

WINTER PARK

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How Does Our Garden Grow?

BY LESLIE K. POOLE



Catherine Bowman and her husband, Ron Blair, are with the Tarflower Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society. In 2013, the society began helping to restore the sandhill pine uplands at Mead Botanical Garden by installing 160 varieties of native plants. Photo by Rafael Tongol

A small white egret balances on a rock, eyeing glassy pond water in search of silvery minnows. Two gopher tortoises wrestle head-to-head in a slow-motion battle of wills. A bicyclist takes a break, peering up into an enormous pine tree from which comes a windborne tune.

These are the creatures of Winter Park's Mead Botanical Garden — humans, birds, reptiles and fish — that have found relief and sustenance in its 47 acres of precious green space.

Only two blocks from the incessant cacophony of four-lane U.S. 17-92, it's a quiet, verdant haven from harassment that allows the human spirit to rise while supporting habitats that have disappeared from much of Central Florida.

The loveliness that visitors find here is real. But the garden also serves practical purposes: It filters water destined for the St. Johns River, houses scarce species, and provides layover grounds for migratory birds in search of food and rest.

It also offers a glimpse into Winter Park's past, when the area was mostly pinelands with trees that extended to the horizon — a rare sight in present-day Central Florida.



The snowy egret and the gopher tortoise are among the creatures who share the garden with humans, many of whom enjoy the tranquility or attend events at The Grove, which is one of two amphitheaters on the property.

"This is an ecological oasis in a very urbanized environment," says Peter Gottfried, an environmental consultant who visited the garden as a child. "There's no place like it in all of Central Florida."

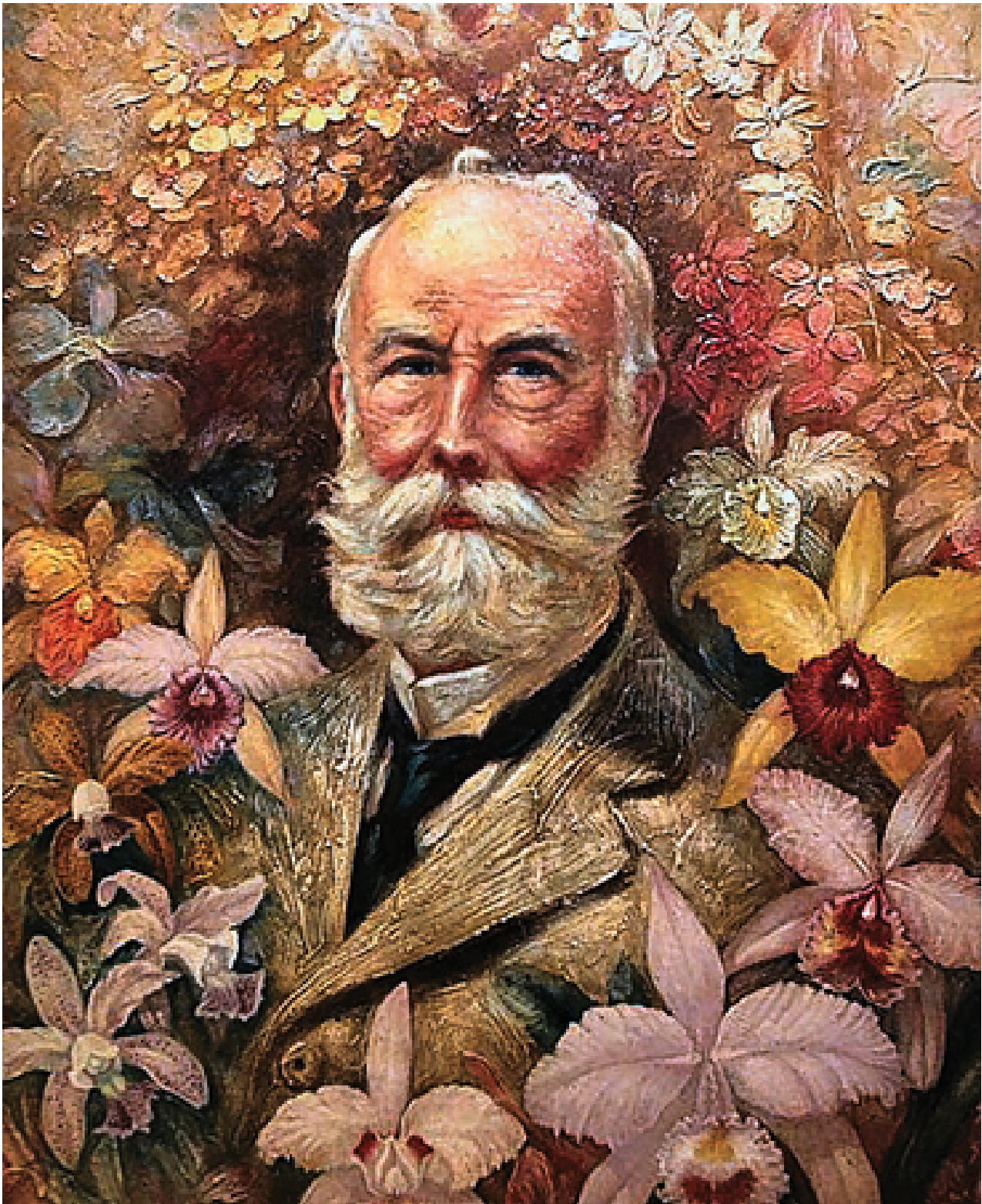
While it may not be truly wild land, Gottfried says the garden is highly valuable because it's a last vestige of Central Florida's natural landscape. Many Winter Park residents, he adds, "don't even know it exists."

