

# When you enjoy those lush Florida plants, you can thank Henry Nehrling

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When you step outside or drive through Jacksonville and admire the lush plants you see, thank Henry Nehrling.

The botanist's work, and his tropical paradise, touches the lives of most of us in Florida every day. Through his writing, Nehrling taught newcomers to Florida how to preserve the best features of the natural environment while beautifying it with ornamental plants, palms and trees from around the world.

But his extensive work — and the man — remain little-known.

You could say he just fell through the cracks.

And so did the Palm Cottage Gardens, his beautiful acreage in Orange County, and the 1880s home of the same name in which he lived. The gardens used to be home to thousands of plants and flowers, but over the years became overrun with weeds and kudzu. Nehrling's home also has seen much better days.

But now there's hope for Paradise Lost to be Paradise Regained.

The nonprofit Henry Nehrling Society bought the property in 2009 for \$450,000, obtained through a private loan and donations. Its mission is to open the site to the public as a historic botanical landmark called Nehrling Gardens, with an emphasis on horticultural and environmental education.

"Decades before Disney made Orange County famous, this was the main attraction in the Orlando area," said Angela Withers, president of the all-volunteer society. "Now its doors will open to the public again as beautiful Nehrling Gardens."

## TAKEN WITH FLORIDA

Henry Nehrling was born in 1853 in Wisconsin and studied science and nature, focusing on birds. He created two of Florida's early pioneer gardens, Palm Cottage Gardens in Gotha, and a second in Naples, named My Garden of Solitude. Many admired his gardens, and David Fairchild, the famed botanical explorer, described Palm Cottage Gardens as the most interesting in the state.

Of Florida, Nehrling wrote: "When I first came to Florida in April of 1886, I had the impression of being in a dreamland. The salubrity of the climate acted like a charm. The beauty of the almost untouched evergreen woodlands and the many hundreds of lakes, glittering like mirrors in the bright sunshine, impressed me deeply. The diversity of the exotic garden flora inspired me with ever increasing enthusiasm."

Nehrling's first stop in Florida was Jacksonville. He visited St. James Park, roomed at the Placida and recorded this in his journal: "No American city known to me is so rich in fine shade trees and subtropical plants as Jacksonville. Although the grayish white sandy soil looks very unproductive, the avenues of shade trees, consisting mostly of water oaks and some magnolia, are hardly anywhere surpassed in the South."

Nehrling taught in Texas, Illinois and Missouri and later was secretary and custodian of the Public Museum of Milwaukee.

In 1893, while visiting the World's Fair in Chicago, he was inspired by an exhibit of caladiums. He turned his focus to plants, and he eventually bought the 65 acres in Gotha, where he moved in 1902.

Between 1886 and 1929, Nehrling experimented with more than 3,000 species of plants and trees in his two gardens. His work resulted in over 300 new and beneficial plants being introduced into the Florida landscape. Caladiums, amaryllis and crinum were staples in the garden. At one time, the property had more than 250,000 caladiums. The caladiums he propagated grew into an industry that is worth more than \$13 million to Florida's economy.

His other favorites were palms and bamboo; at the turn of the last century, he had the largest collection of both in his gardens at Gotha. A prolific writer, Nehrling corresponded with botanists and gardens around the globe, and plant material was shipped to him from India, Brazil, Hong Kong, Australia, Japan and China.

The plants in his garden were rarely seen in the U.S., and caught the attention of many horticulturists and botanists as well as luminaries such as Thomas Edison, who had his own interest in horticulture, and Theodore Roosevelt.

A two-volume set of books, "My Garden in Florida," used items from Nehrling's notebooks. Both of these books were used for decades by thousands of gardeners across the state.

In March 1929, Nina Cummer of Jacksonville (whose garden is part of the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens) invited Nehrling to attend the Florida Federation of Garden Clubs annual convention in Miami.

The highlight of the event was the presentation of the Frank N. Myer Agricultural Medal to Nehrling. At 76, his hearing was impaired and, when handed the award, a look of blank amazement gave way to tears of gratitude. In a faltering tone, he expressed his appreciation for the honor.

