



# A Tale of Two Gardens

MCKEE BOTANICAL GARDEN CONTINUES TO EVOLVE  
FROM ITS ORIGINS AS A ROADSIDE JUNGLE ATTRACTION

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“The Greeting,” an oval space just inside the entryway, has been a central feature of the garden’s design since the very beginning.



**M**cKee Botanical Garden is a special place. It always has been. In 1931, when it was known as McKee Jungle Gardens, the onsite landscape architect, Winton Reinsmith, said: “Let nature’s spectacle dwarf the enormity of your burdens and give you peace.” That sentiment captured the magic of the McKee experience then, and it still does today. The garden is an oasis of beauty – enchanting, verdant, and tranquil. It is also an elegant piece of landscape design.

The site has undergone many changes throughout its existence, including 25 years when it lay abandoned. But it has endured and evolved. During this past year, in celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the garden’s resurrection, three areas have been targeted for revitalization. We’ll take a look at

what’s being done there, but first let’s step back and follow the twisting trail that has brought us to this moment.

It all began on January 1, 1932, when McKee Jungle Gardens officially opened for business. Admission was 50 cents, payable at a fruit juice stand just off the parking lot. Arthur McKee and Waldo Sexton created the attraction as a way to preserve the natural beauty of their 80-acre plot of tropical hammock. As McKee himself said, “There will come a time when there isn’t much of this left.”

The two men selected William Lyman Phillips to be the lead landscape architect. His impressive background included projects in Boston, Panama, and France, but it was his extensive Florida experience and tropical plant expertise that made him the perfect choice for the project.

The design that Phillips came up with was asymmetrical and natural-feeling, embracing and enhancing the landscape that existed rather than molding it in a formal or partitioned manner. The real genius of his plan, however, was an area – referred to as the “Introduction” – that first greeted visitors and that still serves as the anchor of the present-day design. Here’s how Phillips described his intent for that transitional passage into the garden: “You should give the visitor a brief resting spell, get him prepared for new sensations. I believe he should pass through a corridor of some sort, walled densely enough on both sides, and roofed densely enough to shut them

in for a few moments from what they have been seeing and what they are going to see.”

He then specified that the ground immediately inside be cleared to “make a circular lawn about 100-120 feet in diameter, get this in brilliant green Rye grass for the winter and have exotic palms and whatever attractive plants you like around the edges.” He continued, “As the visitor comes out from the corridor he will see the face of the jungle, brilliantly lighted in the afternoon or gloomily dark in the morning, across a bright pool of pure green. The effect wants to be a bit breathtaking.”

The metal pergola was originally a wooden lath structure sandwiched between two plant houses that offered orchids and other plants for sale.





Blooming pink powder puffs, *Calliandra emarginata*, add an explosive burst of color along the Inner Banks Trail.

The final piece of his entrance area would be the lush hammock itself. “I would go from a point on the far side of the lawn, opposite the corridor and in line with it, straight on into the jungle for several hundred feet with a cut narrowing as it recedes, affording a deep mysterious view into the forest.” He added, “You can keep the pond and add others if you like between it and the hammock – but keep them outside and off-side your Greeting, as Reinsmith has labelled it on the plan.”

And there you have it: the Corridor, the Greeting, and the Main Jungle Trail – a distinctive and alluring combination that presents the perfect prelude to the wonders that await within.

As for the rest of the garden, Phillips wanted to create points of interest featuring “different sorts of growth” – dense palm groves, palmetto swales, single great oak trees, waterfalls, ponds, and grassy glades. “The principle of contrast should not be overlooked,” he stated. “Do not be afraid to get out from under the trees at times. The gloom of the forest will seem deeper if there are passages of sunlight. Furthermore,” he pointed out, “you must have a few sunny spots or you will be extremely restricted horticulturally.”

