



GOTHA, FLORIDA

# Nehrling's Palm Cottage Gardens

*At the Roots of Florida Horticulture*

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Nehrling's Palm Cottage Gardens contains the home and remaining gardens of Dr. Henry Nehrling, nationally known horticulturist and ornithologist, and the "patron saint of Florida Gardens." Nehrling achieved his dream of having a garden where he could grow tropical and sub-tropical plants year round. In fact, this property became Florida's first experimental botanical garden, the site where Dr. Nehrling tested over 3000 new and rare plants for the United States Department of Agriculture. Today, the carefully preserved remaining core of this historic property is on the market. The Henry Nehrling Society is working diligently to find a way to purchase it and operate it as the Nehrling Gardens History and Horticulture Education Center.

## HISTORY

In 1884, Henry Nehrling, a 31-year-old Wisconsin schoolteacher and naturalist, purchased 40 acres of land in the newly founded German-American community of Gotha in southwestern Orange County, Florida. He began his garden there in 1886, and in 1902 he moved there with his family. In 1903 he also moved his late-1880s house to the property from its original site overlooking Lake Olivia. Thus the gardens pre-date the building.

Nehrling's dream was of a garden where he could grow tropical and sub-tropical plants year round. As a designer, he developed a landscape that was natural-looking rather than formal. As a scientist, he also experimented extensively with exotic and native plants, ultimately developing many of the varieties of subtropical ornamentals found today in individual



gardens and throughout the Florida landscape industry.

Over time, Nehrling built extensive wood lathe shade houses for his caladiums and bromeliads and also experimented with many varieties of cycads and tropical trees. Eventually, his property became Florida 's first experimental botanical garden, the site where Dr. Nehrling tested over 3000 new and rare plants for the United States Department of Agriculture. Of these, over 300 new and beneficial plants were introduced into Florida and U.S. landscapes including many varieties of caladiums, bromeliads, hybrid amaryllis, gloriosa lilies, palms and bamboos. These plants formed the foundation for Florida 's thriving nursery industry, now the third largest industry in the state. Today, the caladium industry alone is worth more than 13 million dollars to the state's economy, and the amaryllis now grown by the millions have direct ties to Dr. Nehrling's work over a century ago in this garden.

In addition to his research in botany and horticulture, he also developed a specialty in ornithology and the ecology of North American birds. In an extraordinary lifetime of study and cultivation of natural beauty, Dr. Nehrling gave to Florida and America a legacy of exotic and native plants that enhance our homes and public spaces today. His seminal works included *Our Native Birds of Song and Beauty* (1893) and *The Amaryllis* (1908). He wrote eloquently of Florida 's natural beauty and the need to protect it. Two of his books have recently been abridged and edited by Robert W. Read of the Smithsonian Institute and published by the University Press of Florida under the titles *Nehrling's Early Florida Gardens* and *Nehrling's Plants, People, and Places in Early Florida*, in tribute to his outstanding legacy.

Dr. Nehrling's Palm Cottage Gardens soon became a popular destination for thousands of tourists, nature lovers, and new Florida settlers. Many prominent people of the era such as Theodore Roosevelt, John Burroughs and Dr. David Fairchild, the famous botanical explorer, visited these early gardens. Fairchild described Palm Cottage Gardens as the most beautiful place in Florida.

Dr. Nehrling was not motivated by money, but by his love of plants and his dedication to the advancement of ornamental horticulture. He only wanted a garden to grow the plants that he loved and to introduce them to everyone who stopped to visit. His plant collections were sought out by some of America 's greatest botanists and leading authorities in horticulture. Little did he realize the far-reaching impact of his work.

By 1917 a series of severe winters drove Dr. Nehrling to purchase another property further south near Naples (not far from his friend Thomas Edison's estate) for his more cold sensitive plants, but Palm Cottage Gardens remained his first love. After Dr. Nehrling's death in 1929, the Palm Cottage and its gardens were neglected for five years until Julian Nally purchased them in 1934. Nally, a pioneer in bromeliad propagation, added several greenhouses to the property and continued Dr. Nehrling's legacy until his death in 1977. At that time, the property again lay idle until it was purchased by a group of developers and subdivided into the Lake Nally Woods residential development. Of the original 40-acre garden, only 6 acres were retained with the Palm Cottage home site; approximately 3.25 acres are upland while the eastern portion extends into Lake Nally.

