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Paradise Lost, Then Found

By Josh Garrick

Photographs By Greg Johnston

A century later, Nehrling's historic Gotha gardens may bloom again.

One of Central Florida's most popular tourist attractions in the early 1900s was Palm Cottage Gardens, an open-air nursery where a visionary horticulturist named Henry Nehrling had surrounded himself with thousands of palm trees and exotic plants. Even Henry Ford, Thomas Edison and President Theodore Roosevelt came to wonder at Nehrling's lush, other-worldly, 40-plus-acre oasis.

More than 150 varieties of palms from Africa, Australia, India, China, Paraguay, the West Indies and points beyond stretched across the property in long, majestic rows called palm allees.

Beneath them, amaryllis bloomed - not just a few varieties, but "all the species obtainable," as Nehrling proudly proclaimed. Some were giants, 8 feet tall. Many were unusual colors, including a rare, miniature, purple species Nehrling had imported from Brazil.

There were more than 2,000 varieties of caladiums as well. The decorous, leafy species had become a Nehrling favorite after he saw a display from South America at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. Now he had his own collection, shielded from the Florida sun by burlap screens, proliferating in colors "that rival the autumnal tones of the north" with leaves "large enough to serve as umbrellas."

Nehrling first developed a fascination for tropical and subtropical plants while curator of plant and bird exhibits at the Milwaukee Museum in the late 1800s, and decided to seek out a place where he could devote his life to collecting, propagating and sharing them. He found it in Gotha, a small, predominantly German settlement in southwest Orange County.

There, he planted, studied and wrote about bromeliads, bamboos, cycads and palms, as well as many of Florida's native plants, which he found on forays into the surrounding woods. He developed the state's first U.S. Department of Agriculture experimental botanical garden, testing some 3,000 new and rare plants. Of those, 300-plus new



Nehrling with his favorite species: caladiums.



Many of Nehrling's once-rare decorative plants ultimately became staples of Florida landscaping like the gloriose lilies above.

landscape plants were introduced, including several varieties of palms, magnolias, clumping bamboos, bromeliads, caladiums and gloriosa lilies.

Contemporaries said Nehrling treated his plants like pets, while a biographer once described him as "the patron saint of Florida gardeners." He never charged admission to his garden, and often gave plants away. His painstaking efforts to propagate and describe the plants aligned him with pioneering horticulturists of the era, many of whom have their names inscribed on college campuses across the state. But unlike them, Nehrling was largely forgotten.

A killing freeze in 1917 - Nehrling called it "heartbreaking" - forced him to leave many of his surviving plants behind and move further south, to Naples, where he established his "Tropical Gardens," now the Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens.

But Nehrling complained the Southwest Florida soil was too sandy. "In my garden at Gotha, everything had been different," he wrote. "Although the land there was high, dry pineland, almost all the plants started into vigorous growth as soon as they were planted. There, my only troubles had been the occasional heavy freezes, but in this new land, there were so many days of such disappointment and discouragement that I longed for Gotha again, freezes and all!"

Near the end of his life, Nehrling did return to his beloved Central Florida gardens. But it was not a happy homecoming. Throughout his career, he had trusted so many less-scrupulous nurserymen with handshake business deals that others profited far more than he from his labors. When he died in 1929, said Richard Nehrling, Henry's great-grandson, he was penniless.

"My great-grandfather left a legacy of beautiful plants and trees. His work was a true passion," he said. "What Henry did not foresee was that his hundreds of plant introductions would later create not only beauty but also wealth for Florida. The caladium industry, built from Henry's original caladium creations in the 1920s, is now worth millions."

A renovated and modernized version of Nehrling's home, originally an abandoned, heart-of-pine cottage he found near his garden acreage and pulled by ox cart to his property, still exists. It was purchased in 1934 by Julian Nally, a pioneer, writer and researcher in bromeliad propagation, and his wife, Margaret, an orchid grower. Both died in 1977.

Two years later, most of the property was subdivided into Lake Nally Woods. But the house in the middle of those 40-odd acres, along with six acres along the shores of Lake Nally, were purchased by Barbara Bochiardy, a horticulturist and Nehrling admirer, and her husband, the late Howard Bochiardy, an architect.

After Howard Bochiardy died, she decided to move to a smaller home, but was loath to sell to developers and see the home and the last vestige of Nehrling's gardens bulldozed. She hoped for someone who appreciated Nehrling's legacy to emerge and save the old homestead.

Last November, she got her wish when the property was purchased by a non-profit group seeking to restore what it could of the lost gardens and the legacy of its long-forgotten steward.

The Henry Nehrling Society consists of a handful of private citizens, most with home addresses in Gotha. With support from Senator Mel Martinez and former Orlando Mayor Glenda Hood, the group worked for 10 years to obtain funding from public sources to purchase the house and the remaining land and turn it into an educational center.

Society members successfully lobbied to have Palm Cottage Gardens listed both on the National Register of Historic Places and as one of the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered Historic Sites. But in a time of budgetary restrictions, their grant applications to the state kept getting passed over.

Gradually, the group pulled together seed money from private foundations: a total of about \$80,000 from The Winifred Johnson Clive Foundation, the family of John W. and Anita E. Ritchie, the Ella B. Sadler Estate and the Chesley G. Magruder Foundation. But Nehrling's homestead, by now surrounded by million-dollar homes, appraised at \$700,000. The group obviously had a long way to go.

"It was daunting," said Theresa Schretzmann-Myers, Society President. "People were looking at us and saying, 'Are you crazy? You'll never do it.'"

Then help came from an unexpected source: the flagging economy. Plunging real-estate prices brought down the market value of the Nehrling property to \$450,000. That new price made it possible for the group, with the help of the private donations and a low-interest, \$350,000 loan from Windemere residents Jim and Barbara Gissy, to close the deal last November.

"We're the little non-profit that could," said former Society President Angela Withers. "We pulled off the impossible."

Many of Nehrling's larger plants - "anything that was too big to steal," said Schretzmann-Myers - still remain on the property. Volunteers have begun clearing paths through the tree canopy, working yard by yard down to the lakefront. Withers estimates that it will take another 10 years, and \$3.6 million, to restore the house and transform it into a resource for historic preservation, horticultural education and environmental conservation.

Withers envisions exhibits on horticulture and Gotha history as well as a library and a public meeting place. Garden clubs and student groups will be invited to classes on sustainable gardening, learning "green" landscape practices and water conservation.

It was an exotic oasis a century ago. It helped to transform and beautify the world around it. It will be an oasis of a different sort this time around, surrounded not by vast Florida pinelands but by million-dollar homes and overtaxed natural resources. Its latest stewards hope it will make visitors give a second thought to the observation Nehrling made so long ago: "Show me your garden, provided it be your own garden, and I will show you what you are."

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