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A Dose of Green Paradise for a Winter's Day

By Paul Clemence

Wednesday, February 27, 2013 3:00 pm

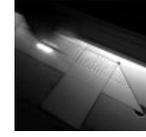


Palms reflecting on Glade Lake

As much as I have enjoyed New York and its famous urbanity in the years since I moved here, a recent visit to Miami (where I moved from) reminded me of the softening powers of nature. It's easy to forget this primeval presence when we're underground or walking in crowded canyons of grey stone and brown brick buildings. By contrast, in Miami, I am soothed as I go about my day and catch a glimpse of unobstructed skies and expansive bay and ocean views, and the reinvigorating presence of lush flora year around and everywhere. On my last day there I went by the [Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden](#) to get a good dose of that green paradise, hoping it would last for me through end of winter. The Fairchild does not disappoint!

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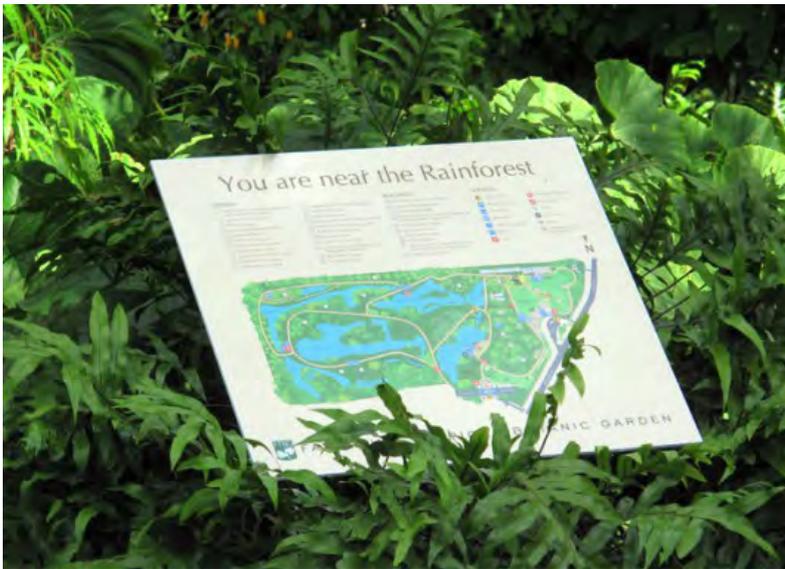
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Palm Garden detail



Grounds guide map

Starting with the drive that leads to the Fairchild, down the banyan tree-shaded Old Cutler Road, the tone is set for a total immersion in tropical flora. At the entry point, a giant African baobab tree greets visitors, as you make your way into the grounds, you're in the midst of a botanical feast. This is a living museum. It contains the biggest collection of palm trees in the U.S. and features rare species from all over the world. All this richness is laid out in carefully orchestrated vistas that harmonize with the unspoiled mangroves (the initial landscape design was done in the 1930's by [William Lyman Phillips](#), a leading designer at the Olmstead Group, the designers of New York's Central Park, among many others).

Here I must admit that I did not take advantage of this great treasure of nature while I lived in Miami. So now for the first time, I was able to see how the lowlands, grassy meadows, the lake views, the vast sky, all come together to show off the captivating beauty and variety of our plant world.



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Bailey Palm Glade

Beyond offering these green Zen moments, the institution, as I found out, is an expanding mode. A couple months ago the Fairchild opened the DiMare Science Village, a complex of buildings that will provide proper space for biology research and educational programs, bringing the institution closer to the community and the visitor experience. The cutting edge educational labs, classrooms, a butterfly conservatory (including a butterfly metamorphosis lab), an indoor garden for rare and sensitive tropical plants, and a café complete the new offering.



Tropical Plant Conservatory

A few years ago Fairchild Garden, a poem on nature, also began featuring art exhibits its grounds. One of the most successful, by glass artist [Dale Chihuly](#), brought in a half a million visitors. The artist's colorful creations were scattered around the gardens and in the lakes. To commemorate the moment, a few pieces remain on permanent display. "This exhibition was the seminal event for Fairchild," Nanette Zapata, COO, told me. "It drew hundreds of thousands of visitors who came to enjoy the beauty of art and nature and learned, once here, about our other activities, like the science and education programs and conservation initiatives."

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Windows to the Tropics Conservatory with Chilluly glass sculpture

Today the two exhibits on display fit in perfectly with the institution's landscape. "[Chapungu: Custom and Legend, A Culture in Stone](#)," celebrates the 40 years of stone sculpture tradition in Zimbabwe. The pieces are primitive yet polished. They have an indigenous sophistication and are completely at home at the Fairchild. The other exhibit, "[Sitting Naturally](#)," is a group show of seven artists each invited to create a piece for sitting and inspired by nature at the Fairchild. The group includes acclaimed talents like [Christophe Côme](#) and [Michele Oka Doner](#). The pieces, ranging from the sensual use of wood by Oka Donner to [Sebastian Errazuriz's](#) whimsical wood bench set with hanging crystal chandelier, are fun and fitting, giving a lighthearted feel to the environment they were created for.



Chapungu sculpture

Aside from the appeal initiatives to bring in a new and growing demographic to enjoy the Garden, for me the appeal is still that open space and the unparalleled collection of plants of different species, sizes, textures, and origins. Just breathing there is an experience. Those multitudes of refreshing scents linger in memory long after you left the place.



A succulent found in the Spiny Forest of Madagascar



Bromeliad with inflorescences



The rainforest

My Miami-native friend, the artist [Julie Davidow](#), often talks about how her parents would bring her here even before she could walk and that to this day, the Fairchild retains its sense of wonder for her: “I’ve been there so many times, yet every visit is a unique experience. It is still where I go whenever I need an escape or inspiration.”

My eyes and camera lenses are most often aimed at concrete, steel, and glass. But on these cold days up north, when spring seems an eternity away, I keep wishing I were back on the shore of the Fairchild’s main lake, taking in that balmy, idyllic flora, and greeting my turtle

friend at water's edge. I hope my words and images evoke the same feelings of warmth in you, too!



Turtle friend

Paul Clemence is an award-winning photographer whose work is part of many collections, including the Mies van der Rohe Archives and housed by MoMA, New York. He exhibits both in the U.S. and on the international fine art circuit, from classic B & W prints to large scale photo installations. A published author, his work can also be seen in major design and lifestyle publications. His "[Architecture Photography](#)" Facebook page receives over half a million hits monthly.

Photographs by Paul Clemence.

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