Tucked behind a busy municipal tennis complex, railroad tracks, apartment buildings and homes, the garden is located on the south side of the city, bordered by Pennsylvania Avenue to the east and South Denning Drive to the west.

But beyond its shady bricked entry, the garden offers calm amid chaos, and an opportunity to experience a different kind of park — one that combines planted gardens with restored natural areas.

"Mead Botanical Garden is a little ecological island," says Forest Michael, a landscape architect and master planner who has long been involved in the garden's restoration. "It's one of Florida's most interesting spots, full of history and ecological relevance."

The garden is named for Theodore Luqueer Mead, an accomplished naturalist, entomologist and horticulturist who moved to Oviedo in the late 1880s. There he grew exotic plants — particularly orchids — and became renowned for his hybridization techniques.



This lively portrait of Mead was painted in 1932 by Sam Stoltz, an artist and self-trained architect whose quirky “Spanish Florida” homes can still be seen in Windermere, College Park, Winter Park and on scattered sites throughout Central Florida.

A year after Mead’s death in 1936, his protégé, John “Jack” Connery — who had inherited Mead’s teeming greenhouses — approached Edwin Osgood Grover, the “professor of books” at Rollins College. (For more about Grover, see page 70.)

Connery thought — and Grover agreed — that there should be a vast garden to memorialize their mutual friend, and to display his collection of amaryllis, hemerocallis, fancy-leaf caladiums and more than 1,000 orchids.

But how could such an audacious goal be achieved?

Near the college was a low-lying area along Howell Creek that they thought would be perfect for the venture. At Grover's behest, owners of several tracts donated their holdings to Theodore L. Mead Botanical Garden Inc., a newly formed nonprofit.

Four years later — aided by Works Progress Administration labor — the dream became a reality. Mead Botanical Garden officially opened on January 15, 1940, in a formal ceremony that included local dignitaries and elected officials. Grover, who presided over the festivities, laid out a grand vision of a garden that would encompass unspoiled natural areas, ornamental plots, greenhouses for exotic plants and even aquariums — which were never built.

Perhaps the garden wasn't everything that Grover and Connery had envisioned. For years, though, it was arguably the most beautiful spot in Central Florida — a fitting tribute to the genius of Mead and the persistence of the unlikely pair who had implemented this far-fetched notion.

