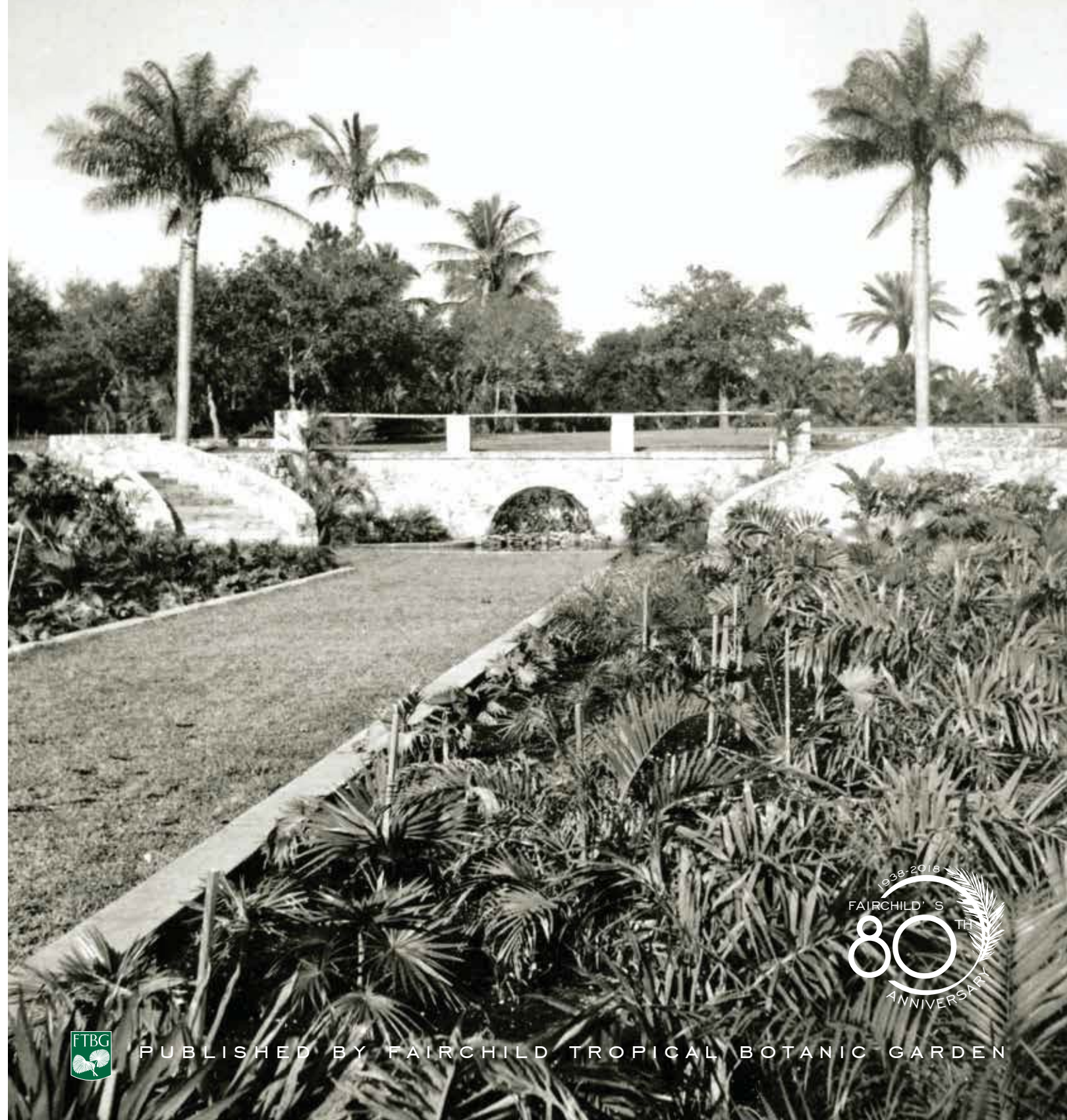


# *the* TROPICAL GARDEN



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## A GEM OF A BUILDING—A LITTLE GARDEN HISTORY IN STONE

Dr. David Fairchild's vision for the Garden included a library on tropical botany, and it came to life just a few years after opening.

