

GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

"I am once more seated under my own vine and fig-tree...and hope to spend the remainder of my days...in peaceful retirement; making political pursuits yield to the more rational amusement of cultivating the earth."

George Washington

My Geddy garden will be encompassed by perennials along the fence this year and my morning glories will have colorful company.

I took a vacation in Vero Beach, Florida this past month and during my visit took a guided tour of an interesting garden. I found it of great interest due to the similarities I found with Colonial Williamsburg.

The original McKee Botanical garden was established in 1932 on Route 1, southwest of Vero Beach in Indian River Co., Florida. At that time it was called the "McKee Jungle Gardens" as it also included some caged animals and birds. It was a major tourist attraction in Florida.

The garden was created by landscape designer, William Lyman Phillips, from the well known New England firm of Fred Law Olmsted. Phillips and Olmsted had been classmates at Harvard. Arthur A. Shurcliff, who became the landscape designer of Colonial Williamsburg gardens at the time of the restoration, at one time worked under Olmsted. It was at that time that restoration concentrated on beautification in our country. Colonial Williamsburg naturally focused on recreating formal European designs in the gardens and the colonial revival look graced many of our yards.

The tropical zone of Florida, with its hot climate, concentrated on more exotic plants, and in order to do so they traveled all over the world to procure such plants. Orchids were featured at McKee Gardens and there were Giant Bamboo trees, many varieties of Palm trees, Hibiscus, Palmetto, Pepper Berry trees, Banyan trees from which you get rubber, and native vegetation. All these combined to create a tropical paradise.

I took a guided tour and as we walked under a canopy of palm fronds we were asked to collect any wild potatoes from the vines which were strangling the trees. I obliged.

The knowledgeable guide told the story of the garden as she identified some of the strange and wonderful flowers and trees. I was impressed by a 500 year-old Live Oak tree. Having recently lost our 300 year-old Oak tree at Bassett Hall in the Christmas ice storm, I could not help but marvel at their treasure and wonder if they appreciated it. I guess they did, as they respectfully referred to the old oak as the "old man of the jungle." The oak

tree was one of seven trees called Florida Champions. The champions are rated not by age, but by height, width, and size of the tree.

Arthur McKee was a Cleveland industrialist in steel and petroleum who decided to establish an 80 acre tract of land in the effort to create an environment for native and exotic plants and to help promote tourism in Florida. A grove of over 300 Royal Palms, which are native to Cuba, created such an attractive and romantic spot that it became a favorite locality for weddings to take place.

Due to the generosity of visionaries like John D. Rockefeller and Arthur G. McKee beautiful places like Colonial Williamsburg and the McKee Gardens became possible.

The opening of Interstate 95 and the decline of travel on US 1, along with the opening of other attractions in Florida, such as Disney World and Sea World, caused the garden to close in 1976. It was temporarily closed to the public during World War II when the facility was served as a training ground for American soldiers. The tropical atmosphere was so realistic that the soldiers were taught the techniques of jungle warfare there.

Although only 18 acres of the original 80 are available today for restoration, a dedicated, hard working group of citizens are recreating a small bit of paradise.

Like Colonial Williamsburg, education plays a major role in the goals and activities at McKee. During the past summer "At Risk" students attended a cultural camp at the site. During my visit I saw middle school and high school students who volunteered to help clean up the garden by removing debris, branches, and fronds. In later years these young people will have a special feeling of attachment to this museum. McKee Gardens has recently been named to the National Register of Historic Places.

This restoration was started as a grass roots endeavor for preservation and conservation. The Indian River Land Trust and McKee Botanical Garden is a non-profit, tax exempt organization. I was very impressed with the place and was happy to learn that in the future there will be no birds or animals kept in captivity as in the past, but certain plants will be planted to attract birds like the parrot.

But enough about what I did on my winter vacation. I must now begin planting my kitchen garden. As John Evelyn wrote in his Kalenderium Hortense:

"A Gard'ners work is never at an end;
It begins with the Year, and continues to the next."

Janet Guthrie