Then, in 1953, the original nonprofit headed by Grover was acrimoniously dissolved — there was a dispute over the distribution of admission fees — and operation of the garden was turned over to the city.

Gradually, it became a mishmash of elements. There were multiple greenhouses, two of which were filled with Mead's orchids. A garden path was lined with palms and hybridized plants, and the wetlands encompassed an egret rookery.

But there was also a county-owned clay pit next to a landfill, which contained everything from old tires to chemical waste. And in 1959, an amphitheater was built next to Howell Creek.



One of the most popular features of the garden is Howell Creek, which brings water from the wetlands near Orlando's Spring Lake through Winter Park and into a lake system that eventually connects to the St. Johns River. Photo by Rafael Tongol

Decades after its creation, the vision articulated by Grover and Connery had been forgotten — or, more likely, ignored. Non-native invasive trees, plants and vines overwhelmed the wetlands. Wooden boardwalks were built and then abandoned to rot.

The city even used the property to store and repair vehicles. Maintenance consisted of mowing over native plants, leaving them unable to naturally grow and reseed.

An irreplaceable natural asset was being not only neglected, but abused.

In 1988, Mayor David Johnson appointed a 15-member Mead Garden Task Force, which recruited the Orlando Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects to assist in formulating a master plan. Perhaps predictably, the plan gathered dust.

In 1992, a Rollins class analyzed the site, offering a vision for a boardwalk system that included signage to educate visitors about local ecology. Again, nothing of consequence resulted. Despite fits and starts of ideas and activity, comprehensive management — and adequate funding for restoration — never materialized.

By the early 21st century, the property had become not a botanical garden but an oversized and underused city park — breathtaking in places, but in a state of inexorable decline.

Enough maintenance was done to keep it looking respectable, and the amphitheater remained a popular venue among event planners. Some boardwalks were repaired, a few trails were built and the entry was rebricked.

However, the garden needed new energy to revive the vision of its early champions like Grover and Connelly. Enter the Friends of Mead Garden, a nonprofit formed in 2003 by concerned residents.

The group organized volunteers for cleanup duty, and advocated improvement plans to city officials. Those efforts were hampered, however, by the hurricanes of 2004. Charley, Frances and Jeanne — three storms in six weeks — left the wetlands a mess and blew in more invasive species.



Volunteers such as Alice Mikkleson and Jean Scarborough are crucial to maintaining the 47-acre garden, which is owned by the city, but operated by Mead Botanical Garden Inc., a nonprofit organization. Photo by Rafael Tongol

Optimism was rekindled in 2007, when the city approved a master plan for the garden presented by Post, Buckley, Schuh & Jernigan, a large architecture and engineering firm.

But an economic storm — the Great Recession — caused funding for reclamation to be slashed. Still, volunteer “Weed Warriors” and “Butterfly Brigades” soldiered on, mostly on weekends, doing what they could with limited resources and motivated by their vision for the garden’s future.

In 2012, the Friends of Mead Garden — now Mead Botanical Garden Inc. (MBG) — signed a multiyear agreement with the city that essentially turned over operational responsibility to the privately funded organization and its 18-member board.

The city still owns the property, but the nonprofit — with a shoestring staff — runs its facilities. MBG board members envision a new master plan that’s more ecologically focused and program-driven than past plans have been.

Central to MBG’s effort is enhancing and restoring habitats and natural systems. There’ll always be human manipulation of the property, notes Michael, but improving its ecology will be a boon for flora and fauna.

“If the ecology is good,” he adds, “people will love it.”

WATERWAYS AND BIRDS

One of the most popular features of the garden is Howell Creek, which brings water from the wetlands near Orlando’s Spring Lake through Winter Park and into a lake system that eventually connects to the St. Johns River.

The portion of the creek that runs through the garden is its longest uninterrupted stretch. It winds through cypress trees and Alice's Pond — named in honor of volunteer Alice Mikkleson — providing an important habitat and travel avenue for wading birds, otters, turtles and fish.

