

# THE GARDENER OF GOTHA

HENRY NEHRLING LEFT MILWAUKEE'S BITTER COLD FOR CENTRAL FLORIDA'S SULTRY SUMMERS TO GROW HIS LOVE FOR THE TROPICAL PLANT INTO A VARIETY OF HYBRIDS AND A THRIVING BUSINESS.

BY  
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ARSDEN



Photos courtesy of Orange County Historical Society

One of the most beautiful foliage plants lending lush variety to our Florida gardens is the caladium. Unlike most yard varieties that are typically praised for the beauty of their flowers, caladiums are well-known for their beautiful, heart-shaped, green-rimmed leaves. Caladiums also boast a cornucopia of contrasting colors—veined or mottled—in delicate shades of white, pink or red.

The caladium owes nearly all of its popularity and praise to the work of eminent Central Florida horticulturist Henry Nehrling. A longtime resident of Gotha, Fla. (near Windermere in southwest Orange County), Nehrling relocated here from Milwaukee, where he was a curator with the Milwaukee Public Museum. There, he specialized in ornithology, the study of birds. One of his best-known published works, *Native Birds of Song* (1893), was later applauded by scholars as comparable in detail and description with the research and writings of John James Audubon.

But Nehrling's interest in the cultivation and development of tropical and sub-tropical plants actually took root while he taught natural history, botany and ornithology near Houston, Texas, in the 1880s. From

there, his enthusiasm for flora blossomed into an all-out search for unsettled Florida acreage, where he could cultivate his beloved plants. In 1884, he purchased 40 acres of pristine land—sight unseen—near Gotha. Two years later, he visited the property and was very pleased with what he found. "When I first came to Florida in April 1886, I had the impression of being in a dreamland," Nehrling wrote in his memoir, *My Florida Garden*, which became a best-seller of the time. "The beauty of the almost-untouched evergreen woodlands and the hundreds of lakes—glittering like mirrors—impressed me deeply."

Later, Nehrling started clearing the land for what would one day become one of the turn-of-the-century's renowned botanical gardens, Palm Cottage Gardens. When Nehrling relocated permanently to Gotha in 1901, he established an experimental agricultural station for tropical plants and foliage, where he started growing exotic strains of bamboo, amaryllis, bromeliad, orchid, ficus and his best-known masterpiece—the caladium, a South American plant that thrives in the Florida heat and peaks in growth from June to November. Despite Central Florida's infamously sultry summers, Nehrling's

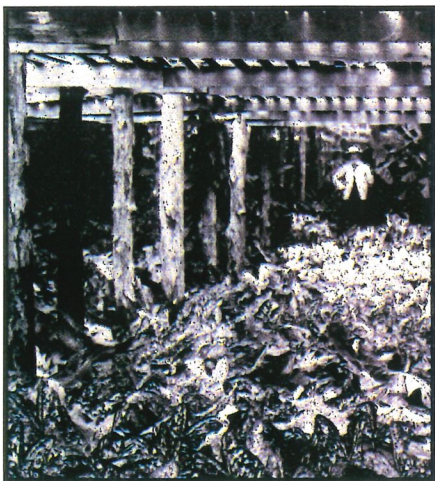




enthusiasm for the area's beauty never wilted. "It was the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream," he wrote in *My Florida Garden* of his land purchase. "Imagine my happiness at the thought of a home where I could grow my new plant friends."

During the years that followed, Nehrling corresponded with botanists and plant collectors throughout the world, and even entertained them at his Gotha garden home. Soon after, he started cultivating a friendship with Rollins College, serving as a lecturer and a tour guide who led field trips to his home. He also befriended fellow botanist Theodore Mead of Oviedo, after whom Mead Garden in Winter Park is named. Nehrling oftentimes corresponded with Mead by letter, and later named the *Mrs. Mead* and *T.L. Mead* caladium varieties after his beloved friends.

It was a 1893 trip to the Colombian Exposition in Chicago that planted Nehrling's seed of fascination for the fancy-leafed plants. "I saw, for the first time in my life, masses of



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fancy-leafed caladiums," he also wrote in *My Florida Garden*. "When I admired the richness, brilliancy and delicacy of these often-translucent colors, I was reminded of art—not of nature. In this, as in many other cases, nature simply surpasses art."

When Nehrling started laying his own roots in Gotha, he commenced with a collection of 50 caladiums, which expanded and flourished to include collections of caladiums sent by the Missouri Botanical Garden and by friends in Pará, Brazil. He even added hybrids from the

Chicago Exposition to his collection. Soon, 50 plants multiplied into thousands. "No pen and no pencil can give an idea of the indescribable beauty of these color masses when at their best," he said to his visitors in an attempt to encapsulate the beauty of the plant in words. "Some of the colors sparkle and scintillate like precious stones or the plumage of hummingbirds ... All of my flower and plant-loving friends, even those indifferent to the beauties of nature, are carried away when they come upon the caladium masses."

While Nehrling's love for the plant must have been stunning to all, it also inspired a lucrative business. Nehrling became the first Florida resident to commercially grow and sell caladiums, providing thousands of plants to Florida gardeners.

By 1916, his garden boasted more than 75,000 caladiums, from which he created more than 2,000 caladium hybrids. Unfortunately, more than half of his prized caladiums and his other tropical plants were destroyed in the disastrous freezes of November 1916 and February 1917. At the age of 66, Nehrling was forced to start his life's work all over again, which translated into a new tropical garden at Naples-on-the-Gulf in southwest Florida, an area that had a wealth of inexpensive land located below the state's freeze line. While rebuilding his proliferation of plants, he simultaneously started building a friendship with Thomas Edison and his wife—a couple with whom he shared stories and his love for ficus and other tropical plants.

For all his successes as a horticulturist, however, Nehrling fell victim to several bad business deals and lost nearly all of his prized specimens in his Naples garden, according to his great-grandson Richard Nehrling, who now resides in Jacksonville. But through it all, he held onto his beloved Gotha land, eventually dying from a heart attack there on Nov. 21, 1929 (he's buried at Woodlawn Cemetery near Gotha). Today, while his Gotha home still stands, Nehrling's precious garden is merely a memory. But the exquisite pink, red, green and white fancy-leafed caladiums remain, gracing our own Orlando gardens and reminding us of one of Central Florida's most remarkable residents—Henry Nehrling. 

Sara Van Arsdel is the executive director of the Orange County Historical Society.

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