

“The Villagers Present: Gardens of Miami”

By Georgia Tasker

This book inspires, intimidates, reassures and educates about what is possible horticulturally on this end of our impertinent peninsula.

It is clear, from this coffee table-style book, that gardens play a central role in many of our lives. We have been given the right climate for year-round access to the green and growing stuff that surrounds us. Sunlight, which both rewards and punishes with its fierceness, demands that we respond, that we shield ourselves—and often we do so by making a garden.

The results, as featured in this lovely book, range from expansive estates to sweetly intimate niches. Throughout South Florida, plant materials are frequently similar, but our uses of them differ in style—from expansive, crisply edged lawns with tidy walks and pavilions, to riotous combinations of color and foliage. Water frequently has a role in our gardens, whether it is cascading or quietly reflecting the undersides of a lotus. Palms are leading players, from the royal to the red sealing wax, and many iterations between.


After Hurricane Andrew’s wholesale landscape destruction in 1992, our thirst for gardening seemed unquenchable. Over time—a short time in comparison to temperate gardens—our sophistication grew and we became assured in the way we planted our palms next to our ferns, next to our gingers and bamboo. For a few of us, the disappearance of natural ecosystems was met with a heartfelt response to restore with great care. More widely, we have learned to combine the native and the exotic, the buttonwood and the begonia, sabal palm and croton.

As you turn the pages of this book, you discover landscapes that thrill and soothe, but together say, “Yes,

there is a Miami garden style.” This style is extraordinarily rich in detail. It increasingly utilizes our native limestone in pavers, walkways, steps and patios. Art often finds its way into our gardens as statuary, mosaics and tile work. And even when there are no statues or waterfalls, the Miami garden exalts in the big leaves of the tropics, the many manifestations of palms, bougainvillea’s exuberant color, the finesse of orchids.

Steven Brooke is responsible for all the book’s photographs, and his eye is never wrong. Take the book as a lesson in gardening and photography. Elaine Mills and Julie Petrella Arch provided the text, often a little breathless with enthusiasm. The introduction, from Joanna Lombard, professor in the University of Miami’s School of Architecture, not only sets our gardens in their historical context, but also teaches us how to read and appreciate them. An admirer of the work of landscape architect William Lyman Phillips, who designed Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, Lombard stresses the principles of unity, contrast and variety that Phillips espoused. “These principles are evident in gardens of all sizes,” she writes. They point to the potential of the region, she adds, and offer “a vision of life in all its beauty and possibility.”

“Gardens of Miami” earned an Award of Honor from the Florida Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, selected by the 2016 Design Awards Jury. The award was presented at the society’s annual conference in August.

The Villagers is a non-profit organization that preserves and restores historic structures and supports the education process necessary for these efforts. 



“Gardens of Miami” is available at the Shop at Fairchild. \$60. It is also available for purchase online at www.thevillagersinc.org.