The sawdust-covered pathways led to several dramatic destinations as well: a Watery Maze, an Orchid Glade, a swath dubbed the Garden of the Gods, and a spectacular grove of royal palms, which was composed of hundreds of towering royal palms arranged in majestic rows. Exotic subtropical plants collected from around the world, most notably a huge

assortment of water lilies and orchids, were mixed into the natural landscape and native flora throughout the garden. After botanist Ludwig Diels of the Berlin Botanic Garden visited the site, he declared, “Twenty-five thousand miles of travel would be necessary to see all of the rare plants I’ve just seen within these gardens in an hour.”

Of course, this being a Waldo Sexton production, there also needed to be crowd-pleasing attractions. That requirement was met by bringing in animals – at first less exotic choices such as parrots, free-roaming peacocks and turkeys, otters, deer, and native frogs – but as time went on, visitors would see tethered monkeys clambering in the trees, Doc the dancing bear, Ole Mac the alligator, and the garden’s pair of celebrity chimps, Napoleon and Josephine. At one point, there was also a petting zoo.

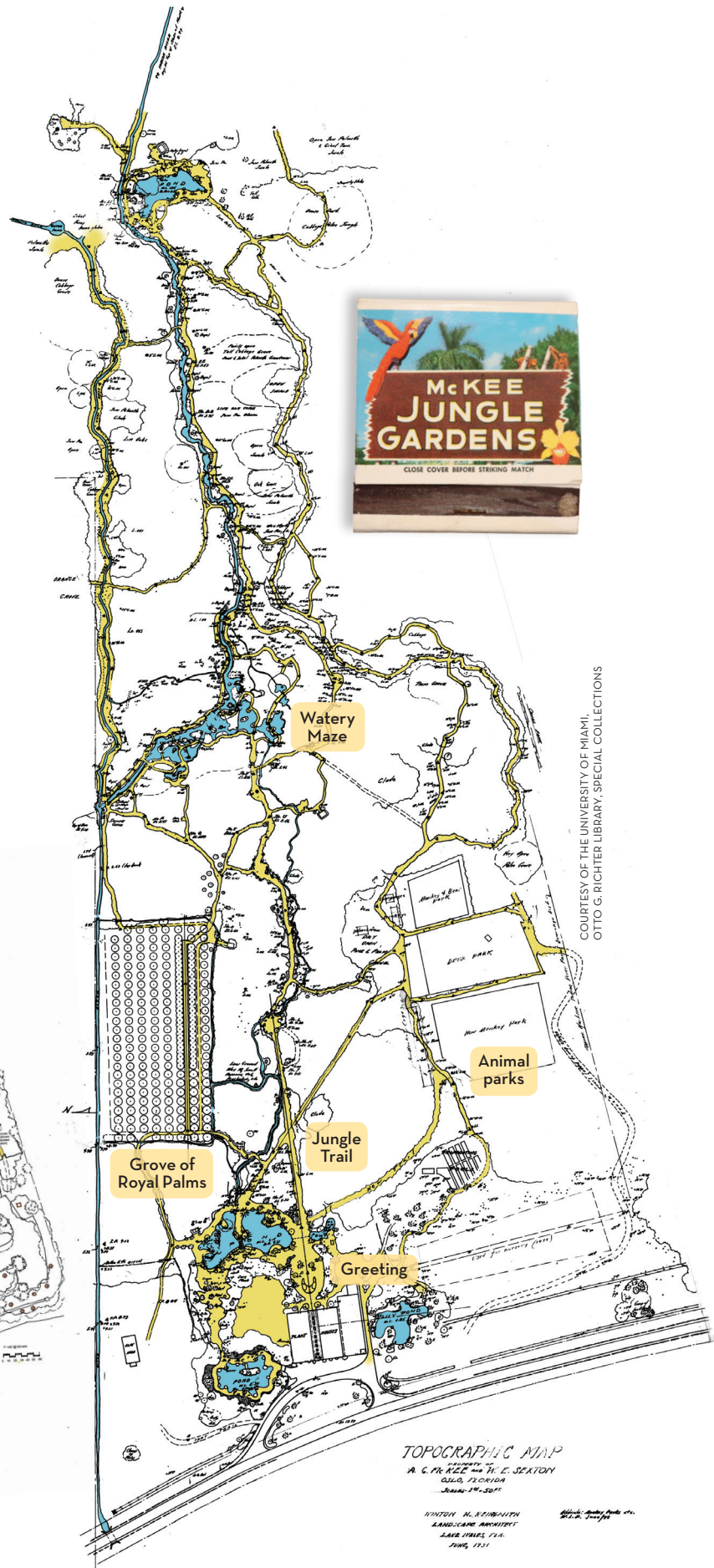
In 1940, the garden remained open during the summer for the first time. To help “amateur jungle explorers” avoid the thriving swarms of mosquitoes, a screened-in “Jungle Cruiser” pulled by a tractor was made available. It turned out to be so popular that a second was quickly added.

