

## THE MARIE SELBY BOTANICAL GARDENS: A NEW BOTANIC GARDENS FOR SOUTH FLORIDA

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*The Orchid Identification Center,  
800 S. Palm Ave.,  
The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens,  
Sarasota, FL 33577*

Today, more than ever before, desirable living space in this country is succumbing to sight, sound and smell pollution. The onslaught of a burgeoning population of people striving for their place in the sun has resulted in the irreplaceable loss through overdevelopment of much of the choice oceanfronts in Florida. It is therefore extremely gratifying to find one of the loveliest stretches of waterfront in the fast growing city of Sarasota being conserved in a manner that is not only physically and aesthetically beneficial to Sarasota, but of tremendous significance to the scientific community. The founding of The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens comes at a time when botanical gardens are no longer a luxury but a necessity. On one level, they serve as a haven and a veritable green lung for the surrounding communities, while at another level, they are fountains of information at a time when preserving the beauty and rewards of nature is of paramount concern.

A five-acre peninsula on Palm Avenue, bounded by Hudson Bayou and Sarasota Bay, was the homesite chosen by William G. and Marie Selby when they moved to Sarasota back in the early 1920's. Mrs. Selby was active in garden club efforts to maintain a green and flowering community, much of which was lost as the town grew. Marie Selby decided to preserve as a botanical garden the green space surrounding her home. Several years before her death in June 1971, she purchased the adjoining two acres of waterfront property to the north. As her last and most enduring of many contributions to the city of Sarasota, she gave the seven acres for use as a botanical garden to be governed by an administrative committee. She also designated an endowment, the income from which would be used for the maintenance of the garden. Selby Gardens became a private non-profit institution, the endowment being the principal source of revenue.

After consultation in 1972 with The New York Botanical Garden, the University of Florida and the Fairchild Tropical Garden, it was decided that a botanical garden specializing in epiphytic plants would be appropriate, in addition to cultivation of plants of general interest. Epiphytes are non-parasitic plants which live upon other plants. Representatives include ferns, aroids, and orchids. The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens is the only botanical garden in the world whose main emphasis is the study, research and display of these plants.

In 1973, Dr. Calaway H. Dodson, Professor of Botany at the University of Miami, was charged with the task of directing the planning and development of the gardens. Quickly assembling a highly dedicated and efficient staff,

he proceeded to bring into reality the ambitious intent of Marie Selby's endowment.

The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens opened its doors to the public in July, 1975. Today less than five years after the initial decision was made, we have a full-fledged botanical garden which includes 6 acres of landscaped waterfront land, more than 20,000 square feet under glass, a modern entrance house and plant shop, and a large landscaped parking lot along Hudson Bayou. The renovated Selby home serves the dual purpose of being a book and gift shop as well as providing quarters for visiting scientists. A large colonial style mansion on the southwest corner of Palm Avenue and Highway 41 has become the administrative building. Across the street from it is a large house that is used as the Science Building. In addition to the offices for the scientific staff, it also houses the Orchid Identification Center appointed by the American Orchid Society, the office for the local chapter of the Audubon Society, the herbarium, the orchid species slide collection, the insect collection and the headquarters of Selbyana, the scientific journal of Selby Gardens. Most of the capital improvements were acquired through grants from the Selby Foundation.

The outdoor garden boasts of a spectacular view of Sarasota Bay, while the hibiscus collection is recognized by the American Hibiscus Society as one of the finest displays of hibiscus in the nation. The display greenhouse with its innovative use of tropical plants in a rain forest setting is being used as a model by longer established institutions. Less visible to the public eye, but even more important, is the Gardens' impact on the botanical scene. The scientific journal, Selbyana, has been extremely well received and the Orchid Identification Center is of international scope. The Gardens serve as a training center for future orchid taxonomists through a program directed by Dr. Norris Williams of Florida State University and sponsored by the American Orchid Society. Because of its status as the repository of a unique collection of living and preserved epiphytic plants, The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens has attracted a continual stream of visiting scientists and professionals on study projects.

The membership currently numbers over a thousand. In addition to other benefits, members can take advantage of special lectures and courses offered through the year, go on study tours conducted by the scientific staff to botanically fascinating areas of the world, or make selections of unusual tropical plants during the annual plant distribution.

The program of development of The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens is far from completion. This mere baby of a botanical garden looks forward to a future of planned growth and improvement commensurate with the financial support it is able to raise through donations, grants and memberships.