

the art of flowers

Blooming Art

By Michael Davenport, Director, Living Collections and Garden Landscapes

This autumn brings a continuation of Fairchild's recent tradition of displaying extraordinary art exhibitions, a series which has brought even greater recognition to the garden and invited visitors to view the landscapes in a different light. Perhaps in complete contradiction to last year's Dale Chihuly sculptures, which were based on organic forms, the art of Roy Lichtenstein seems to spring from the one-dimensional, the bubblegum comic. The juxtaposition of his sculpture with the riot of living forms growing at Fairchild is sure to emphasize both the living and static, in the same way a bromeliad clinging to a rock invokes wonder. No doubt Mr. Lichtenstein, who passed away in 1997, would be pleased to see his work on display at William Lyman Phillips' masterpiece of landscape architecture, a botanic garden hewn from the wind-beaten Cutler Ridge and dredged from Biscayne Bay's mangrove flats.

Fairchild's horticulturists live with a grand inheritance. Earlier generations secured the land, blasted the rock with dynamite, built up beds with fill, terraced the ridge and mulched heavily. Old giant trees persist against countless storms, providing shade for plants that need it. Hundreds of expeditions to the most remote tropical forests on Earth have gifted South Florida with a remarkable collection of plant life. Fairchild is Miami's Louvre.

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Hibiscus fragilis


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Planting is also shadowed by the fact that no matter how well any plant grows, someday it will die. As most gardeners know, you can not really know how to grow plants until you have killed a few. As heartbreaking as it can be to lose something precious, horticulturists learn much from these failures, bookmark the mistakes in their minds and collection records and make wiser decisions next time. There is also some beauty in death. Witness the many palms that grow to large sizes, never flowering until a final reproductive burst before the quick decline. And, of course, dead plants are removed (unless we leave the stems for the insects, squirrels and woodpeckers), creating space for a new planting opportunity.

The current crew of Fairchild horticulturists has transformed the garden since the hurricanes of 2005. Those storms felled over 500 trees, palms and shrubs, but also opened up the garden plots for a new cycle of intensive planting. With the help of many dedicated volunteers who constantly braved intense heat, back pain and stinging insects, the garden was reclaimed. At this writing, the health of the collections is fantastic, in no small part because of innovative improvements in fertilization regimes, implemented by curatorial staff. Plus, the weather has been better than we could have wished for. Since Hurricane Wilma, every dry spell has been quenched, winds have been light and there has not been a freeze. We will enjoy it while it lasts and continue to knock on wood.

At Fairchild, not all the plants in the collection are viewed equally. As a research institution, we place a greater value on wild-collected plants with known, documented origins. That said, although the main focus of the plant collections is not purely display, it would be a shame to leave Phillips' design unadorned. With modest purchasing of ornamentals, the garden has more color, softer edges and more flowers, both for the butterflies and the humans. A gardenia flower that smells like bubblegum needs to be at Fairchild, regardless of origin. With all of the planting space available, we have been able to match each new plant with an optimal spot, unless, of course, we are experimenting. Will it grow in the shade? Can it handle salt winds? Do weevils find it delicious?

We have been planting butterfly bait. We consider an *Atala* butterfly flying art, even though the rascal has chewed down our coonties. In the same vein, the colorful mass plantings in the garden are bait for human visitors. For the people who can not tell the difference between a palm and a pandanus, and, frankly, do not care, perhaps the drift of beach sunflower in the Palmetum will excite them. Perhaps the Lichtenstein sculptures are the reason they came, but the rainbow eucalyptus is why they will return.

By no means do the Fairchild horticulturists renounce their plant snob status. Most of the species we select are good growers, generally low-maintenance and just the sort of plant we would like to see growing all around town. Some of the plants are none of those things, and we ruthlessly remove them at the first sign of poor performance, invasiveness or general ugliness. The garden is never static, evolving every moment, changing with the winds and by the hands of your artists in residence. As you walk the grounds this winter, look long and hard, and see the pulsing beats of all the art around you. 



Heliconia rostrata

Photo by Lorena Alban/FTBG



Nymphaea sp. Waterlily

Photo by Jo-Anne Gardner

As in any art museum, Fairchild curators are involved in the placement, care, restoration and interpretation of the collection's holdings. Unlike an art museum, however, botanic garden curators are the artists, as well. You can't grow a Picasso from a cutting. Planting can be a leap of faith. Will it grow there? Can it take the sun? Perhaps the greatest joy for a Fairchild horticulturist is to acquire a seed or cutting from a plant new to cultivation, raise it to the perfect size, plant it where it has a good chance to live, and watch it grow and thrive. A healthy tree is fine art.