Reflections on Wildly Exquisite: Florida’s Native Plants

By Susan Lerner, Director of Horticulture

Wildly Exquisite: Florida’s Native Plants celebrates the rich diversity of Florida’s indigenous plants. The Foundation is delighted to partner with the American Society of Botanical Artists for this exhibition. This perfect pairing of new botanical art with the Preservation Foundation’s mission to celebrate the botanical heritage of Palm Beach is reflective of the early documentation of the flora and fauna in the New World and the delight of discovery.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that this exhibition is exclusively about lovely artworks of interesting flora. Like Pan’s Garden, the first all-native botanical garden in Florida, it aims to raise awareness of the beauty and function of native plants in Florida landscapes, and to encourage home gardeners, landscape architects, city planners and others to realize the impact that plant choices have in our world.

The well-known eighteenth-century explorers John Bartram (botanist), his son William Bartram (naturalist, botanist, artist, and explorer) and Mark Catesby (naturalist and artist) were followed to Florida in the nineteenth century by John James Audubon (ornithologist, naturalist, and painter). Each of these trailblazers documented their exciting Florida discoveries with words and/or paintings that became significant natural history resources in their day and remain so in ours. These and other naturalists chronicled a Florida comprised of vibrant landscapes unlike any other. To William Bartram, the “spring-fed streams, sandy banks, and ancient trees formed a natural paradise.”

But the Florida they detailed has almost disappeared. In their time, for instance, longleaf pine communities covered an estimated seventy to ninety million acres in the Southeastern United States. By the late 1990s only three million acres remained, with more than thirty threatened and endangered species calling the dwindling longleaf pine ecosystem home. Here’s another chilling statistic: by 2003, 95% of the land mass of the lower forty-eight states had been commandeered to serve our various needs: 41% for agriculture and 54% for otherwise developed land, leaving only 5% of the land in relatively pristine condition.

Without an appreciation for the intricate tapestry that is a thriving ecosystem, our communities have been assembled using exotic plants from around the world, largely eschewing unfamiliar indigenous plant species and ignoring the needs of the native insects, birds, and other wildlife critical to a balanced habitat. Perhaps with the assumption that there is more land for nature “over there”, delicate habitats for species that co-evolved with and depended on native plants have been, and are still being, diminished or destroyed. In fact, so much land has been appropriated for human use, that we can no longer count on the shrinking natural areas to provide habitat for our wildlife friends. It is now up to each of us to add a diversity of appropriate native trees, shrubs, vines, and herbaceous wildflowers to the segment of that 54% that we can influence - our home and community landscapes.

Commemorably, the Town of Palm Beach recently joined the ranks of other forward-thinking Florida counties, cities, and towns by revising its landscape ordinance to “promote the planting of appropriate native vegetation to encourage the presence of birds and wildlife...” The ordinance improvements recognize the importance of native plants, the impact of toxic pesticides and the overuse of fertilizers, the danger of exotic invasive plants that can destroy native habitats, and the value of native ecosystems.

Change is not easy, and resistance to new landscape and environmental concepts is not unexpected. But courageous policy leadership plus focused educational experiences offer guidance to a new way of envisioning landscape: Dynamic learning opportunities abound that provide the why and how to realize a native transformation, including but not limited to guided tours of Pan’s Garden; the work of native plant societies around the country; books and lectures by scientists and writers such as Douglas Tallamy; art exhibitions featuring native plants, such as this brilliant collaboration between the Preservation Foundation and ASBA.

Plants are not intended to be static wallpaper in the rooms of our outdoor life, yet the choice of exotics over natives often yields that result. Rehabilitating our landscapes with indigenous plants is the gateway to environmental sustainability.

The artworks in this exhibition summon us to re-educate our eyes and see wildly exquisite beauty in places and ways that have been overlooked - the curve of a palm frond, the frilly lip of a pitcher plant, the waxy red seeds of a magnolia, even the insect-chewed leaf of a seagrape, to name a few of the thirty-four juried pieces.

