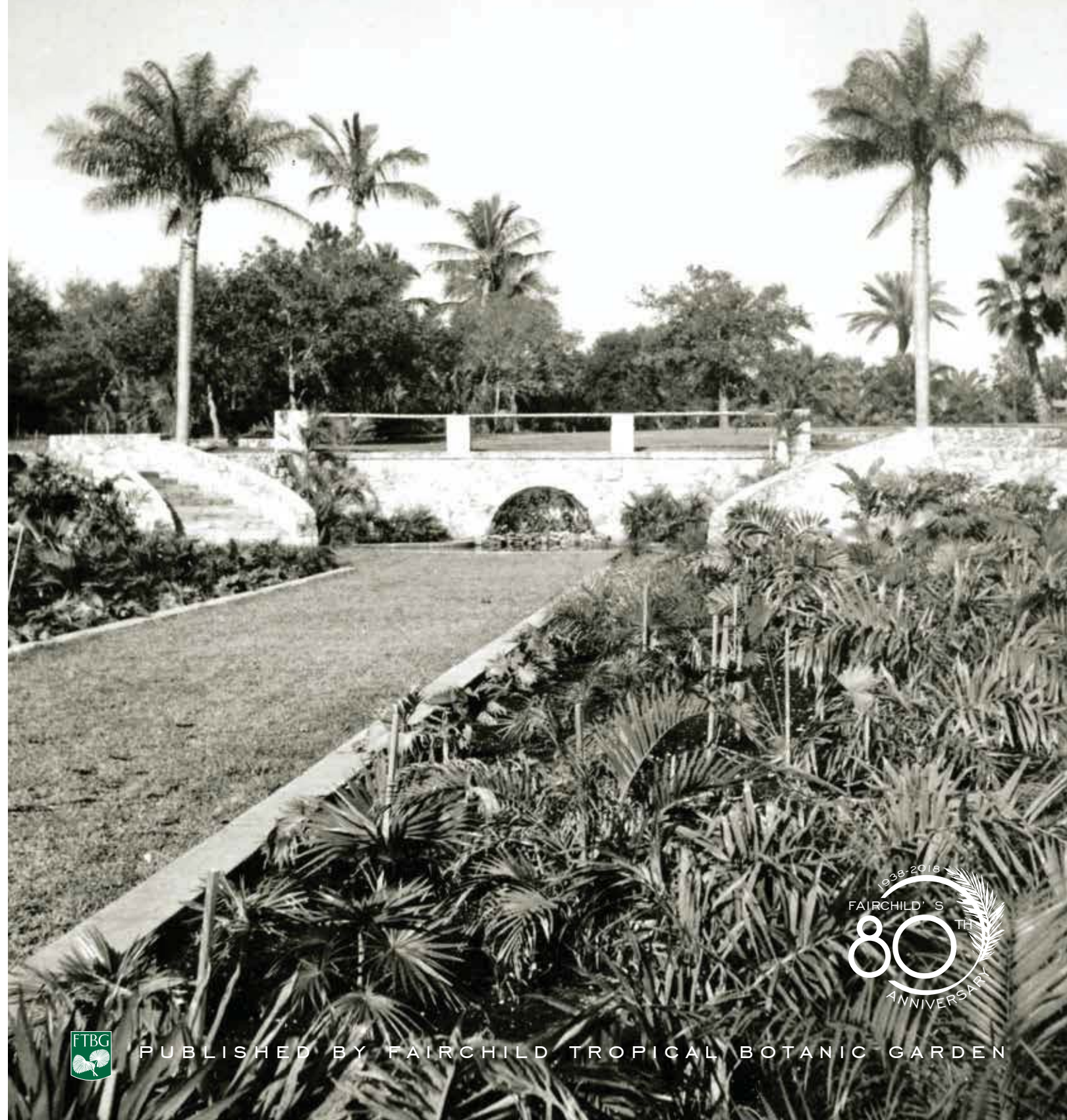


the TROPICAL GARDEN



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OBJECT OF INTRIGUE: THE GARDEN BLOWGUN

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Photos: Kenneth Setzer/FTBG
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The Agassiz/Barbour/Fairchild
blowgun, at 9 feet long, is a heavy
weapon to wield.

In the 19th century, scientist and naturalist Louis Agassiz was as internationally famous as Charles Darwin or Alexander von Humboldt. The Swiss-born Agassiz gained fame studying glaciers and for introducing the concept of ice ages as part of Earth's history. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is an Agassiz-Fairchild connection involving a most interesting object. Here's how an Amazon blowgun wound up in the Garden's collection.