Barbara Bochiardy (the current owner) and her late husband, architect Howard Bochiardy, rescued Palm Cottage House and its gardens in 1981. Together, they restored the house and added several architecturally compatible structures. Since her husband's death and the onset of health problems, Mrs. Bochiardy has found it increasingly difficult to maintain the property, which suffers from invasive species as well as extensive tree damage from the 2004 hurricanes.

In 2000, a small group of concerned citizens banded together and formed The Henry Nehrling Society with the mission of purchasing and preserving Dr. Henry Nehrling's historic Gotha home and Palm Cottage Gardens. The group incorporated in the State of Florida and petitioned and received non-profit charity status 501(c)(3) with the Internal Revenue Service. Over



the past five years, the organization has grown to over 200 paid memberships with a 20-member Board of Directors and an advisory board of successful professionals with expertise in business, landscape design and hands-on experience in rescuing old gardens. The Society has also formed partnership alliances with many other organizations, such as the Florida Federation of Garden Clubs and the many plant societies that share our goal of saving these historic gardens.

Today, the remaining garden is a living repository of magnificent trees (some damaged and destroyed by the 2004 hurricanes), shrubs and plants overtaken by an invasion of potato vines and exotic species. While Dr. Nehrling's original shade houses and palm allee to the lake are long gone, there are mature trees, bamboos, and palms planted by Nehrling which remain on the site and which may be studied and propagated. Additionally, there are perennials and herbaceous materials in the under story which are believed to be Nehrling's. One of the wood and glass greenhouses built by Julian Nally remains. The State of Florida's Division of Historic Resources recognized Palm Cottage Gardens as "a historical site of State significance" in January 2000, and the U.S. Department of the Interior placed the site on the National Register of Historic Places in November 2000.

The Henry Nehrling Society believes that the best way to preserve the garden is to create an education, history and horticulture center for the public on the site. The purpose of the center would be to:

- Honor Dr. Nehrling's horticultural and ornithological achievements;
- Preserve the remaining historical gardens and create new teaching gardens;
- Recognize the community's historical and German-American cultural heritage;
- Teach environmentally sound gardening and landscaping practices, and wetlands restoration and conservation; and
- Assist in the conservation and protection of natural resources in Central Florida.

There is a tremendous need for this kind of resource in Orange County.

Nehrling's Palm Cottage Gardens was the subject of an extensive 2005 Masters degree thesis for the University of Florida by landscape architect, Cary S. Hester, M.L.A., who also holds a horticulture degree from Cornell University. Hester's intensive study included a G.P.S. tree survey of the gardens; a new site plan; detailed historical and horticultural research of the site; studies of gardens comparable to the proposed Nehrling garden restoration and their positive impact on the surrounding community. "There are a lot of mature trees, bamboos, and palms that are Nehrling's which remain on the site," said Hester. "In addition, there are a lot of perennials and herbaceous materials in the under story which I suspect are Nehrling's. These under story species of herbaceous plants need to be inventoried as well, as there are probably enough of them to at least begin the new garden planting, but a lot of material will have to be added as well. More research needs to be done in creating a "Master Plant List" of all species historically grown on the site. This would then serve as a checklist for obtaining or propagating new material, some of which still remains on the site today."

"The framework of mature trees on the west side of the property (near Hempel Ave. ) is almost entirely Nehrling's, as are the canopy trees immediately surrounding the house," said Hester. "On the east side of the property (near the lake) there are less of Nehrling's trees and a lot of new planting would need to occur to implement my site plan in this area. The original Date Palm Allee would be reconstructed. Even so, this garden is well worth rebuilding, even if slowly and one piece at a time. Canopy trees would have to be added as time goes on, as well as the under story and herbaceous materials. I suspect everyone involved would be surprised at how quickly we can accumulate more species knowledge and inexpensive plant materials for the new garden with the right team on the task. Nehrling also collected many of the same species at the Naples Caribbean Garden location, many of which remain there today. I would gladly be the Nehrling Gardens contact in Naples, and



work with the horticulturalist here at Caribbean Gardens if they would be receptive to discussing possible donation of plant material of Nehrling's for propagation purposes. However, there is so much history at the Gotha location that it is worth it, no matter how long it takes."

