The Tropical Garden

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Georgia Tasker was the garden writer for The Miami Herald for more than 30 years, and now writes and blogs for Fairchild. She has received the Garden’s highest honor, the Barbour Medal, and a lifetime achievement award from the Tropical Audubon Society. She is also an avid photographer, gardener and traveler. She graduated cum laude from Hanover College in Hanover, Indiana.

Isabel Sanchez is Fairchild’s director of volunteer services, a position she has held since August 2017. Her focus is to promote and enhance the Garden’s volunteer program. She leads the new Conservation Student Scholar volunteer program, which engages our youth in community volunteerism while adding to the visitor experience. Sanchez has a background in anthropology and linguistics.

Kenneth Setzer joined Fairchild as a writer and editor with the marketing team in 2013. He contributes to print and digital media. Setzer enjoys writing about natural and human history and is an enthusiastic outdoor photographer. His educational background is in linguistics.
THE GARDEN’S EARLY PLANTINGS

By Javier Francisco-Ortega, Ph.D.; Brett Jestrow, Ph.D.; Chad Husby, Ph.D.; Marilyn Griffiths; and Carl Lewis, Ph.D.

Photos: Archives/FTBG, USDA National Agricultural Library Special Collections and Kenneth Setzer

The flagship of a botanic garden is its living collection of plants. They are a source of beauty, education, horticulture, research and conservation. Because of its unique location and 80-year-long history in plant exploration, few other large botanic gardens in the continental U.S. have Fairchild’s splendor, range and experience in cultivating tropical plants.

Our founding fathers were aware that the Garden needed to establish a unique collection of living plants. This green patrimony was considered the basis to fully develop Fairchild’s mission of celebrating tropical botany. Therefore, it is not surprising that just one year after the Garden was established, its first official plant hunting expedition was organized. Dr. David Fairchild led the expedition onboard the Chêng-Ho, a traditional Chinese junk built in Hong Kong specifically for this task. This plant exploration endeavor reached remote locations of Indonesia and the Philippines between 1939 and 1940 and brought many plants to the Garden. At least nine of the species collected by Dr. Fairchild during this trip are still grown in the Garden.

In a 2013 issue of the The Tropical Garden devoted to celebrating the Garden’s 75th anniversary, Georgia Tasker presented an article highlighting the 11 tree species distinguished botanists and horticulturists planted when the Garden was inaugurated on March 23, 1938. These 11 trees can be considered the first “official” plants that started the Garden’s legacy of tropical horticulture. These initial plantings also recognized the Garden pioneers.

Among these 11 individuals, only one remains with us today: the baobab tree Dr. Fairchild planted. This individual is located near the Sunken Garden in the Montgomery Palmetum. It is worth mentioning that the largest baobab tree in the Garden (located near the northeast corner of the Phillips-Atwater Gatehouse) is also an old friend. It was planted in 1938 from material provided by the Dade County Nursery.

The collections that the first director of the Garden, Col. Robert Montgomery, had on his property were an important initial source of plant material. His private gardens (today the Montgomery Botanical Center) were extensive, famous worldwide because of their superb plantings of cycads and palms from all continents. The Garden’s founders considered these two groups of plants a main priority for the
living collections. The Horticulture Department archives contain an undated report prepared by Roger W. Sanders that provides a good review regarding the arrangements of early accessions introduced to Fairchild. From this report, it seems that as early as November 1934, Montgomery started acquiring plants for a garden to be established in South Florida to celebrate Dr. Fairchild’s legacy. These archival documents also show that, between May and October of 1938, the Garden received a total of 179 plants accessions from Montgomery’s garden. During 1939, the number of introductions from Montgomery’s property increased to 193. The introduced material included palms, along with trees from a wide range of flowering plant families such as Bignoniaceae, Fabaceae, Sapotaceae, Annonaceae and Moraceae.

The book “Fairchild Tropical Garden: The First Ten Years” by Lucita H. Wait (see Georgia Tasker’s review on page 19) also has insights regarding our first living collections. Wait’s accounts were largely based on the Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Tropical Botanic Garden, which included the director’s report for each year. These Proceedings are still housed in our archives and are among the most important historical documents at Fairchild. From Wait’s book we know that “by the date of the Garden’s first anniversary ... the total [plantings] had reached 692 individual plants, representing 243 species.” This number increased significantly during the rest of 1939, and by October the Garden had 1,034 palms, representing 268 species. There were also 24 species of cycads (142 plants), 266 vines and, Wait wrote, the “succulent garden was favored with a fine collection of agaves from the United States Department of Agriculture. Many aloes and other species were planted.” This material was donated by Montgomery as well as other individuals, landscape companies, nurseries, banks, small businesses, USDA-Chapman Field, Dade County, the city of Coral Gables, the Tropical Research and Education Center, and the Subtropical Experiment Station.

