

Lettuce Lake Conservation Park



SURROUNDED by *Beauty* Colorful blooms and scenic views

by Kathy A. Johnson

WHEN YOU THINK OF THE FLORIDA LANDSCAPE, you might think of palm trees and beaches. Here in Tampa Bay, in addition to the stunning Hillsborough River, we're surrounded by the beauty of botanical gardens, parks and green spaces that showcase the area's flora and fauna. Here are a few of the best spots to commune with nature, without ever leaving the city.



Lettuce Lake Conservation Park

Just west of I-75 along a curve of the Hillsborough River lies **Lettuce Lake Conservation Park**. Cypress trees, ferns and oaks draped with Spanish moss make you feel like you're in the heart of Old Florida. Enjoy the peaceful vibe as you stroll down the boardwalk, then climb an observation tower to try to spot turtles and alligators dozing in the sun.

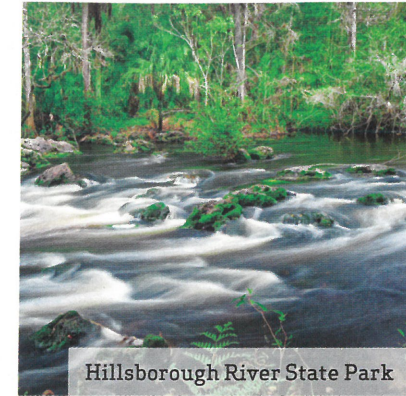


Hillsborough River State Park

HILLSBOROUGH RIVER STATE PARK: AMY PEZZICARA

Down the road from Lettuce Lake, **Hillsborough River State Park** offers outdoor recreation for everyone. Pitch a tent or hook up your RV, go fishing or drop a canoe or kayak into the river where you can shoot a set of class II rapids, a rarity in Florida. The landscape ranges from pine flatwoods to cypress swamp, hardwood hammock to pond grass.

Have a quiet hour or two to spend? Look no further than the 16 acres of the **USF Botanical Gardens**, part of Tampa's University of South Florida campus. The collection of more than 3,000 plants, animals and natural habitats displays the diversity of the Tampa Bay area. Butterflies flit



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USF Botanical Gardens

between blooms in the butterfly garden and carnivorous plants set their traps for insects. Fruit trees, palms, bromeliads and a medicinal garden also flourish here. And don't miss the extensive collection of orchids.

Just north of where the Tampa Bay Buccaneers play football, you'll find **Al Lopez Park**. This family-friendly oasis is free to enter and features two ponds, a paved loop trail and a nature trail. With the crunch of leaves underfoot, the chatter of squirrels and the breeze rustling in the trees overhead, you'll forget you're surrounded by a busy thoroughfare and in the heart of a city.

Down the road between Tampa and Orlando, **Bok Tower Gardens** boasts 50 acres of gardens designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. Paved or mulched pathways meander through longleaf pines and turkey oaks, through quiet spots and secluded nooks, all the way to the 205-foot-tall, Art Deco/neo-Gothic Singing Tower carillon (30-minute concerts take place at 1pm and 3pm). Against a background of ferns, pines, oaks and palms, something is always blooming—azaleas, camellias, magnolias or even giant Victoria water lilies. 🌸



Bok Tower Gardens