Carrying forward the work of Florida’s early botanical explorers with exquisite sensitivity, the twenty-nine artists represented here are the bridge from that past - and they invite us to rediscover and reclaim Florida’s native plant heritage. A rich palette of Florida’s native plants awaits - exquisite, living, breathing, life-sustaining, essential participants in the dance of Life.

Wildly Exquisite: Florida’s Native Plants closed on April 30th. Exhibition catalogs may be purchased through the ASBA website at asba-art.org.
From Palm Beach to Shangri La: The Architecture of Marion Sims Wyeth
By Jan Sjostrom

Marion Sims Wyeth worked with E.F. Hutton to develop Golfview Road, was the architect Ralph Norton chose to build the Norton Museum and designed Hagardito, Marjorie Merriweather Post's first Palm Beach home. Doris Duke tapped him for her Honolulu treasure house Shangri-La, and he was responsible for the architectural bones of Mar-a-Lago. Yet he's the least known of the "Big Five" architects who in the first half of the 20th century established the Palm Beach style.

The Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach decided it was high time Wyeth, who died in 1982, received his due, alongside Addison Mizner, John Volk, Maurice Fatio and Howard Major. The organization is behind the first book published about Wyeth and a documentary about the restoration of one of his most important projects. Both the book, which will be published by Rizzoli, and the film will debut this fall. The Foundation is the repository of Wyeth's architectural collection. Chairman Betsy Shiverick, and her husband, Paul, recently restored No. 16 Golfview Road, the subject of the documentary, and underwrote the book and film.

No. 16 was once part of La Claridad, the mansion Wyeth designed in 1924 for Clarence Geist, the utilities magnate who in 1927 took over the development of the Boca Raton Club (now the Boca Raton Resort & Club) after Mizner's company went bankrupt. La Claridad was divided into two residences in 1948, when Paul Butler, head of Butler Aviation and developer of Oak Brook, Illinois, moved into No. 16. "We're trying in our small way to preserve the way Palm Beach looked and should look," Betsy Shiverick said. "I think the reason people love Palm Beach is because of the old feel, the history and the beautiful architecture." Filmmaker Dave Simonds agreed. "Sometimes there's an old building sitting there and it's easier to knock it down. But if we do that everywhere we lose the physical fabric of our history."

The documentary covers the more than two-year restoration of the home as well as the people and times that figured in its story. Shiverick hopes the film encourages other homeowners to take on similar projects and draws attention to the Foundation's archives. "The Preservation Foundation is a great resource for anyone wanting to redo a home," she said. The archives serve as a resource for anyone who wants to learn more about Palm Beach's architectural history. They contain more than 50,000 original renderings and over 3,000 property files, including photographs, newspaper stories, historic designation reports and other information.

Author Jane Day pored through the archives while researching From Palm Beach to Shangri La: The Architecture of Marion Sims Wyeth. Archivist Marie Penny helped unearth rarely viewed documents to enrich the book, such as Wyeth's early watercolors from a trip to Italy and construction photographs of Shangri La. Day, who spent 21 years as consultant to the town of Palm Beach's Landmarks Preservation Commission, has written extensively about the town's landmarked properties. She considers herself a “public historian,” who eschews the ivory tower and “wants to present the facts to the public,” she said.

With more than 700 projects executed during Wyeth's 54-year career to choose from, she focused on the ones with the best back stories. Wyeth's father and grandfather were prominent physicians, whose connections helped him land the first major commission of his career, Good Samaritan Hospital in West Palm Beach. The gentlemanly architect fit well with Palm Beach society. He's the only one of the "Big Five" architects to graduate from the prestigious Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.

His colleagues benefited from his expertise. When Wyeth chafed at collaborating with Urban, who Post hired without informing him to work on Mar-a-Lago, her then-husband Hutton begged him to stay on. "You've got to come back on this job, because Joe Urban may be an artist but he's not a practical man," Hutton said. "He doesn't know much about plumbing or heating or electricity or any of the basic things that go into a house." Wyeth eventually quit anyway.