According to Sanders’ report in our archives, by the end of 1940 the total number of introduced plantings was 5,400, already giving Fairchild the best living collection of tropical plants in the continental United States.

Many of the botanical jewels introduced by Garden collaborators and supporters between 1938 and 1948 are still with us, and Wait highlighted them. They include the oldest fellow of our collections: a well-developed individual of the Mexican cycad Dioon edule, chestnut dioon or virgin’s palm, located on the northwest edge of Cycad Circle. It was donated by Mr. Arno H. Nehrling in 1940, and was originally imported from Scotland in
1873. Just across from this magnificent Mexican cycad stands a splendid and large cannonball tree, *Couroupita guianensis*, that was another of our first introductions; the specimen came originally from the Hope Gardens of Jamaica and was donated to us by Mrs. Sarah Jones in 1938. A few other iconic individuals include three large and beautiful trees of the Caribbean *Pimenta dioica*, allspice, that were donated by a nursery and by the Tropical Research and Education Center between 1940 and 1942 (these trees are currently located in Plot 45).

The small Indonesian tree *Clerodendrum minahassae*, which belonged to the Mint family, was another introduction by Dr. Fairchild that Wait highlighted in her book. One accession of this beautiful tree can be seen in Plot 51, located just west of the Tram Plaza. It was planted in 1941 and was a unique introduction brought to the Garden from the Celebes Islands by Dr. Fairchild.

Finally, the last member of Wait’s selection still found in the Garden belongs to the coffee family: *Posoqueria latifolia*. A single individual of this is located in Plot 24 just west of the Overlook; it was planted in 1939 from an unreported source.

Interestingly, some of the Garden’s introduced plants originated from expeditions that Dr. Fairchild made long before the Garden was established, mostly onboard the research yacht *Utowana*. The Sunken Garden baobab tree that he planted at the Garden’s inauguration came from material collected during the 1927 *Utowana* expedition to West Africa. One of the largest trees in the Garden, the legume *Albizia niopoides*, was part of the collections Dr. Fairchild made in 1932 during his first extensive exploration of the Guyanas and the Caribbean Islands, also onboard the *Utowana*. This individual is located at the north end of the Vine Pergola and was planted in 1942.

Dr. Fairchild’s connections with the USDA also facilitated the introduction of unique plant material. A good example is one individual of the Haitian palm *Attalea crassispatha* found in Plot 142 (adjacent to the northwest corner of the Bailey Palm Glade). This accession was originally collected in southern Haiti in 1938 for the USDA, was introduced to the Garden in 1940, and was planted in this plot in 1943. This is one of the most threatened palm species in the Caribbean Islands, and it is unlikely that during this time this very rare palm tree was a common element in tropical gardens of Florida.

**Keeping Track of Early Plantings**

Documents found in the Garden archives also provide good insights about how these early plantings were recorded. According to Sanders’
report, when the Garden was just started in March 1938, “no plant-by-plant accession record was kept of any plantings made during this Garden’s first season.” However, soon there was a system based on “Master Cards” to assign accession numbers to the collections. Unfortunately, this system was not based on single numeric identifiers, but on at least three different ones! The reason was that these early plantings came from three major sources: Montgomery’s private garden, Dr. Fairchild’s plant hunting expeditions and personal collections, and other donors. It appears that this system with different numbers created some confusion for our horticulturists. On top of that, the Garden was initially divided into two distinct sections. The first one—the Montgomery Palmetum Section—was within the boundaries of the land donated by Nell Montgomery in 1938. The second section—the Dade County Section—comprised the rest of the Garden, and is the piece of the property that Dade County developed as part of the arrangements made between the local government and Fairchild to establish a botanic garden adjacent to Matheson Hammock Park. It was only around May of 1947 that the Garden started to move towards a single numeric system, using a plant-record notebook, to keep track of the seeds and plants that it received. However, this transition took a while, and due to unknown reasons there were still two independent plant record identifiers of our living collections until 1955.

Early Plant Distributions

There were many hurdles to sort out to establish these early plantings. The two most important ones were the high salt content of the water from the Garden wells and the snaps of cold weather. They resulted in many plants not surviving, and eventually there was a need to make a new well that did not have salinity intrusion. Another major problem faced by the Garden was uncertainty, particularly regarding sources for unique plant material, funding for its expanding horticulture activities and ways to keep strong support from the Miami community through Garden memberships.

The archive records show that by April 1938 material from 26 species was already available for distribution, only for Garden members. This distribution program expanded rapidly, and during 1940 more than 600 plants and “large quantities of seeds” were shared with Garden members. Many of the distributed samples came from the Chêng-Ho expedition.

We believe that the initial policy of the Garden to distribute plant material only among its members aimed to increase the Garden’s connections with the community. Many of the plants introduced through the Garden were not available in the horticulture trade. Having access to these novel introductions would have encouraged plant enthusiasts to join the Garden. Clearly, this policy also helped to develop new gardening plants for South Florida.