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Miami's gardens of distinction

BY DEBORAH S. HARTZ-SEELEY

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Among gardens to be pictured in the Villagers' garden book is this one in the Grove, which uses hot tropical colors in both the hardscape and landscape. STEVEN BROOKE

This time of year, the flowers on the Royal Poincianas set the streetscape aflame. Mangoes drip from backyard trees. And most raised vegetable beds are sweating under sheets of plastic as gardeners solarize the soil.

Anyone who comes here from someplace else soon discovers that gardening in our tropical climate is unique. What thrives in Miami-Dade County can differ even from what flourishes in Broward and Monroe counties, says Julie Petrella Arch.

Miami has a very specific microclimate because of Biscayne Bay, says Petrella Arch, who is a landscaper and master gardener. That's why she is involved in producing *The Gardens of Miami*, a book that will showcase our diverse foliage.

The book is a fundraiser for The Villagers, who got their start in 1966 when a group of men pooled their money and bought the Douglas Entrance to Coral Gables. This Mediterranean jewel was to be torn down to make room for a Food Fair.

The wives of the investors formed an auxiliary called The Villagers and went to work on the historic building. "Back then we were hands-on, and we did everything from cleaning pigeon poop off the tower to cleaning bathrooms," says Dolly MacIntyre, a charter member.

Today the group is more likely to be planning its annual spring garden tour or working on a book to raise funds for scholarships and preservation projects. In fact, it was just after The Villagers produced a cookbook in 2008 that MacIntyre got the idea for the present tome.

"Because we have done the garden tour for so many years, it just seemed like a natural fit to make our next publishing venture a book on Miami gardens. There really isn't such a book out there," says Petrella Arch who, with MacIntyre, co-chairs the 30-member committee charged with creating the book.

"When people think of Miami, they think about South Beach and all the glamour. But there's another side to our area that shows up in the beauty, calmness and creativity of our gardens," says MacIntyre.

In order to find gardens for inclusion, the group turned to local landscapers for recommendations. They also contacted homeowners who have participated in The Villagers' garden tours over the past 25 years. Now they also are asking the public for nominations.

So far the selection committee has about 35 gardens to consider, from a five-acre private garden to a 200-square-foot backyard.

"We are looking for gardens that have an interesting story to tell. It doesn't matter if they are grandiose or funky, lavish or simple, modern or traditional. We want anything and everything," says Petrella Arch. The gardens must, of course, be well maintained, she adds.

And the group wants gardens located throughout the county. "When you go from one municipality to another, the character of the area is so different. Miami is such a melting pot of different cultures, and each has brought its own specific part of home with them," says Petrella Arch.

The book will feature about 30 gardens. Each will be professionally photographed but the owners will remain anonymous — no addresses or names will be included. In the back of the book will be information on Miami plant societies and associations as well as public gardens.

"If you have an interest in crotons, then you'll be able to find a croton society. If you have an interest in flowering trees, there's a flowering tree society you can belong to," says Petrella Arch.

The Gardens of Miami, which will be priced at about \$60, is scheduled for publication in October, 2015. That gives the photography committee a year-long growing cycle in which to capture each garden at its finest.

In the meantime, to nominate a garden for consideration, send a description of the garden and photos, if available, to R528altara@aol.com (<mailto:r528altara@aol.com>) by Oct. 1.

"I can close my eyes and see the book on my coffee table," says MacIntyre. "I can hardly wait."

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