



History of Mead Garden

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Theodore L. Mead, was a world-renowned horticulturist who grew orchids and developed new varieties of caladiums, rare ferns, bromeliads, and many more. After his death in 1936, two of his friends, Jack Connery, who Mead had met as an Eagle Scout and Dr. Edwin Grover, Professor of Books and President of Rollins College, sought a location not only to house Mead's orchids, but also to develop a botanical garden in his name and memory. A sizable, untouched natural area bordering Pennsylvania Avenue, in which Howell Creek connects Lake Sue and Virginia, seemed ideal. This lush habitat hosted an abundance of wildlife, including herons and egrets nesting around Lake Lillian as well as small waterfalls created by a nine-foot drop between the two lakes in this pristine, wild expanse.

The community wasted no time in expressing approval of Mr. Connery and Mr. Grover's endeavor. Donations of land, collectively comprised the park's acreage, were made by the following individuals: Senator Walter Rose, Winter Park Mayor James Treat, Mr. and Mrs. R.F. Leedy, and Mary Bartels. Orange County donated an unused clay pit and an abandoned Winter Park city property. Building the park began with a \$62,170 Works Progress Administration project grant for labor.

When Howell Creek was deepened and widened, the wetland was drained making it possible to cut three miles of trails and to plant the beautiful azaleas we still enjoy today at Mead Garden.

Beautification projects included leveling high ground to plant grass and designating a nursery area to supply future plantings of caladiums, ceriman cherries, azaleas and original collections from Mead.

Cabbage palms provided the first fence posts and logs for the two gatehouses in Mead Garden. Two greenhouses were added for Mr. Mead's extensive orchid collection and buildings for the garden superintendents and caretakers were built.

January 14, 1940 marked the dedication of the new Mead Garden. Many Senators and representatives, including Senator Walter Rose of the Florida Legislature, attended. Dr. E. O. Grover, President of the Garden and Master of Ceremonies, honored numerous volunteers, including Winter Park Garden Club President Mrs. Raymond Stevens and Florida Federation of Garden Clubs President Mrs. Harry M. Griffin. Dr. Hamilton Holt, then President of Rollins College, also participated in the ceremonies and the garden's gala premiere, band included, drew a large crowd and a hearty welcome. Flower shows and other outdoor events were soon to follow this grand opening!

On March 31, 1953, the City of Winter Park assumed the administration of the Garden.

The Winter Park Garden Club has been meeting in the Garden for over 50 years. Members continued volunteer efforts, leading to the construction of a beautiful outdoor amphitheater built in the shade of towering oak trees, dedicated in 1959. Before long, this outdoor theater became the site for fashion shows, weddings and other festive social events including a series of concerts conducted by The Florida Symphony Orchestra in 1967. Over these years, however, Mead Garden gradually deteriorated with litter, vandalism to the greenhouse and the disappearance of the orchid collection.

In 1977, the Orange County School System and the Junior League instituted an environmental awareness program for sixth graders (today fifth graders). The children followed the trails and learned through hands-on experience about the plants and wild animals of the Mead Garden. This program continues today with over 5000 public school students coming through the garden each year.

Other groups also sought this relationship with the unique natural setting in Mead Garden. Rotary, Boy Scouts and the Youth Conservation Corps have assisted with community activities to clean and restore the garden. The Youth Conservation

Corps constructed a floating boardwalk through the marsh and helped rebuild the greenhouse.

In 1982, City crews began work to maintain the garden. Two years later, the Red Pepper Garden Club installed a large billboard map with directions for visitors. These efforts were not enough however, and by 1988, Mead Garden had fallen into disrepair. Winter Park residents organized to restore their park, and Mayor David Johnston appointed a fifteen-member Mead Garden task force. The Orlando Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects assisted the group with a master plan to revitalize the garden. The plan provided for the needs of the park including beautification, upkeep, conservation and management.

The Mead Garden Preservation Association, Inc. was formed in 1991 to continue the work of the task force. In 1993, two new boardwalks were built followed by bike and walking paths. Other improvements included parking, re-bricking the road entrance, fencing, picnic tables, new restroom, and shelter.

Presently, the City's Parks and Recreation Department maintains the Mead Garden on a day-to-day basis. However, many volunteer organizations such as the Boy Scouts, various church groups Club and the Winter Park Garden Club participate in clean-up workdays and special projects for garden enhancements to maintain the green haven that is called Mead Garden.