

Article in Creative Loafing

How flora and fauna could spark the St. Pete economy.

by LINDA F. HERSEY 11/07/13

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- Chip Weiner
- **PLANT CITY:** Brad Young has offered St. Petersburg his late father's collection of 300 cycads, living links to a prehistoric past.

Enthusiasts flocking from all over the world to see a plant? Schoolchildren throughout the region clamoring to see pink flamingos? These may sound like unlikely scenarios, but thanks to the efforts of two committed groups of volunteers, they could come true — and in the process bolster eco-tourism in St. Petersburg.

Brad Young was studying botany at USF in 1979 when he saw it.

He had traveled to a remote Papua New Guinea village, accessible only by prop plane, with a group of American researchers there to study palms. But it was the jungle cycads that captivated Young. Old-growth plants that look like palm trees without the prominent trunk, they are Earth's original seed-bearing plant — living links to a prehistoric past whose slender green leaves were once snack food for dinosaurs.

Cycads often beguile, even obsess, people who know anything about them — and Young was no exception. On impulse, he shimmied up a cycad and used his machete to lop off the furry uvula-like tendrils that dangled shiny seeds the size of key limes. He then carefully extracted, treated and shipped the seeds back home, where his father, a Tampa surgeon, grew rare cycads as a hobbyist and held a federal permit to import them.

The surprise gift helped to spawn a local legacy. From those 20 seeds, one plant — an endangered *Cycas scratchleyana* — thrives today in the most unlikely of places: the South Tampa yard of the late Dr. U.A. Young.

It is believed to be the only one of its kind in North America and among a dwindling number anywhere on the planet.

In an unusual gesture, Brad Young is offering the city of St. Petersburg his late father's entire rare cycad collection, 300 plants in all, including the *scratchleyana*, the crown jewel of his garden.

Young's offer may ensure that the entire collection of rare and endangered plants — most of them cultivated from seeds by his science-minded father — can be seen and enjoyed by the public in perpetuity.

Placing the collection in the public domain will make St. Petersburg a destination for global enthusiasts, according to plant lovers, including members of the Central Florida Palm and Cycad Society, an offshoot of the International Palm Society.

"This is a huge collection and extremely rare, the only one of its kind," said Phil Stager, who volunteers at the city's waterfront palm arboretum.

The acquisition would cost the city \$300,000, which would come from the Weeki Wachi reserves for park improvements. The Council is expected to vote on the proposal later this year.

Council member Bill Dudley said city officials are receptive to the idea, though they want to ensure that waterfront views will not be obstructed by the slow-growing cycads, which often look more like bushy shrubbery and can live as long as 1,000 years.

"This is a big responsibility. It's not like buying a \$3 plant from Home Depot," Dudley added. "But it also is an opportunity that the city will not likely have again."

With the city's string of downtown parks, St. Petersburg can easily accommodate the primitive plant collection. It is perhaps the only city on the west coast with the natural resources to do it. A recent report from the Urban Land Institute noted that St. Pete's undeveloped shoreline, lush parks and vibrant downtown should give it a competitive advantage among U.S. cities. The Institute also advised the city to consider more private-public partnerships, including a waterfront conservancy.

Transplanting Dr. Young's cycad collection suddenly seems to be more than a curiosity or oddball idea. It builds on a highly endangered concept in Florida — that major cities can gain a competitive edge economically by providing an urban setting while leaving the natural beauty intact, enhanced and accessible to the public.

St. Petersburg already has a well-regarded palm arboretum, next to the North Shore pool complex, where several rare cycads are on display, as well as the enclosed Sunken Gardens, a historic roadside attraction that can provide the oversight and security that the most valuable cycads need to discourage thievery.

Yes, thievery. There is a black market for poaching the world's threatened and endangered vegetation, with the purloined plants coveted by wealthy private collectors.

(Told you people get obsessed.)

As the plan evolves for acquiring and transplanting the cycad collection, another group of park volunteers has stepped forward to raise money to return flamingos to Sunken Gardens, the four-acre historical attraction off busy 4th Street.

Although the flamingo is not as rare as the cycad, it certainly triggers a similar obsession. The pink flamingo is an icon for Florida tourism, though the birds were hunted to near extinction in the state by the early 1900s.

A stray flamingo is occasionally spotted off the Tampa Bay coast, but it is an anomaly. They largely survive and thrive in the Sunshine State in commercial parks, such as Tampa's Busch Gardens, which boasts a flock of 300 and a team of animal care specialists to care for them.

At Sunken Gardens, says volunteer Robin Reed, "these exotic pink birds have been one of the most popular features with visitors" for a half-century. But the Gardens' original flock of Chilean flamingos has now dwindled to an elderly pair of birds. The two flamingos have resided there since the 1950s, introduced by the Turner family, which operated Sunken Gardens before St. Petersburg acquired the property in 1999.

Volunteers already help tend the botanical gardens, home to some of the oldest tropical flowering plants and fruit trees in the region. They hope that by restoring the flamingo flock, they can help boost attendance, too.

The volunteers started the Flamingo Forever Fund with the help of St. Pete Preservation, a private nonprofit. The group has the support of the city, which has agreed to pay for the feeding and care of a new flock, if it is donated to the gardens. Once the birds' wings are clipped, they tend to be low-maintenance, standing as still as a lawn ornament next to artificial wading ponds.

But flamingos aren't easy to buy.

The volunteers are just at the beginning stages of identifying a seller in the U.S. or Canada, and trying to purchase a small number of juvenile birds, which will cost about \$7,500 each.

Restrictions on importing exotic animals prevent them from bringing in flamingos from their native habitats in the Caribbean and South America. They cannot purchase from U.S. zoos without a permit. Now they are trying to work with an independent Canadian breeder who recently sold a pair of birds to a Key West park.

Lesli Larmon, a St. Pete native, recalls seeing Sunken Gardens' flamingo flock when she was a girl in the 1960s. She is one of the volunteers helping to lead the local fund drive.

Larmon believes that if the fund drive is successful, Sunken Gardens will attract more tourists and locals, especially schoolchildren who can see the tropical birds up close as well as learn about the gardens' collection of 50,000 plants. She thinks the flamingos "could be a tremendous asset for the city."

In an era of declining public dollars, supporters say it is essential to find innovative ways to increase attendance at the Gardens, which dates back to the 1930s and is believed to be the first commercial roadside attraction established on Florida's west coast.

Added Larmon: "We are hoping that a small flock of six birds will contribute to the Gardens' vitality well into the future."

The idea of eco-tourism is hardly new; it's been growing by 20 percent a year worldwide since the 1990s. But even though alligator tours may lure visitors to the Everglades, eco-tourism is still an untried idea in other parts of the Sunshine State, which is more likely to tout its theme parks, beachfront high-rises and outlet malls than its abundant flora and fauna.

But with a trove of prehistoric tropical plants to show off and the state bird of tourism returned to its rightful place at Sunken Gardens, St. Pete may hit on the right formula to attract a new kind of tourist.

Besides, the idea that showcasing exotica can help the local economy already has a precedent on the other side of the bay — though Tampa's exotics (see Dancers, Mons Venus) are a different breed altogether.