak, is often rented out for weddings and other special events.

Josephine Telenko, Secretary of the Friends, works in the Gardens' nursery three days a week. Here she trains volunteers to propagate plants for sales that benefit the garden. Plants are also sold during regular business hours. Nearby, founding member and longtime volunteer Bea Cooper propagates and tends plants that will go into the new Hibiscus Garden later on. Future plans call for a Palm Walk, as well as a boat launch and restaurant on property next door.

Since they receive no public funding, Friends has found creative ways of raising money. The two-day Botanica Garden Festival and Plant Sale is held each February (always the weekend before Valentine's Day), and "mini" plant sales are held once a month. They also have a tree adoption program, and host other fundraisers throughout the year.

"We call this the little garden that could," Giarrappa says. "We may be small and young by most people's standards, but we've come a long way." Just like Port St. Lucie itself.

Port St. Lucie Botanical Gardens is located at 2410 SE Westmoreland Blvd. Admission is \$5, and hours are Wed-Sat 10-4, and Sun 12-4. Call 772-337-1959 or visit pslbotanicalgardens.org for more details. 🐦