During dry periods, the creek almost disappears; during rainy periods, it floods, demonstrating the fluctuations of natural systems and the importance of wetlands to the local ecology.

Joining the creek at the garden are two city stormwater pipes that collect water from the surrounding neighborhood and dump it onto the property. The water — teeming with chemicals, fertilizers, leaves, grass clippings and trash — had for years been deposited into an increasingly mucky marsh.

But with Michael's help — and through in-person lobbying of Tallahassee lawmakers by Winter Park Mayor Steve Leary — the city received \$450,000 in state grants to remove 17 truckloads of muck and landfill debris from the half-acre site.

A clay pit and a plant-lined pond near The Grove — a newer amphitheater built in 2012 — assist in water treatment during storm and high-water times. Now, when water enters the creek, it's much cleaner than when it arrived.

"The garden is going to be a managed system to some extent, but we want it to be managed as close to natural as possible," says Tim Egan, water quality manager for the City of Winter Park's Public Works Department.



The garden has long been a popular birding site. Its checklist of almost 180 species, compiled by the Orange Audubon Society, includes native and migratory birds. Birders regularly roam the site carrying binoculars or cameras with large lenses to "capture" their prey. Among the year-

Egan's department is supervising an ongoing wetlands restoration and reforestation effort using \$100,000 from the city's stormwater utility capital improvement fund.

The entire job may take decades to fully complete. For now, though, the garden provides priceless green space for the city — which is important for people and animals alike.

"The tremendous ecological value of the garden is, in part, its proximity to other natural resources," Egan says. The city's various parks support many species — particularly birds — that have adapted to living in an urban environment.

The garden has long been a popular birding site. Its checklist of almost 180 species, compiled by the Orange Audubon Society, includes native and migratory birds. "Mead Garden is a supermarket for migratory birds," says MBG Executive Director Cynthia Hasenau.

Birders regularly roam the garden carrying binoculars or cameras with large lenses to "capture" their prey. During the spring and fall migration seasons, OAS conducts guided walks for birders, who come from across Florida in hopes of glimpsing, say, a colorful American redstart or hooded warbler.

Scot French, an amateur photographer, usually visits the garden twice a week. "Obviously, I love the place," says French, who lives in Maitland and is a UCF history professor. "I go there all the time. I find it really peaceful."

The wildlife is always changing, French says. On a recent visit, he realized that a barred owl was directly overhead, staring down at him — and offering an unexpected photo op. "It shot me a look like it was mad," says French.

SANDHILL PINE UPLANDS

The southern part of the garden, which offers the healthiest habitat, encompasses the sandhill pine uplands that once were the dominant landscape of Central Florida.

This tract, while not completely pristine, has the greatest potential to be restored to its natural state. It rises to 89 feet — the highest elevation in the garden. Its central feature is longleaf pine — majestic trees that can reach 50 to 60 feet in height and live up to 500 years.

Plant growth in the uplands was once kept in check by forest fires. However, with no fires for at least 150 years, other trees have sprouted, including palms and laurel oaks. In the meantime, native plants have been mowed over by city crews, and non-native plant species have invaded.

In 2013, in partnership with MBG, the Tarflower Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society began restoring the sandhill area, creating two plots where a variety of plants have been located.

Signs to explain the habitat — and the gopher tortoises that thrive there — are displayed. Gopher tortoises are listed by the state as a threatened species, which means their numbers have dropped from historical levels.

Gopher tortoises also have an important function in the environment. Their extensive underground tunnels — the entrances are cordoned off at the garden — may be home to some 350 other animal species.

Catherine Bowman, the society's president, calls the garden "a treasure," and notes that most other sandhill communities — including Wekiwa Springs State Park in Seminole County — are at least 25 miles away.



