

Gardens with a Past

New Norris Gardens adds shades of green to historic Palm Cottage

Showy gardenias scent Palm Cottage's Garden of the Senses. (Bottom) Crown-of-thorns.

by Chelle Koster Walton

Land was selling for ten dollars a lot in 1895 when Naples founder Walter N. Haldeman, publisher of the *Louisville Courier Journal*, built a winter home for friend and fellow journalist Henry Watterson.

In May 2004, the Naples Historical Society paid \$1.25 million for a 120-by-200-square-foot lot next to Watterson's home, today known as Palm Cottage—Naples' oldest house and the Society's headquarters. The property was prime real estate in the heart of downtown Naples' historic district, just steps from the beach and Naples Pier. The empty lot

once held the home of Ed Crayton, a Naples inhabitant whose name appears on local street signs and the historic waterfront Crayton Cove district.

In the 1910s, Crayton bought all of Haldeman's property, except for the home, and built a house next door.

A few years ago, the lot's latest owner revealed plans to build a big, Naples-style house on the property. Humble little Palm Cottage would surely have been dwarfed, its integrity compromised, if that were to happen. So the historical society set out to purchase the property, despite the owner's hesitancy to sell, and ended up paying full market price for the Crayton lot largely to save the overshadowing of Palm Cottage, the town's historical gem.

Haldeman had built his friend Watterson a home made of Florida pine, tidewater cypress, and a certain type of

tabby mortar made by burning seashells over a buttonwood fire. It was one of the first permanent buildings in Southwest Florida to be constructed of local materials, modeled after traditional Southern architecture. Its small confines today hold a lot of history. Watterson, nephew of Mark Twain and Haldeman's star editor and Pulitzer Prize-winning colleague, spent many winters in the home. The home also housed overflow guests from Haldeman's Naples Hotel, which used to sit where one finds today the parking lot behind Tommy Bahama's. Watterson's house featured twelve-foot ceilings and transom windows over the seven upstairs bedrooms, designed to take advantage of sea breezes for cooling.

Mr. and Mrs. Walter Parmer purchased the home in 1916 and named it "Palm Cottage," although it was grander in style than traditional cottages of the day. They added a kitchen, plumbing, and electricity. The home's



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HABITATS (

The Water Garden is one of five gardens at Palm Cottage's Norris Gardens. A Seminole chickee provides space for education and community events.



with the lot. They had educational purposes in mind. With a gift from the Dellora A. and Lester J. Norris Foundation, a garden was germinated in April 2005. The Norrises, a plaque in the garden reveals, are remembered fondly for twice rebuilding the Naples Pier, once after Hurricane Donna in 1960 and again in the early 1970s when the wood had begun to deteriorate.

The Norris Gardens, which opened March 24, 2007, encircle a green oval lawn. Circular residential-scale theme gardens grow at the quadrangle's corners. Naples landscape architect Ellin Goetz designed it after researching horticulture at the turn of the last century. The paved path around the perimeter of the oval leads first to the Pioneer Garden, where birds-of-paradise bloom, bromeliads and crowns-of-thorns thrive, bamboo creaks, sapodilla fruits, and Fakahatchee grass feathers at the edges.

Between the Pioneer and Edible gardens, a genuine Seminole pole-and-thatch chickee structure provides space for community programs at the gardens. A special Seminole culture exhibit runs in the space through April 2008. Coontie fern, a sugar apple tree, papaya, nastur-

tium, lavender, jalapeños, and other herbs and vegetables give the Edible Garden credibility.

The Palm Garden pays homage to the Victorian-era fascination with palm trees. It is planted with local varieties and novelty species such as the Old Man palm, named for its bearded appearance. Signage tells the history and lore of the palm, which Babylonians once used to mark the location of water wells in the desert and St. Christopher used as his staff.

The Water Garden, in the Italian Renaissance tradition, features water lilies and a graceful heron sculpture in the center of its pond. The fifth and final garden appeals to two senses: society garlic, frangipani, and gardenia for fragrance; pentas to attract butterflies; and fountain grass and lavender for further visual appeal. The Garden of the Senses creates a delightful space where one can sit on the wooden bench behind the white picket fence that surrounds the garden.

On the other side of Palm Cottage, the Shade Garden is a work in progress, planted with native flora in a natural setting. "We don't want people thinking

that the exotics people brought in belong here," says tour guide Webster of the indigenous plantings here. 🦋

Travel Editor Chelle Koster Walton is the author of Sarasota, Sanibel Island & Naples Book and The Adventure Guide to Tampa Bay & Florida's West Coast.

If You Go

Palm Cottage is located a few blocks west of Third Street South at 137 12th Avenue South, Naples, FL.

Through April, volunteers conduct tours of the cottage and gardens Tuesday through Saturday from 1–4 p.m. In summer, the site is open only Wednesday and Saturday, 1–4 p.m. Fall hours vary. The Naples Historical Society requests a donation of eight dollars per adult and five dollars per child under age twelve for the tours.

For more information, call 239-261-8164 or visit www.napleshistoricalsociety.org.