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GUARDIANS OF THE MANGROVES

BY ANN TAYLOR
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That’s the message at the entrance to the Mangrove Gardens at Carwill Oaks in John’s Island and it’s one Carolyn Stutt hopes will long be remembered.

Carolyn is a woman with a mission — to educate others about the importance of preserving the mangroves, in turn protecting a fragile eco-system too often destroyed because of ignorance. Her awe-inspiring mangrove preserve is the ultimate teaching tool.

Here giant oaks, palms, haleconias, orchids, ferns, a meandering stream, waterfall, and creatures large and small all thrive happily ever after with mangroves in one glorious garden.

For Carolyn it’s a never-ending labor of love, a love of nature and a land she holds dear.

“So many of us who live here have migrated from the north. Florida is so different. I came from New York and knew nothing about mangroves,” she begins.

“Some people do their homes and gardens turnkey. They come in to build and cut the mangroves out; they aren’t thinking about the future. They don’t understand that we need to be good shepherds of our environment.”

We have not inherited the earth from our Fathers, we are borrowing it from our Children.

– ANCIENT INDIAN PROVERB
One of several walkways, bridges and paths that connect the mangrove garden preserve.

Approaching the house from the river, the visitor is surrounded by lush tropical foliage and African iris blooms that supply protection and sustenance to creatures from bobcats to bees.

Carolyn grew up with that kind of thinking.

“It was fostered by my parents, my father in particular,” she muses.

“He’d get me up at 4 in the morning and by 5 we were in the boat fishing. And we’d also go for long walks. He taught me to listen to acorns dropping, rain misting through the trees. He instilled me with a love and respect for nature.”

It was that respect for nature that had Carolyn looking long and hard at the lot she and her husband Bill purchased on Coconut Palm Road in September of 1988. Although the lot was relatively large — 3 1/2 acres — only 1 1/2 were uplands. The remaining property was made up of wetlands that included a large tidal pond and portions of mosquito abatement ditches created in 1951 by the Army Corps of Engineers, all of which were — and still are — surrounded by a

A ganglier vine thrive in large pots on the east and west terraces.
During the construction of the gardens, Carolyn and Bill discovered a number of spoil islands. The heart of the African iris

A citrus blossom

The view from the window of Carolyn’s office provided a delightfully distracting view of wildlife at play.

mangrove border.

That border was almost destroyed; in December, four months after the Stutts purchased the property, a disastrous frost hit. Tropical plantings, mangroves and citrus were hit hard by the cold temperatures and battering winds. The red and white mangroves experienced a die-back of approximately 50 percent of their height and the black mangroves were so damaged that their survival was questionable. It was felt that with the removal of the dead limbs and branches the mangroves would have an improved ability to overcome the trauma. Carolyn and Bill acted fast. In mid-January of 1989 they met with Dan Ford of Ford & Haack Landscape Architecture (formerly Landscape Design, Inc.), who obtained a permit from the State of Florida to trim the dead wood.

During that trimming process several ‘spoil
islands” were discovered in the mangroves on the northern border of the lot and in a neighboring lot which could not be developed due to lack of substantial uplands. A plan for reaching the islands was developed and negotiations began for the purchase of the neighboring property. In August 1992 it was split into two parcels, one of which the Stutts purchased. Today, they have 4.3 acres, most of which has been transformed into a series of amazing gardens that encompass mangroves, wetlands, lagoons, spoil islands and upland grounds accessible by a series of walkways, bridges and paths. The black mangroves have not only substantially increased their canopies, they're thriving, producing an abundance of seeds Carolyn has harvested and given to the Indiantlan-tic Rotary Club for propagation at their mangrove nursery. Ultimately, the plants grown from them will be used to re-set areas affected by development and environmental hazards.

“It's all about mangroves, mangroves, mangroves. I started landscaping, working on the gardens even before we built the house,” Carolyn says. Wearing overalls she calls “my Farmer John’s,” she personally guides visitors, explaining every detail she can squeeze in during a walk along the wandering pathways of what has been featured in The Garden Conservancy’s 2001 “Open Days Directory” as one of “America’s Best Private Gardens.”

You enter the mangroves from the drive court along a walkway that leads to a world of wonder. Sights, sounds and sights of soft breezes fill your senses and you can't help but smile at your greeter — a grinning frog. “That’s Kermie. We bought him especially for the garden; he watches over the stream,” Carolyn
A bird of paradise in the garden.

Outstanding specimens of hibiscus thrive at Carwill Oaks.

had been broken into once and raided. A Chinese man digging for water stumbled onto it and saved it.”

“General was one of the best preserved figures. We wanted the life-size version and we brought him back with us. Actually, I wanted a second one, but Bill said no.”