On Nov. 21, 1929, Nehrling died at his home in Gotha

Palm Cottage Gardens was purchased in 1935 by Julian Nally, the son of the first president of the newly formed RCA Corp. Nally, writing to his sister about the purchase, said, "It's a find in a million; it's very nearly like being transported into another world."

The property was subdivided after Nally's death. Howard and Barbara Bochiardy bought the home and the remaining six acres in the 1980s and maintained the gardens until the property was acquired by the Henry Nehrling Society in 2009.

The property was listed in the National Historic Register in 2000.

Eric Schmidt, a botanical records specialist at Orlando's Leu Gardens, has been identifying plants at Nehrling Gardens since discovering the property in the fall of 2010.

"It's just a forgotten piece of history," Schmidt told The Orlando Sentinel. "Nehrling was such a plant pioneer. ...The plant industry wouldn't be around in Florida without Nehrling."

While surveying the gardens, the Sentinel wrote in a recent article, Schmidt has found several rare palms and "oddball" plants, including an 80-foot Araucaria tree, which typically doesn't survive in Central Florida because of lightning strikes.

"I was amazed at what he was growing," Schmidt said.

### **PRESERVING THE GARDEN**

Interest also is growing for preserving Nehrling's Garden of Solitude in Naples.

The town founders originally invited Nehrling to Naples for the interest his tropical garden would bring to their new seaside resort.

It worked. Fairchild, Edison and many other famous scientists, botanists and tropical plant lovers made their way to Naples by ship and over rough trails to visit Nehrling in his paradise.

Eventually, Nehrling moved his specimens to his Naples property after a freeze hit Central Florida.

Julius Fleischmann, heir to the Fleischmann yeast fortune, recognizing the cultural importance of the garden, bought the Garden of Solitude in 1953. He acquired adjacent properties and preserved it all within the heart of what is now called Caribbean Gardens. The property became a zoological park after Fleischmann died, but the animal exhibits were carefully placed around decades-old exotic plants and trees. Within the park is "H. Nehrling's Tropical Gardens and Arboretum," in which visitors can see bromeliads, caladiums, giant bamboo, climbing ferns and much more.

The land was purchased in 2004 through a referendum of Collier County voters to save Caribbean Gardens from developers. Now, however, expansion at the zoo is threatening the gardens.

An attempt to designate the gardens as historic failed, but preservationists continue to try to save the site.

### **HISTORICAL DIFFERENCE**

What separates Nehrling Gardens in Gotha from other botanical gardens in the state is history. Few, if any, gardens were once working laboratories. And even fewer can claim homes that date from the 1880s, the Sentinel reported.

"We have the history, big-time," Kathleen Klare, a Gotha native and the Nehrling Society's archivist and historian, told the Sentinel.

That history is why the all-volunteer 800-member society is working hard to preserve the home and gardens.

"It may take a lifetime," said David Driapsa, historic landscape architect from Naples, "but they are worthy. These heritage landscapes contain the story of pioneer Florida and the phenomenal history of American garden design."

Former U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez, when he was the mayor of Orange County, helped kick-start the campaign to preserve the site. News of the project was picked up by the Wall Street Journal and Garden Design magazine, putting the landmark on the map again as one of Florida's most historic sites. And Martha Stewart toured the gardens after reading about the preservation efforts. But despite the attention, the society's task has not been easy.

"Like all nonprofits, we're slammed," Theresa Schretzmann-Myers, past president of the society, told the Sentinel. "We need help."

The society must raise \$350,000 to pay off the loan by January 2015.

The group also wants to raise an additional \$2 million to restore the grounds and home, the Sentinel reported.

If the funds are raised, Nehrling Gardens could completely open to the public within five to 10 years, Schretzmann-Myers said. In the meantime, the society does give limited tours. In addition to focusing on historic preservation, horticultural education and environmental conservation, the gardens also could be a meeting place for garden clubs, students and the Gotha community.

"This really belongs to Florida," she said.