His work spanned a wide range of styles, from the extravagant Spanish baroque of La Claridad, which suited Geist's expansive personality, to the classical Greek Revival of the Florida governor's mansion in Tallahassee, patterned after Andrew Jackson's Hermitage in Nashville. Look for more about Wyeth this fall, when the Foundation plans events centered on the book's and film's premieres.
“People will go to any party Pauline throws.” That’s what Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach trustee Dan Ponton said during a tribute to Pauline Pitt, who stepped down in November after five years as chairman. That’s because Pitt knows how to make a Foundation party of 400 to 500 people not only an elegant affair but also “feel like a small dinner at home,” he said. This year’s March 5 dinner dance really was an intimate occasion because the COVID-19 pandemic prohibited large gatherings. Gourmet dinners and gift bags were delivered to guests’ homes, where some hosted small parties.

The evening’s centerpiece was a pre-recorded program that - while it wasn’t face to face - might have been the next best thing. Highlights included the tribute to Pitt, a segment in which trustees talked about what makes Palm Beach special and a peek at the Foundation’s latest project, a master plan to redevelop the town’s Phipps Ocean Park to showcase the Little Red Schoolhouse education center and native plants.

Pitt was reluctant to accept the chairmanship when it was offered, but under her leadership the Foundation was transformed, trustees said. “She looked at the whole organization,” Michele Kessler said during the tribute. “She really turned things inside out.” Among the achievements during Pitt’s watch: professionalizing the staff, expanding membership and attracting younger people and new residents, enlarging the mission to embrace the natural as well as the built environment, establishing forward-looking programs such as the water-rising series, the rehabilitation of Pan’s Garden, the revitalization of Bradley Park and underwriting a master plan to reinvent Phipps Ocean Park. One reason for Pitt’s success was her deep roots in Palm Beach. When trustees shared what makes Palm Beach special to them she explained how Via Tortuga got its name. It once led to the home of a Galapagos tortoise brought to Palm Beach during the 1930s. One of her favorite childhood memories was walking from Casa Amado, the home Addison Mizner designed for her grandfather Charles Munn, to where the tortoise lived to feed it grapefruits. Just about everyone mentioned the wide variety of interesting people they meet in Palm Beach. Also high on trustees’ lists was the diverse character of Palm Beach’s architecture. Some aspects that set the town apart take some getting used to. Hilary Geary Ross referred to “the Palm Beach pause,” an all too familiar conversation stopper caused by the town’s location on a heavily used jet flight path.

The program wrapped up with an episode of Landmarks Discovered, the latest in a series available on the Foundation’s website. Viewers learned how a plan to spruce up the grounds surrounding the Little Red Schoolhouse for its 30th anniversary under the Foundation’s stewardship evolved into a master plan to reimagine the under-used, 18-acre oceanfront park. As Executive Director Amanda Skier and Programming Director Katie Jacob explained, the 1886 schoolhouse was the first constructed in Dade County, which then encompassed Palm Beach, Broward and Dade counties. Residents pooled their resources and skills to build the simple wood structure.

Today the schoolhouse offers free living history programs to Palm Beach County fourth-graders. As part of the plan designed by landscape architect Raymond Jungles the schoolhouse will be relocated to a more prominent location in the park visible from State Road A1A. The park will be filled entirely with native plants, reinforcing the Foundation’s goal of demonstrating how sustainable landscaping can not only be good for the planet but also refreshingly beautiful. Jungles described a park laced with trails where visitors can enjoy shade, bird song and breezes as well as the beach. The redesign also will allow the Foundation to add programs such as native plant propagation and dune studies. Work continues on the plan, which the organization expects to present to the Town Council within the next few months.
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Join us for a tour of the Preservation Foundation’s half-acre Pan’s Garden, guided by the Foundation’s Director of Horticulture, Susan Lerner. As the first all-native botanical garden in Florida, Pan’s Garden is home to more than 250 species of native plants.

In this overview tour, we will visit all areas of the garden, answering questions as we go. Native trees, shrubs, grasses and wild flowers, many of which are endangered, are incorporated into upland and wetland areas designed to display their naturally occurring relationships to one another.

The tour will last approximately an hour and is capped at 15 participants. Upcoming tours will be held on May 3rd and June 7th. Tours will resume in October on the first Monday of each month during season.

Register online at https://www.palmbeachpreservation.org/pans-garden-tour or call 561.832.0731.