The path continues west along Evelyn’s Walk where more wind chimes guide the way to the Kitchen Garden, located along the Indian River. From there the path wanders directly south along River Walk and crosses the southern lawn to a path that leads to Panther’s Lair walkway and island where the statue of a prowling panther awaits.

Lift your eyes and a large lagoon containing creatures indigenous to the area comes into view. If the timing’s right, wading birds can been seen feeding in the shallows.

“We have otters here and spawning fish — tarpon, snapper, shrimp, snook, red tail, blue crab. They’re all so well fed they’re hard to catch. The food chain is so lush, so full here — that’s the sign of a good ecosystem.”

Circling back on the southern lawn to the east side of the house you find herb garden pots and, a little further along, a potting/growing area used for propagation.

Carolyn handpicks every plant in her gardens. She knows and works with the wetlands, we have found that one can live and garden within this environment without upsetting the delicate balance. In developing The Mangrove Gardens at Carwill Oaks, we protected and improved the environment by removal of invasive species, i.e., pepper trees, Australian pines and vines — and by instituting controlled periodic pruning/trimming of the mangroves the health of the wetlands has greatly improved and the result is a more productive, natural environment.

Garden beauty comes in many different forms. By working with the environment and incorporating the mangroves and the spoil islands left behind by the Army Corps of Engineers and the Mosquito Control District in the early 1950s, a unique and exotic garden has evolved. By example, it has become a tool with which to educate individuals and groups who visit — we can only hope that each and every visitor learns that with careful planning, each of us can do our part to preserve and enhance these areas so they can flourish not only now but for all time.

— CARLOYN STUTT

The Stutt home is an excellent example of good mangrove management with trimming executed by Chuck Shock and Robert Dooling of Beautification by Chuck.
in her driveway by the well-intended who find their thumbs are black instead of green. Nurturing is in her nature and preserving the mangroves has been her passion from the moment she saw the property. Bill had to be convinced.

“It was the first garden tour when he became enraptured. That nailed it home for him and he’s been a major part of the gardens since 1994. He’s waded in this muck with chest waders on and with a machete as we laid out the new boardwalks taking us out of the rain forest into the General’s Island.”

Since the beginning, Carolyn and Bill have made every effort to preserve the land that nature had so generously blessed.

One of the first examples of this was in 1991 when plans for straightening Coconut Palm Road were put into motion by John’s Island Real Estate Development (JIRED). In order to accomplish this, a 70-plus-year-old oak had to be removed from the easement of the Stutt’s lot, so they set about working with Bob Burnett from JIRED, arranging for root pruning and irrigation in preparation for moving the tree further back into their lot. At the same time Burnett showed them trees on Sago Palm Road also slated for removal. They adopted two of them and spawned the “orphan tree program” which is still in effect at John’s Island. By 1993 the concept of building bridges in order to reach the “spoil islands” had evolved. Again, preservation steps were taken, with appropriate applications of permits submitted to the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. With approval from both agencies, construction began in September and was completed in December. The first bridge connected the drive court to what is today known as the Rain Forest. Once in place, the spoil islands were cleared of pepper trees, fire ants and other invasive, non-indigenous plants. The remaining vegetation consisted of two juvenile live oaks, one large black mangrove and one large sea grape — all of which were pruned and shaped. It truly rains in the Rain Forest — twice a day, every day, thanks to John Kluntz of Vero Beach.
Looking east through the African iris and mangrove hedge across the tidal lagoon to the untrimmed mangroves, which provide roosting areas for the birds that feed and visit there.

Carolyn's Thai orchid house on Serenity Island was conceived by the Stuts, in collaboration with Dan Ford, Toby Hill and Bo MacEwen of MacEwen & Associates in Tampa, the architect for the Stut’s home. The custom-carved teak panels, produced in Thailand, were secured by Jorie Kent.

It’s all about mangroves, mangroves, mangroves.

—CAROLYN STUTT

The Panther’s Lair walkway crosses the path of its namesake, the prowling panther.