Just beyond the garden's entrance is its restored greenhouse (above left), which is surrounded by a colorful and meticulously maintained Legacy Garden. Among the unusual plants you'll find are staghorn ferns (above right), which hang from the large oak trees just to the left of the greenhouse. The ferns are native to Africa, Australia and Southeast Asia. Photos by Rafael Tongol

Bowman's husband, Ron Blair, helped design and implement the restoration project. Volunteers have planted 160 sandhill plants such as saw palmetto, black cherry, persimmon and native grasses in the deep yellow sand, while also removing invasive plants.

"It's a remnant of Winter Park — it's all we have left," Bowman says. "It's a part of the garden where you can say, 'It kind of feels like I'm in the woods here.'"

Volunteers, says Hasenau, are vital to the garden's improvement. Susan League, an MBG board member, says that planting and weeding in the garden "keeps me sane."

"This is a semi-wild garden, where visitors can be free and just wander wherever they want to go," she says, taking a break on a sweltering August morning. Nearby, two wild honeybee hives prove her correct, as does a flowering vine that has attracted the attention of a flitting hummingbird.

NATURE EDUCATION AND PSYCHIC RELIEF

Ecology comes to life during the garden's educational programs and camps, which aim to be incubators for future environmentalists. One of the most popular such programs is the Young Naturalist Summer Camp, held every June and July for children ages 5 to 12.

When it debuted six years ago, the camp had 35 registered children and ran three weeks. By 2017, the camp had extended to six weeks and hosted 375 campers. More than a quarter of the attendees came for multiple weeks, according to Hasenau.

The Rotary Club of Winter Park supports the program with a dozen scholarships annually. “The secret of the camp’s success is the awesome camp staff, the amazing natural setting and the interesting activities and adventures,” Hasenau says. “Children have fun, they explore, they learn, and they don’t have to worry about tracking in dirt.”



Educational programs at the garden cultivate — literally — young ecologists. One of the most popular such programs is the Young Naturalist Summer Camp, held every June and July for children ages 5 to 12. During the most recent camp, Shannon Charmley, program counselor, and a group of eager youngsters collect samples of aquatic life from Howell Creek.

Centered in the Discovery Barn — originally built as a storage facility for city tractors — and a small environmental building, the camp lets kids get up close and personal with everything from snakes to minnows to butterflies in the butterfly garden.

All the while, they’re learning about Florida habitats from a 14-member staff. There’s not an electronic device in sight — and the kids, some of them soaked through their clothes from wading, are having a ball.

“I’m fond of saying that if we can get kids to fall in love with the Earth when they’re little, they’ll love it forever,” says Hasenau as a group of boisterous campers pass. She describes the camp experience as “going green and getting grimy,” a phrase that seems to perfectly fit the bill.

Graham Fetteroff, 13, has been coming to the camp for six years, eventually becoming a junior counselor. “It’s my backyard,” he says. “I like to look for the birds.”

He’s helped with water quality testing in the garden, and today has been dip-netting for minnows with campers. Notes Graham: “When the kids learn a new thing, they go, ‘Wow!’”

In January, with a \$2,500 grant from Healthy Central Florida, the garden began a new Wednesday morning "Tyke Hike" program. Children ages 3 to 5 explore the garden on 90-minute guided treks, during which they examine bugs, leaves and flowers. That program resumed in October.

The garden also works with area schools. Fifth-graders from the Geneva School, for example, have planted flowering native plants and harvested noxious air-potato plants.



The garden offers some extraordinary ground-level sights. But sometimes, you can get the most breathtaking views by just looking up. Photo by Winter Park Pictures (winterparkpictures.com)

Meanwhile, fourth-graders from the school have wandered the garden's waters acting as "wildlife detectives" while studying macro-invertebrates found there. Another summer activity, The Nature Camp, operates out of the nearby Azalea Lane Recreation Center, and regularly brings youths to hike and explore the garden.

Rollins classes often walk to the garden, where they're able to conduct studies in nature's own laboratory. Students taught by Bobby Fokidis, an assistant professor of biology, have trapped, tagged and collected blood samples from turtles; their biggest catch was a 51-pound female snapping turtle, which they released.

Rollins students have also documented fish from the creek and from the stormwater retention ponds, discovering in the process that a South American fish species has somehow entered the ponds.