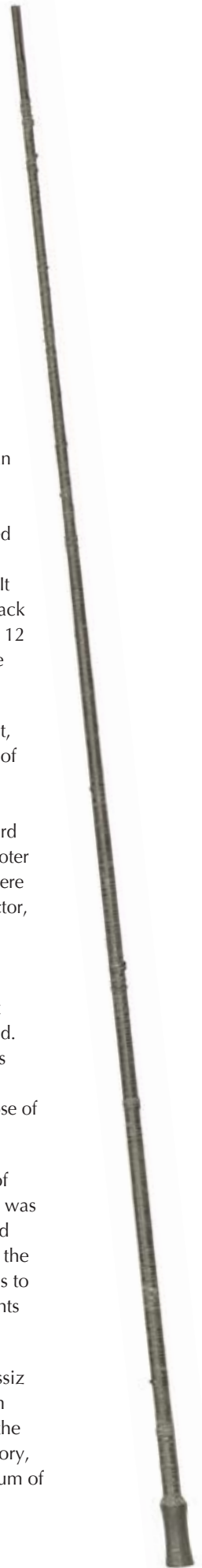
Soon after beginning work at the Garden, I began poking around the archives while searching for information on the Montgomery Library building and its palm products museum; I gasped in amazement at a *Miami Times* column on the palm products museum dated March 10, 1941. It references a display of "the blow gun brought back from the Amazon in 1871 by Louis Agassiz. It is 12 feet long, has a sight, and poisoned arrows to be blown high up into trees to kill birds."

Does the Garden really possess such an artifact, collected by one of the most famous scientists of all time?

Agassiz was many things to many people: Harvard professor, explorer, naturalist, mentor, self-promoter and to some, a formidable scientific nemesis. There is no doubt, however, that he was an avid collector, even by Victorian standards. He was considered to possess "a mania for collecting, and rapidly accumulated natural objects of all kinds." Never one to ignore the chance to explore, he was part of numerous sailing expeditions around the world. He feverishly collected natural history specimens as well as artifacts and interesting objects from different cultures for his own collections and those of universities, museums and other collectors.

In 1865, he joined a journey to Brazil as part of the Thayer Expedition. For 16 months, Agassiz was immersed in all the wonders the Amazon could offer a scientist, traveling about 2,000 miles of the river and shipping back over 80,000 specimens to Harvard. The expedition collected not just plants and animals, but artifacts of human culture.

Much of the collection filled the museum Agassiz himself founded in 1859: the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. Today accessible to the public as the Harvard Museum of Natural History, that museum is adjacent to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard.





Dr. David and Marian Fairchild, standing in front of the Garden House, admire the ingenuity of turning a palm trunk into a weapon.

Agassiz died in 1873, but his son in many ways continued his work. Alexander Agassiz, a student of engineering and chemistry, later gained expertise in ichthyology. He also made a fortune in copper mining, but not without teaching and curating in the museum his father created. During the Thayer Expedition, Alexander remained back at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology to receive his father's shipments from the Amazon; he is key to uncovering the path the blowgun took to get to the Garden.

Finally, in Florida, we discover the third link in the chain: Thomas Barbour. Born in Martha's Vineyard, he visited Harvard as a teen and was so besotted by the Museum of Comparative Zoology that he eventually completed his education there with a focus on reptiles and amphibians, though was known to have broad biological interests. At Harvard, he studied under Alexander Agassiz, eventually becoming director of the museum that helped hook him on biology.

Barbour also had a grandmother in Eau Gallie, Florida; in his book "That Vanishing Eden: A Naturalist's Florida," he lovingly recalls adventures in exploring the "wild Florida" he found while staying with her. He and Dr. David Fairchild were apparently very good friends, with Barbour regularly staying at the Kampong's guest house. When Fairchild Garden was established, and a museum of palm tree products proposed, it's only natural that Dr. Fairchild would appeal to his friend, who possessed a great love of biology and knowledge of museums. Fairchild wrote

"He took a keen interest in the Palm Museum and when the associates of Colonel Montgomery built it he contributed largely to its equipment." Barbour set up the palm museum with display cases, images, interpretation, and—apparently—a blowgun.

I still sought the smoking (blow) gun to this mystery. I hadn't found anything to directly link Barbour to getting the blowgun to the new Fairchild Tropical Garden, but his prestige at Harvard's Museum and connection to Agassiz's son sure makes it likely. I wanted to know the source of the *Miami Times* reporter's statement for attributing the blowgun to Louis Agassiz. Her byline is Mrs. Marion F. Dall, Chairman, Museum and Library Committee—the Museum being the Fairchild palm products museum. She was also Fairchild's "Museum Curator," so her knowledge of the blowgun's provenance was likely direct from Barbour or Dr. Fairchild.

A Peabody Museum annual report from 1880 lists receiving a "zarabatana, or blow gun," collected from the Amazon River by the Thayer Expedition, under the direction of Louis Agassiz, and "presented by the Museum of Comparative Zoology."

I finally found a source in our archives: an old, yellowed letter dated 1938 from the director of the Harvard Peabody Museum, Donald Scott, to Dr. Fairchild. Scott notes that a shipment to Dr. Fairchild has been made, including:

"Blowgun (also described as Zara batana), from Rio Madeirs (sic), Brazil. Collected by Professor Alexander Agassiz, date unknown. Received as a gift from Dr. Agassiz in 1871."

Now supposedly Alexander did not accompany his father Louis on this expedition, so it's possible he means that Alexander Agassiz donated his father's blowgun to the Peabody Museum. Either way, this confirms the blowgun is the real deal.

Nell Jennings Montgomery recalled that during the first Ramble Festival, "Dr. Fairchild set up a dart blowing contest . . . Dr. Fairchild provided the blow guns. He had brought them from South America for the [palm] Museum and they originally had poison on the darts." One hopes none of these were the Agassiz-collected blowgun; then again, at 9 feet (not 12, as *Miami Times* stated), I doubt anyone would have dared wield it. Ah, simpler times, without worry of liability for stray poison darts!