A phaelenopolis glows in the orchid house.
Sprinkler, who redesigned the watering system in the spring of 1997. Using a series of irrigation pipes and misting heads installed vertically along tree trunks, he was able to replicate the fine mist found in rain forests. A fresh water stream was sculpted into the hard-packed earth and a recirculating pump system installed. The first plantings consisted of button wood mangroves, adenidias (Christmas palms) and lobster claw haleconias. These were chosen for their rapid growth and ability to provide a canopy for the island below, home of the planned rain forest. During the course of the following year Carolyn and Dan Ford personally selected plants from nurseries. In addition, orchids were tied into the existing trees. Today there are over 3,000 of them, so no matter what time of the year it is there is always something blooming. The second bridge was constructed from the base of the fresh water stream in the Rain Forest, across a mosquito abatement ditch to the west side of the property that borders the Indian River, thereby allowing access to the Kitchen Garden that runs parallel to the river. That garden was begun in late 1992 when citrus trees were planted: valencia, honey bell and navel oranges, tangerines, Thompson white grapefruit, pink grapefruit, key lime, Persian lime and lemon. The northern border was planted with a cherry hedge, traveler palm and a Chinese kapok tree. Since then, other fruit-bearing trees and plants have been added: guava, pineapple, two varieties of avocados, lichee nuts, mangos, papayas, figs, pineapple and coconut palms. The original layout included large grassy expanses with narrow beds along the sides and islands containing various fruit trees. In March of 1999, the grass was removed, planting beds enlarged and mulched paths created. The third bridge leads to Panther’s Lair Island on the southernmost point of the original lot and runs east to the large lagoon, passing a desert-like microclimate on another spoil island. The prickly pear cactus "volunteered themselves," providing a setting for the panther sculpture that calls the island home. A casting made from the original silkwood carving by sculptor Bruce White, formerly of Vero Beach, was commissioned by the Stutts. Further down the walkway is a dock with canoes used to navigate deep into the mangroves to view wildlife in their habitat.

In June of 1996 three additional walkways were created that run through the mangrove preserve. Due to the hard work and generosity of Evelyn and Steve Lepire of Evelyn’s plant care.
designed to provide access to the remaining islands north of the Rain Forest. Construction on the one leading to Serenity Island was begun in March of 1997, and it’s the site of the Thai Orchid House, a co-operative effort conceived by Carolyn and Bill. Toby Hill of The Hill Group designed the entire structure with its unique architecture; he also personally monitored the construction. “Bo MacEwen, the architect for our home, designed the roof accents,” Carolyn explains, “and Jorie Kent of Abercrombie & Kent obtained the custom-carved teak panels produced in Thailand for us through their Bangkok office.”

The other two walkways lead to General’s Island, the northernmost part of the Kitchen Garden. In April of 1999 a teak Thai Spirit House the Stutts purchased two years earlier was installed to the south of the swimming pool. It sits on the edge of the river in an oak tree glade, surrounded by asparagus ferns and sea grapes, facing due east. The purpose, according to Thai culture, is to attract the good spirits who will reside there and protect the house and surrounding garden. Payment for this “protection” takes the form of a fresh floral offering every day to keep the spirits happy. Those spirits must have been sleeping in Mangroves and mankind exist together in the preserve at Carwell Oaks, and will continue to do so if Carolyn Stutt has her way.
September 1999 when Hurricane Irene came calling. The winds were not the problem. The rainfall that caused heavy flooding was. Ground cover in the rain forest was devastated and the fresh water stream had to be re-installed. The Kitchen Garden lost 100 cubic yards of soil to the Indian River along with the retaining wall, and the Garden Conservancy cancelled all garden shows in the area for the year 2000.

Carolyn did not lose heart. “I have two observations. First, gardens are never-ending works in progress, and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Mother Nature is at best an unreliable partner, even though she has provided memorable moments, many of them coming just before daybreak. I used to get up at 5 in the morning and walk down to a bench with a cup of coffee and a dog we had. I’d sit there, wrapped in a blanket and wait for daybreak to come. It’s like the horizon is giving birth. Then, one morning, I noticed what looked like a dark cloud coming towards me. It wasn’t a cloud — it was hundreds and hundreds of snowy white egrets. They were flapping their wings and then they suddenly split over the river. It was incredible.

“I was recounting the experience to some friends we had over for dinner that night and one of them said why don’t we do this on Easter morning?” Seven years ago the Stutts held their first Easter sunrise service with 25 people; today the invitation list numbers 10 times that. “It’s funny,” she muses. “When we came here we didn’t have a goal, other than retirement and making friends. Instead, we’ve become guardians of the mangroves. They’re enchanting, especially when you listen. It’s a way of communing with God.”

Carolyn is teaching that lesson to her grandchildren. Last year on Arbor Day they planted a Thompson grapefruit tree.

“I wanted them to understand the importance. One of them, Will, tells everyone, ‘You have to meet my Granny C. She’s a real environmentalist. She’d put the pedal to the metal to save a squirrel.’”

And she would. Saving the mangroves is where Carolyn puts her emotional and physical mettle. And anyone who visits the Gardens at Carwill Oaks comes away with a greater sense of responsibility, thanks to lessons learned from a woman dressed in her Farmer John’s.

“Come often to my garden, for your pleasure gives me the greatest joy of all.”

Carolyn takes in what she calls the “orphans,” plants left in her driveway by the well-intended who find their thumbs are black instead of green.