

# AHS NEWS SPECIAL: Gulf Coast and Florida Gardens Begin Recovery

by William Clattenburg

**M**ONTHS AFTER Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma successively ravaged the Gulf Coast and Florida regions, relief workers, police, volunteers, and citizens are still working to aid the unfortunate, restore vital services in battered cities, and clean up tons of debris.

In the realm of botanical gardens and arboreta, recovery comes slowly. For gardens with the greatest damage, it will take years to bring displays and trails back to their pre-hurricane condition. Initial efforts in most Gulf Coast gardens have focused on cleaning up debris and rubble that impeded workers from starting other tasks. On top of hauling away the many limbs and fronds that were detached during the storms, workers had to remove miscellaneous garbage washed or blown into their sites. Given the overwhelming nature of the damage, and faced with winter's approach, in many cases garden staff concentrated on saving plants that had a shot at survival and getting gardens back to where they are safe enough to open to visitors.

## SOUTH FLORIDA GARDENS MAKE HEADWAY

Southern Florida, which was hit hard by Rita and Wilma, is one area where replanting is somewhat more prevalent. As in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, however, a lot of plants were destroyed. "We lost many subtropical flowering trees," says **Janet Alford**, executive director of McKee Botanical Garden in Vero Beach, Florida.

At Mounts Botanical Garden in West Palm Beach, Florida, garden workers have proceeded in an orderly way from "the front of the garden to the back," says **Sandy Sklar**, marketing director. "The second week after the hurricane the entire Cooperative Extension went out *en masse* to work on cleanup, along with other volunteers from a neighboring extension. All told, they put in 2,000 hours of work."



Hurricane-felled trees like this one at Mobile Botanical Gardens, above, and those that toppled and crushed the pavilion at Crosby Arboretum, left, were common sights at many public gardens throughout the southern coast of the United States last year.

den's nervous is the perception that we're destroyed," she says. "A drop in attendance has affected us, but this is in large part because a lot of residents have their own issues and homes to clean up." Sklar says she wants people to know that Mounts Botanical Garden opened again as of December 1. "We never shut our gates," she says.

## NEW ORLEANS GARDENS FACE LONG HAUL

Unfortunately, the outlook is not as good for gardens in New Orleans and other low-lying areas where Katrina made landfall. Some positive news came from New Orleans City Park where the Civilian Engineer Corps has started replanting the park's 14-acre Botanical Garden.

The City Park, which offers residents an experience similar to New York's Central Park, was subjected to heavy flooding with salt water from the Gulf of Mexico. Even after waters receded, arborists are con-

No amount of work, however, will save many of the big trees that were weakened and felled by the storm. Both Mounts and McKee Gardens suffered in this respect. "We did lose some of our canopy," says Alford of McKee Gardens, "but we have a plan for restoration." One element of that plan was in effect before the first hurricane of 2005 hit. Live oak trees, emblematic trees of the American South, were all staked for support.

Alford emphasizes that, despite some damage, the perception of devastation in Florida has actually been greater than reality. "The thing that makes Florida gar-

cerned that some of the large trees might not survive. Tree death can occur five to 15 years after periods of heavy stress. Tree losses at this site would be all the more tragic because New Orleans City Park has “the largest and oldest stand of live oaks in the world,” says frequent New Orleans visitor **Gail Dresner**, who is also the lead designer of the Resurrection Garden, a benefit for this Park that will debut at the Portland Home & Garden Show this year (for details on the show, see the *Member Guide* in this issue).

In Picayune, Mississippi, the extent of fallen trees made even getting to arboretum and garden sites an obstacle. In some cases garden staff members had to use chainsaws to literally clear a road back to their places of work in order to begin cleanup. “We’ve had extensive damage to the exhibits and trails,” says **Melinda Lyman**, senior curator at the Crosby Arboretum in Picayune. “A tree fell on our Pinecote Pavilion causing a hole in the roof. A lot of rafters have broken and loosened in the corner where it fell and the support beams now are warped.”

## VISITORS NEEDED

Botanical gardens—dependent on revenue from visitors—face a “Catch 22” situation if they cannot open to the public because of safety concerns. Crosby Arboretum reopened on December 3 and Lyman credits staff with tirelessly preparing the Arboretum for this date. “We spent several weeks cutting through the trails to get equipment through them. We’ve had trouble getting volunteers to help us because of course they were dealing with their own crises. But some have started trickling in.”

Lyman says the support of fellow public gardens and other green industry groups has been incredible. “We were strengthened by monetary help from Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, our sister arboretum,” she says. “We need it because of the loss in revenue and to rent equipment to keep us up and running. We want people to visit us.”

Damage to Mobile Botanical Gardens was exacerbated by lingering effects of the 2004 hurricanes. “The damage from Katrina was extensive because so many of the

trees were weakened by Ivan,” says Executive Director **Marion Drummond**. Volunteers arrived soon after both Ivan and Katrina to clear the roads, uncover plants, and carry plants to irrigation facilities. “It’s amazing how many people came out to help,” she says. “They remind you that you have to help others.” Drummond notes that she was “tremendously touched” to receive a letter and personal donation from AHS President **Katy Moss Warner**. “Those kind of thoughts and donations have been particularly meaningful,” says Drummond.

While reconstruction of damaged gardens and communities will go on for some time, lessons learned in botanical gardens will be used to prepare for future natural disasters. “You always have changes, and Mother Nature seems to heal herself,” Janet Alford says. “We really want people to learn from our experiences and learn about what works in our gardens and what might work in their own landscapes.”

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