Sexton’s fabulous Polynesian-style Hall of Giants was erected in 1941 to house the world’s largest one-piece mahogany table. The Spanish Kitchen was installed directly across a flagstone patio from it. To help attract motorists, an enormous 2,000-year-old cypress stump was positioned next to the road, as was a fully intact whale skeleton. McKee was equal parts roadside attraction and jungle garden.

At its high point, McKee Jungle Gardens attracted a reported 100,000 visitors in a year, ranking it as one of the top tourist attractions in the state. But that popularity began to wane in the '60s and '70s as the Florida Turnpike, I-95, and Walt Disney World drew away potential visitors. A severe gasoline shortage in 1973 was a likely factor as well. Various money-making schemes were tried at the garden, both prior to and after those developments. In 1953, Wild Animal Compound Inc. began operating a base out of McKee, for supplying animals to zoos and circuses but also for displaying them in the garden. The company's ever-changing inventory included Humboldt penguins, giant red kangaroos, anteaters, tapirs, cheetahs, lions, Canadian black bears, elephants, and large venomous snakes, to name just a few.

In 1954, after the garden's entrance and gift shop were destroyed in a fire, a Balinese entryway was erected about 20 yards to the north. Visitors would cross a bridge over the small pond that abutted the parking lot, then enter through the back of the Spanish Kitchen. Before continuing on into the garden, however, they needed to wend their way through the Hall of Giants, which had been reimagined as the Tropical Gift Shop and Museum of Oddities.

As a last ditch effort in 1974, a camping facility for mobile homes went in next to the garden. It was all for nought, though – McKee Jungle Gardens was no longer generating



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Above: The current Garden with the three revitalized areas highlighted: Red – Outer Banks Trail; Yellow – Live Oak Path; Orange – Folly Patio  
Right: The 1931 McKee Jungle Gardens plan, with several 1938 updates



Landscape architect David Sacks gives a talk at McKee back in November.

enough income to be viable. It closed its doors for good in 1976 and most of the land became home to a complex of condominiums.

Much has been written about the 25 years that would follow. Suffice it to say that, through the dogged determination of the Indian River Land Trust and local residents, 18 acres of the garden – the very heart of McKee Jungle Gardens – were saved from development. In 2001, a reimagined and renamed McKee Botanical Garden opened to the public.

As successful as the original design was, McKee the sequel is arguably even better. David Sacks, a Miami-based landscape architect with a masters degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design – the same school from which William Lyman Phillips graduated – was chosen as the historic landscape mastermind behind the garden’s resurrection. Also vital to that effort has been McKee’s director of horticulture and research, Andreas Daehnick.

The main goal, Sacks says, “was keeping the feel of the place as close as we could to what it would have been in the ’30s and ’40s, keeping the ambience, but at the same time allowing it to function in the way that botanical gardens do today, which is as cultural and educational institutions.”

He adds, “In physical terms, it was a matter of working through, ‘Okay, what kind of facilities do we think we need? How do we fit new buildings into the site without disrupting or destroying the landscape? What are the pieces of the landscape that are part of the historic design, and therefore important to restore or preserve?’”

Miami artist Xavier Cortada works away in his studio creating some of the nature-inspired tiles that will grace a set of five columns in the garden.



