

TAMPA'S SECRET GARDEN

Who loves a garden still his Eden keeps, perennial pleasures
plants, and wholesome harvests reaps - Amos Bronson Alcott



Tucked away in a corner of the University of South Florida's Tampa campus is a peaceful little garden filled with native plants, mulched walkways and a friendly feline mascot named Rafters. What started out as "little more than wilderness," is now six acres of landscape displays and greenhouse collections as well as a center for research, education and enjoyment for plant enthusiasts from all over the state. "It's Tampa's best kept secret," says USF Botanical Garden Director Laurie Walker.

The USF Botanical Garden was

established in 1968. At that time, the only trees on site were the native live and turkey oaks. The first director planted most of the flowering trees, according to Walker. Each director has added his own specialty to the garden. Ms. Walker, who in June of 2001 became the first female director, specializes in plants native to Florida. "My passion has always been native plants," reveals Walker.

Today, the botanical garden is part of the University's Environmental Science and Policy Program. Its primary purpose is "to develop living plant collections,

garden displays, education programs and research programs which promote knowledge and understanding of plant life and the conservation of biodiversity on earth," according to the USF Botanical Garden Guide.

Visitors who stroll through the displays and look for hidden treasures find the journey quite rewarding. Paths wind through beds in which plants are placed according to family. "This allows us to show the diversity of plants within a family. For example, we have a bed that contains hibiscus, cotton and okra—all members of

the mallow family," says Ms. Walker.

Many plants are marked with signs (red for natives, blue for non-natives and green for those of culinary interest). Ms. Walker comments, "What we have is pretty much a natural system. This is one of the few gardens where you can see Florida natives planted. Our state has areas that range from sand hills to wetlands. We have plants here from all of those areas. We have a little bit of everything."

Beginning at the trailhead, visitors find a bromeliad garden that includes pineapple plants, as well as air plants such as Spanish moss



LEFT: Flame Vine (*Pyrostegia venusta*) is an evergreen vine that thrives in tropical and subtropical gardens.

TOP LEFT: Sky Vine (*Thunbergia grandiflora*), a native plant to India, enjoys Florida's warm, moist climate.

TOP RIGHT: *Aristolochia gigantea*, or Dutchman's Pipe, provides larval food for the pipevine swallowtail butterfly.

BOTTOM: *Dichorisandra thyrsiflora*, or Blue Ginger, is a native plant to tropical America.

**All photos courtesy of the
USF Botanical Garden.**



and ball moss. "You'll occasionally see a hummingbird here," notes Ms. Walker.

Nearby, a butterfly and perennial bed teems with butterflies. Plants such as scarlet milkweed, butterfly bush and black-eyed Susan attract many different species of butterflies in search of food and a place to lay their eggs. Near the butterfly garden is a section of flowering shrubs and trees, including trumpet trees with showy yellow or pink flowers.

Also of interest is an herb and scented garden. Wild coffee (a native), pecan, ginger, mint and culinary herbs can be found here, as well as a cinnamon tree. This is one place guests are encouraged to touch, as well as smell the plants, and is a pleasant place to sit and relax. Also, keep an eye out for Rafter's rolling in the catnip.

Other displays include grasses (including bamboo), cycads, a fruit orchard and a wetland area containing cypress and other water-loving plants. The shade garden mostly contains tropicals. "It's a really lovely, quiet, often colorful and fragrant place," according to Ms. Walker. Lush ferns and a camellia garden encircle a brick patio. Benches scattered throughout the garden encourage visitors to sit and enjoy



the surroundings.

On the northwestern side of the Garden, a large pond (named Lake Behnke for a generous patron) provides a home for Florida wildlife. Visitors often see alligators, fish, turtles and waterfowl. Herons, egrets, osprey and even an occasional pelican also visit. The Wetland Forest area borders the pond. "It's a true wetland area," says Ms. Walker, "in that it occasionally floods during the rainy season."

Another unique feature of the Garden is its collection of carnivorous plants. "Meat-eating" pitcher plants, Venus flytraps, sundews and butterworts share a bed near Lake Behnke. Ms. Walker explains, "These plants live in acidic conditions where there are not a lot of nutrients available. They have to get their nutrients from an alternate food source. The plants come from different families, yet each plant has come up with unique specialized leaves to capture food." These plants are becoming rare as their wetland habitats continue to

be destroyed, and horticultural collection takes its toll.

The conservatory contains a small fishpond and part of the Garden's collection of orchids. "We have quite a number of orchids thanks to the donation of two large private collections," says Ms. Walker. The Garden is in the process of accepting a third collection.

The Garden does most of its own propagation, and a shade house grows plants for the grounds and the plant shop. "The plant shop contains plants you won't find at local stores," comments Ms. Walker. Orchids, carnivorous plants, and many Florida natives are for sale. The shop also stocks books of interest to Florida gardeners.

The Garden employs only one full-time gardener.

A handful of students work there each semester, but volunteers do most of the work. "The volunteers are invaluable," comments Walker. Some volunteers are regulars, such as the curators. Others may come

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only once a year to help with one of the many plant festivals the Garden hosts. Festivals are the main source of funding for the Garden.

School groups, retirement community residents, plant clubs and garden societies all come to enjoy the Garden. "Every week we have a new group visiting," Ms. Walker remarks. Visitors who come from nearby H. Lee Moffat Cancer Center and Shriners Children's Hospital particularly appreciate the restful and healing atmosphere of the Garden.

Garden workshops, open to the public, are held on select Saturdays and serve as continuing education classes for novice as well as experienced gardeners. Upcoming workshops include Grafting, Scented Gardens, Orchids, the Herb Garden and Tropical Fruit Care and Culture. Reservations are recommended as the workshops fill quickly.

The USF Botanical Garden is open to the public seven days a week and admission is free. Gardeners of all levels and visitors merely searching for a peaceful place to spend an hour or two may find Tampa's own secret garden just what they're looking for.

USF Botanical Garden

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http://www.cas.usf.edu/envir_sci_policy/botanical/botanical.htm

Garden hours: Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 4 p.m. The Garden is closed on major holidays. Admission is free, but donations are appreciated.

Directions: The garden is located near the southwest corner of the USF Tampa campus, at the intersection of Pine and Alumni Drive. From I-275, take Fowler Ave. east to Bruce B. Downs Blvd. and turn left. Go north one block to Pine and turn right. Go east one block to the first traffic light and turn left. Go north one block to the garden entrance on left. ♪