

South Florida 2012 Annual "The Villager's Tour"

Historic Property

This property is not only historic but the site conditions here have long provided for the best in South Florida agriculture. The live oaks identified the land as an ancient hammock with higher ground. It was first purchased in 1916, planted as a mango and avocado grove and platted in 1925.



Early pioneers, Harold and Mabel Dorn arrived in this area first known as Larkin, now South Miami, in 1914. He was a businessman who owned and managed groves and a packing house. He also built the Riviera Theater in South Miami, next to what is now Sunset Place. In 1961, their land at 77th Avenue and Sunset Drive was claimed to make way for the Palmetto Expressway. They moved a few blocks west and it is probable that this property encompassed what is now the Block property. There is a 1961 Miami News picture of Mabel Dorn sitting in her garden in front of the Block house. Mabel founded the first garden club in South Florida. She and Marjorie Stoneman Douglas co-authored the first gardening book for South Florida, "Book of Twelve."

This garden is extraordinary in on so many levels beginning with the owner, Dr. Jeffrey Block. He has taken knowledge from his medical background and applied it to horticulture. Combine that with his interest in architecture and design and not only is this garden filled with rare and award-winning plants, it is also visually spectacular. He has successfully grown many plants that are notoriously difficult to grow here. Much of his success stems from his extensive understanding of a plant's needs in terms of light, water, air and nutrition.

Though it seems much larger, this garden is slightly less than one acre in size. Dr. Block has lived here for 22 years so the garden is mature yet still evolving. He feels a good garden needs to begin with the trees with care taken not to overcrowd. Large open spaces give visual depth. His plants are carefully selected and he has a great sense of where to place them. He says, "The most expensive plant you ever buy is the one you lose. Find out what went wrong."

Sabal palms march along the street front up to the brick drive leading into the garden. Inside to the left are croton specimens and very tall and old cycads. One of the tallest trees here is the Cuban royal palm. On the right is a large American oil palm and a *Chambeyronia macroparpa* regularly displaying its bright red new emergent leaf.

A pair of ancient bottle palms flank the front door of the house. The ground cover of dwarf mondo grass is twenty years old. The mule fern (*Angiopteryx palmiformis*) is among the world's largest tree fern. It is thriving in a conservatory meant to be viewed from inside the house. Among Jeff's favorite plants are epiphytes, ferns and bromeliads. He also has utilizes many alocasias, but has been gradually switching to begonias because of their greater cold-tolerance.

There are dramatic views in every direction as you enter the back garden. A path to the left leads to a bed of desert plants centered by a multi-headed (25) ponytail palm. To the right a dusty green night- blooming cereus cactus climbs a Florida ficus tree. Further along on the sunny south side of the garden are fruit trees: papaya, jackfruit, mango, mamey sapote, carambola and jaboticaba.

Dr. Block has listed six plants as currently among the most significant in the garden. There is a 75-year-old Lignum vitae tree, the slow growing Caribbean native which is in the island in the back garden. It has extremely dense wood and is salt tolerant. Also in the island is a *Caryota rumphiana*, or fishtail palm, in full flower. The cascading necklaces of seed pods and flowers are on display. This tree will gradually decline and die over the next few years leaving a legacy of seeds for future generations.

The garden has two stands of mature Queen sago palms planted over 50 years ago. These are not actually a palm but a cycad, a far more ancient group of plants dating to when dinosaurs roamed the earth. Some are inside the front entrance, and the others in the island grouping in the back.

There are two Champion trees as designated by the U.S. Department of Forestry and the Florida Department of Forestry. The first is a Champion Mango Tree in the back right corner recognized for the size of its trunk and canopy. It was planted nearly 100 years ago and has withstood numerous storms and freezes and still bears fruit. The other is on the north side of the garden, a pink silk floss tree (*Ceiba speciosa*) and is recognized by the State of Florida as the largest of its kind. Its massive trunk is covered with a modified bark resembling thorns. Its autumn flowers are four-inch pink blossoms. Avocado sized fruits contain seeds with cotton-like fibers cover the ground beneath. Peeking through the canopy is a massive African oil palm with its spiny trunk.

The *Cyrostachys renda* or sealing wax palm is a highly ornamental cold sensitive palm. It is planted in a protected area near the entrance to the conservatory. The multi-trunk specimen here boasts a healthy green palm with bright red leaf bases wrapped around ringed trunks. It is a rare treat to view.

Other distinctive plants in the back garden include the Cuban petticoat palm with its dead fronds forming a dense skirt. The back of the island is anchored by a magnificent *Bismarkia noblis*. Nearby is the world's largest palmate leafed palm, the talipot palm with its "boots" on. It is about 20 years old and will flower and die sometime 30 and 80 years of age. Following the path to the pool you will see a solitary sugar palm (*Arenga pinnata*) in the island's northwest corner.

At the west end of the island is the distinctive Silver Saw Palmetto var. 'Hobe Sound'. A large red sculpture by John Henry punctuates the landscape. A huge oak lifts the garden skyward, its limbs home to orchids, ferns and bromeliads.

The conservatory features begonias, gingers, and one-of-kind tropical exotics. The wet wall to the rear is built of coral rock with a soaker hose across the top to moisten the clinging ferns, orchids and aroids. An even larger double-headed giant mule fern, *Angiopteris palmiformis*, dominates the center of the conservatory. Another rare plant is the silvery *Itaya amicornum* with deeply divided big leaves. The beautiful Silver Joey palm has huge diamond shaped leaves.

Outside the conservatory in the back is an orchid collection in a protected area. Two greenhouses contain bromeliads and other young plants. One of Dr. Block's secrets of success is the water he uses. Research shows that many plants prefer slightly acidic water with a low pH. This enables them to better absorb micronutrients. Ground water here has basic pH levels. Our municipal water has an even higher pH levels and chlorine which makes it hard for most plants to thrive. Dr. Block has installed a reverse osmosis system that removes the calcium from his ground water, thus lowering the pH value. He adds a diluted fertilizer to the water in the irrigation system. That is just one of the reasons the plants here are so healthy and large and of such high quality.