ADAM ROBERTI



Anne Linville, David Sacks, Mark Mistretta, and artist Robert Anderson are on hand for the unveiling of Anderson's new "garden kaleidoscope."

Retaining the central core of the original design was essential – the Corridor, the Greeting, and the Main Jungle Trail, along with the hammock on either side of it. In the case of the Corridor, an arching metal pergola captured the essence of the original wooden lath structure. The lawn of the Greeting was reconfigured as a perfect oval, with a crushed-shell pathway encircling it.

The two ponds just inside the garden, as well as the Stone Bridge, and the two ponds just outside the entrance needed to be resurrected. Lastly, both the Hall of Giants and the Spanish Kitchen would also be extensively restored.

Beyond those essential McKee elements, however, there was room for interpretation, and Sacks's solution was lovely. Two of the Jungle Gardens' "greatest hits" were reimaged

in new locations: The Royal Palm Grove was installed south of the Greeting, with the Watery Maze situated just east of that.

An entirely new system of interconnected waterways was put in south of the Main Jungle Trail. Gently flowing rivulets, with the occasional small rocky weir to provide a bit of sound, added to the garden's inviting and serene feel.

The resulting layout is seamless; one area leads effortlessly to the next, with something new lurking around every bend. There are currently more than 2,000 species of native and exotic plants in the garden, with pathways meandering through them so that visitors are rarely aware of other trails or other people nearby. It helps make the space seem larger than it is.

The loss of land, from 80 to 18 acres, is often characterized as a drastic change, but the truth is that after World War II, the size of the garden was reduced to an area that wasn't tremendously different from the footprint of today's. It makes for a manageable walk, something that the 100,000 people who visited McKee this past year might agree with.

To help celebrate the garden's twentieth anniversary, a revitalization has been underway for the last year, scheduled to be completed by June. Three areas were targeted: the Outer Banks Trail and Live Oak Path at the back of the garden and an area known as the "Folly" just south of the Royal Palm Grove.

"David came down and we walked the garden with Andreas," Christine Hobart, McKee's executive director, says. "We identified those areas where you may just continue on the pathways – they're not necessarily views or points of interest." Sacks characterized her comments a little differently in a recent speech: "Christine said they were boring."

The most dramatic transformation will be in the Live Oak Path area. The trail's route has been simplified, leading to an open Orchid Glade with the already-existing waterfall now serving as a striking backdrop.

"That waterfall was demolished in the original rebuilding of the garden," Daehnick reveals. "The problem was that it didn't keep in step with the timeline, which was the '30s and '40s. It was much more recent." However, Daehnick hid the pieces, which were eventually reassembled and reinstalled. "It makes for a really neat attraction back there," he says. "It's like a whole new section of the garden."

At either end of the pathway to that waterfall, sculptural pieces by the Miami artist Xavier Cortada are going in. Five columns covered in vibrant, nature-inspired tiles will support sculpted bowls that contain specimen blooming orchids and other plants. "I think this is very exciting," Sacks says about Cortada's art, "and is kind of a step up for McKee."

As for the Outer Banks Trail, Sacks says, "I've learned that a lot of times in landscape enhancements, the most important thing to do is to just get rid of stuff that doesn't look good. But we're also planting a lot of things. And the palette we ended up with really takes inspiration from the original idea, which is, 'Here is a native piece of Florida landscape which was thought to be beautiful and worth preserving.'" He adds, "The other piece of McKee horticulturally is what I call the 'gee-whiz factor,' all the weird and wonderful and unusual plants that come from all over."

Finally, there's the Folly, which will be transformed into a flagstone patio with seating and one of Robert Anderson's custom-made "garden kaleidoscopes" as the focal point. Visitors can view a rotating, plant-filled bowl through kaleidoscopic tubes that are positioned at varying heights.

Of course, these are far from the last changes we'll see at McKee Botanical Gardens, since the quest to improve, rethink, and add elements is never-ending.

"Things can change and evolve," Daehnick says, "but they still always have that big picture in mind, even though it's completely different than it ever was." ❁

Water lilies and the Stone Bridge have been a part of McKee since 1932.