Landscape architect, horticulturist, botanist and ecologist Martin Quigley, Ph.D., M.L.A., Director of the U.C.F. Arboretum and an Associate Professor of Biology, was invited to Gotha to tour Nehrling's Palm Cottage Gardens. Quigley said, "It was very exciting to see first hand the fantastic potential for restoration of this historic site. Despite the first impression of overwhelming vegetation, what lies beneath the canopy of vines is the intact structure of magnificent trees and shrubs that have survived over a century of storms and neglect. Towering live oaks are familiar to everyone in Florida - but there are also the largest Eastern Red Cedars I have ever seen. A rare mature Firmiana (Parasol Tree), spectacular bamboos and countless botanical treasures are there waiting to be revealed. Saving this garden will spotlight environmental and cultural values in southwestern Orange County and will effortlessly enhance its political reputation."

Richard Nehrling, great-grandson of Dr. Henry Nehrling, has also been a champion proponent of the gardens. Richard recently received the Unsung Hero Award for Historic Landscape Preservation from the American Society of Landscape Architects Historic Preservation Professional Practice Network.

## THE THREAT

Burgeoning residential development in Orange County and the greater Orlando area is the greatest threat to Nehrling's Palm Cottage Gardens. Gotha is a "hot" area, and available properties are being snapped up at rapidly increasing prices. Age and health issues have made it imperative for Palm Cottage's owner to move. Thus the property is currently listed for sale and at risk of being lost to residential development. The property to the west of the gardens is commercially developed. The property on the north and south borders of the garden (once part of Nehrling Gardens) is now the residential development called Lake Nally Woods and governed by its Homeowners Association. The groves on the east side of Lake Nally are currently being developed into upscale residential homes.

In December, 2003 the Palm Cottage Gardens property was to be purchased by The Henry Nehrling Society in partnership with Orange County, which had offered \$500,000 in funding contingent upon an agreement from the Lake Nally Woods Homeowners Association to lift the "single family residential" deed restriction on the property by September 30, 2005. However the Lake Nally Woods HOA declined to approve the amendment to the deed restrictions and consequently Orange County's funding was lost. More recently, in 2005, the Florida Communities Trust approved a Florida Forever grant worth over \$250,000 toward the purchase of the gardens. However, this funding also was lost because Orange County was unwilling to guarantee to maintain the site in the future should the property ever revert to the county. Through all of this, the local press, particularly the Orlando Sentinel and The West Orange Times, have been tireless proponents of the efforts to save and restore the Nehrling Palm Cottage Gardens, providing extensive coverage and editorial support.

Also, lack of vegetation management has become a threat to the gardens. Several large trees that were damaged in the 2004 hurricane season now represent a danger to the remaining trees and visitors. Invasive potato vines are growing up into the 120 year-old specimen trees and exotic species are threatening the under story. Without ownership of the garden, Nehrling Society volunteers are limited in their freedom to access the property to clear the invasive potato vines on a regular basis and maintain the garden. The Society also needs to purchase the property as soon as possible to care for the site's historic plants.



## HOW TO HELP

There are three things people can do to help secure the future of Palm Cottage Gardens:

one | Provide funding: Approximately \$975,000 is needed to purchase the property immediately and begin the first phase of restoration to rescue it from encroaching development. A couple who are supporters of the Nehrling Gardens are willing to purchase Palm Cottage Gardens and provide the Nehrling Society with a 5-year lease/option to purchase agreement, with no financial benefit to them other than reimbursement of expenses. The Society would cover the mortgage payments while conducting a capital campaign, and would have the option to pay off the outstanding balance of the mortgage at any time. The property would be operated as a private home and garden with tours by appointment until such time as an agreement could be worked out with the Lake Nally Woods Homeowners Association to allow greater public access. Unfortunately, the owner's asking price is in excess of the appraisal done by the mortgage company willing to finance this agreement, so the property remains on the market. Financial contributions are urgently needed to bridge the remaining gap so that the property can be purchased and preserved.

two | Urge Orange County's leaders to take action to protect one of its important historic resources.

three | Urge the Lake Nally Woods Homeowners Association to permit a change in the deed restrictions and to actively support interim maintenance of the Palm Cottage Gardens property.

To help, please contact

The Henry Nehrling Society  
P.O. Box 884  
Gotha, FL 34734  
Tel. 407-876-1894

[www.nehrlinggardens.org](http://www.nehrlinggardens.org)

## Research

Extensive history and photos submitted with National Register Documentation have been placed on the Florida Master Site File 8OR08111 maintained by the Division of Historical Resources (FTP site).

## Site Address

Nehrling's Palm Cottage Gardens  
2267 Hempel Avenue  
Gotha, FL 34734