Fokidis, an eco-physiologist who studies the effect of urban environments on animal species, points to scientific studies indicating that a walk in the woods can decrease stress and improve *human* emotional wellbeing. "Psychologically, it's important that people have this," he adds.

Researchers have indeed found that people living near green space have less mental distress as well as lower incidences of 15 ailments, including asthma, migraine headaches, depression and heart disease.

"It's very valuable to human beings to step aside ... and be with real nature," adds Gottfried, who is also a member of the MBG board. "It's important to a lot of people."





Bobby Fokidis (top), an assistant professor of biology at Rollins College, holds a 51-pound female Florida snapping turtle found in Howell Creek near the foot bridge. The turtle was given a unique mark on her upper shell (carapace) that allowed her to be tracked. "It's cool to know that even in a small parkland in suburban Winter Park, such large and old reptiles are still out there," Fokidis says. Former Rollins student Sarah Wright (above) holds a breeding pair of northern cardinals. The birds, captured where the upland area meets Alice's Pond, were leg-banded as part of a study comparing the role of food on stress experienced by urban-dwelling birds. Photos courtesy of Bobby Fokidis

THE FUTURE

Improving Mead Botanical Garden means that future generations will benefit in many ways.

Bruce Stephenson, a Rollins professor who studies the history of city planning and parks, sees the garden as "an opportunity to create the type of open space that we need to have if sustainability is to become an organizing principle in our society."

The garden, he says, provides three things: a recreational opportunity for people living in developed areas; a place for children to expand their experiences and imagination in nature; and natural ecological functions that support flora and fauna.

Nurturing the latter, he adds, requires a "full commitment to making it not just a botanical garden, but a fully functioning ecological habitat."

That's the challenge for the future. With a staff of two full-timers and two part-timers, the garden is reliant on a combination of taxpayer dollars, private fundraising and literal sweat equity — about 7,000 hours of labor per year — from volunteers.

The public-private partnership is proving beneficial to the city, which allocates approximately one sixth of one percent of its annual budget to the garden while earning back more than twice that amount, according

to Hasenau.

Some of the challenges include reducing the impact of feral cats that hunt avian life — a problem made more difficult by people illegally feeding the felines — and working with local governments to reduce the use of insecticides and herbicides that can harm native biota.

Also high on the priority list is improving land-management practices; removing exotic species; and accelerating the wetlands restoration and reforestation program.

It'll take time, money, energy, passion and vision. Michael says he'd also like to see markers erected that highlight the historical aspects of the garden, including Mead's pioneering work.

Walking through the garden on a recent muggy afternoon, Hasenau energetically points to garden highlights, notes some problem areas and praises the passionate volunteer efforts.

"We've made a lot of progress since 2003," she says. "And, there's tremendous potential as well. We're just scratching the surface of what we can do here."



Photo by Miguel de la Rosa

IDEAS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

Three international scholars are in Central Florida for a four-month residency through IDEAS (Intellectual Decisions on Environmental Awareness Solutions) for Us, a nonprofit founded by Winter Park resident Clayton Louis Ferrara, who also serves as executive director. One of the three, Dipesh Gurung (above center) from Nepal, is working with Mead Botanical Garden, while the other two, Alina Blaga of Romania (above left) and Huong Dang of Vietnam (above right), are working with Ferrara's organization. Since 2014, IDEAS, which has affiliates across the world but is based in Orlando, has participated in the U.S. Department of State-funded Community Solutions Partnership (CSP) program, which annually sends

“fellows” to local communities to work on sustainability issues. Gurung will be working with the garden on education, conservation and youth outreach programs. CSP fellows are usually students, recent graduates or others who have special expertise in sustainability issues or nonprofit management. This is the first year that the garden has partnered with IDEAS to have CSP fellow.

Leslie Kemp Poole, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of environmental studies at Rollins College. She’s also the author *Saving Florida: Women’s Fight for the Environment in the Twentieth Century* (University Press of Florida, 2015).

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