By Kenneth Setzer



**N**ot all the jewels at Fairchild are green. Some are not even living. They belong to a part of Fairchild people often overlook—our architecture. I don't mean our landscape architecture, which is world-renowned, but rather the architecture of our buildings. We have beautiful structures, many—both old and new—built of the local Miami oolite rock (often incorrectly called “coral rock”) that is so reminiscent of early Miami.

### “It Should Have a Library”

Before the Garden was dedicated on March 23, 1938, Dr. David Fairchild had specified it should contain “a library on Tropical Botany.” Some maintenance structures already existed,

including a garage and dynamite storage shed (can you imagine using dynamite to dig holes?), but nothing that met both the functional and aesthetic demands of a growing botanic garden's library.

Col. Robert Montgomery and his wife Nell had made the contribution—including 83 acres—that allowed the Garden to be founded; they were also again instrumental in getting the library building constructed. In 1939, the accounting firm of Lybrand, Ross Bros., and Montgomery celebrated Montgomery's 50<sup>th</sup> year in accounting by presenting the new Garden with a gift that would enable it to construct a building to house the botanical library and a museum filled with palm products and artifacts.

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The Montgomery Building: non-members of the Garden could access the Museum for 25 cents. An additional source of income came from selling the stamps attached to parcels of seeds the Garden received from exotic locales.

**RIGHT**

The “mysterious coco de mer” from the museum’s collection of palm products.



Construction began on the Montgomery Library & Museum on September 25, 1939—a year and a half after the Garden’s dedication. The architect was Robert Fitch Smith, who also designed Fairchild’s Garden House and the “Doc” Thomas House in South Miami (the current home of the Tropical Audubon Society). Some 300 people—including Dr. Thomas Barbour, the Montgomerys and Fairchild’s landscape architect, William Lyman Phillips—attended the little building’s dedication on February 7, 1940. Liberty Hyde Bailey and others spoke, and the gathering coincided with the Garden’s annual meeting, where Dr. Elmer Merrill was inducted as president of the Garden. Dr. Fairchild himself was absent, away exploring and botanizing in India.

### The Museum of Palm Products

Barbour was a herpetologist and overall naturalist extraordinaire. He also wrote extensively, including the book “That Vanishing Eden: A Naturalist’s Florida,” which is worth a read if you can find a copy. Having served as director of Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, he knew a thing or two about museum displays. Barbour generously oversaw the installation of a palm products museum within the new Montgomery building, and even donated its display cases.

Much of the palm products collection was originally housed at the University of Miami. Raincoats, hats,

musical instruments, sail cloth, nets, baskets, woven matting made from nipa palms, carved coconuts, “the mysterious coco de mer,” Balinese dolls and various “votive offerings” populated the collection. Practical items like jaggery sugar, rattan furniture, palm syrup, fruit and “wax for phonograph cylinders” were also on display. All of these and more were destined to educate visitors on all the uses for palms around the globe.

According to Marion Dall, chair of the original Museum & Library Committee, Capt. Richard Carney contributed a cross section of a royal palm, while Capt. and Mrs. Clark Stearns donated palm spears, clothing and utensils from Samoa, where Capt. Stearns served as governor. Gilbert Grosvenor of *National Geographic* magazine donated enlargements of palm photographs (Alexander Graham Bell was father-in-law to both Grosvenor and Fairchild.)

### The Library & Museum Building Today

The Garden has grown tremendously since those early days, and today the Montgomery Library & Museum building houses offices. However, with the exception of the small addition of a director’s office in 1972, the building looks mostly as it did in 1940. Seventy eight years later, its native rock, pine interior, cypress rafters and beams, as well as its art deco details, still maintain, as the architect desired, “a fresh interpretation of rustic tropical architecture.” 