



A Guide to Planting an African-American/African Focused Yard in Miami-Dade County:

An Overview of Landscape Design and Plants Grown in Traditional African-American Yards

John McLaughlin

Miami-Dade Extension Office
18710 SW 288 Street
Homestead, FL 33030



Historical Background

The Africans who were brought to the US as slaves had left one agrarian society in Africa, to be forcibly introduced to another totally different system in the N. American colonies. Not only were many of the food crops quite different, but so too were horticultural practices. One distinctive feature of W. African agriculture, then as now, is the importance of vegetatively propagated food crops, as compared to those grown from seed. Many wild plants are still utilized as sources of leafy green vegetables, whilst various starchy root crops provided foodstuffs rich in energy. In equatorial Africa starchy root crops such as taro, tannia and yams are still grown, with grain crops (native sorghum, though this is being replaced by wheat) more important in drier interior areas. It is of interest that most of the staple food crops now grown in Africa are native to S. America (tannia and cassava) or S.E. Asia (true yams)¹. A review of available evidence also reveals that at least from as early as the latter half of the 18th Ct., when the slave trade was still active, European vegetables (cabbages, beans, purslane, thyme etc.) were also being grown in W. Africa.

The historical record mentions that even as slaves, often forced to work from sunrise to sunset, African Americans found locations where they could grow food crops to help supplement a meager diet. There are records of plantation owners buying crops grown in these garden plots, and slave cabins have been found with cellars for storing root crops, many sold out of season as part of this “underground” trade. Whilst some slave owners objected to the existence of garden plots, others believed that it made for a more docile labor force and fostered a greater attachment to the land.

Though most of the vegetables grown were those native to temperate climates (roots and leafy greens), some that we now accept as dietary staples were introduced to this country from Africa by those caught in the slave trade. These include eggplant, okra, water-melon, cantaloupe and West Indian gherkin. African slaves first brought sesame, which is believed to have originated in Central Africa, to N. America where it was used to thicken stews. Some have suggested that the early spread of the tomato (native to western S. America) in the southern states of the US was in large part attributable to African American growers. Since African Americans were those mainly responsible for maintaining the landscape around southern plantations, gardening skills were mastered and passed on from one generation to the next.

After the abolition of slavery many African Americans continued to live off the land, often as sharecroppers. As a consequence, much of the available acreage had to be devoted to single cash crops - usually cotton, leaving only a restricted area that could be used to grow food crops. Renters were able to devote some space to growing a vegetable garden, whilst the few African Americans who were able to purchase small lots of land were those most likely to have a garden and be able to sell any excess produce. Over the years the function of the garden,

¹ Consider also two of the world's most popular beverages, coffee (*Coffea arabica*) and cocoa (*Theobroma cacao*). The former is native to Africa, but grown much more extensively in S. America, whilst cocoa is native to tropical America, but Ghana and Ivory Coast are the world's leading producing nations.

especially in the second half of the last century, slowly shifted from strictly utilitarian to having a greater recreational value. More emphasis was being placed on growing plants for their ornamental value and the enjoyment they provided.

For those African Americans who migrated away from the rural south the hardships associated with toiling on the land often turned subsequent generations away from taking an interest in growing plants. This legacy was until recently in evidence among members of Miami-Dade County's African American community where there was a reluctance to consider careers in agriculture or horticulture (Tyrone Carlis, personal communication).

Historical Overview for Miami-Dade County

In Miami-Dade County plantation agriculture never became established. There was one short-lived attempt, in the 1830's, to develop a South Carolina style plantation on the south side of the Miami River. Prior to emancipation, escaped slaves were the first people of African descent to arrive in what is now Miami-Dade County. In the final decade of the 19th Ct., an influx of Bahamians established Coconut Grove as the first permanent black settlement in Miami-Dade County, soon to be joined by American born black settlers from neighboring southern states and the Carolinas. Subsequently further black settlements were established in other parts of the county. While the residents were sometimes involved in local agriculture, most were part of the predominantly black labor force involved in building Florida's developing east coast rail road.

As with other aspects of local African American history, there is little available written material to trace the development of home gardening in Miami-Dade, either as a source of sustenance or leisure. Mention was previously made of the reluctance to consider careers in horticulture or agriculture. Nevertheless, over the years several gardening clubs were founded in black communities in various parts of the county, some of which are still active today. One of the earliest was the Poinsettia Garden Club, which was founded in 1926 and devoted to neighborhood beautification. In 1936 a group of black women, under the leadership of Mrs. Annie Coleman organized the Friendship Garden Club, with meetings in the parish hall of St. Agnes Episcopal Church. They held annual flower shows, landscaped schools and later broadened their activities becoming the Friendship Garden and Civic Club.

After World War II, Richmond Heights was developed as a private residential area for African American war veterans, and attracted many relatively affluent professionals. The Richmond Heights Garden Club was founded at this time to promote home gardening in general, as well as roadside beautification and conservation of native plants and birds. The club is still very active today, as is the Bougainvillea garden Club in north Miami-Dade.



Currently attempts are being made to organize communal garden groups in sections of Miami-Dade including Overtown.

A Synopsis of Landscape Design and the Plants Grown

The Swept Yard Probably the most characteristic feature of the African American yard as it developed in the South was the conspicuous absence of turf grass. Instead the area around the residence was kept bare and swept smooth (the swept yard) to provide both a recreational/outdoor work area, and to reduce weeds and insect pests. In addition, having the area round the house cleared of vegetation probably reduced the danger from brush fires. The swept yard is still common in West African villages (and indeed other tropical areas, particularly where there is a long dry spell), garden lawns being a landscaping feature that developed in northern temperate latitudes. In the American South, lawns were restricted to plantations and affluent white urban dwellers; however for poor whites too the swept or dirt yard was the rule. As an aside, it is interesting to note that current environmentally responsible landscaping recommendations are for scaling back areas devoted to high maintenance turf grass.

One drawback to the swept yard is apparent during the wet months of the year when it can become muddy unless all the loose dirt has been assiduously swept to the side. Not surprisingly, maintenance of such a yard is labor intensive, requiring constant upkeep to remove weeds and smooth out the surface with a brushwood broom. One quote described this task as “ironing” the yard, and it was a weekly chore usually undertaken by the younger members of the family.

The Garden The term garden to African Americans in the rural south referred to an area of the yard that was specifically set aside for growing vegetables. Vegetables were grown in rows with space in between to attend to cultivation. Plants would be irrigated when first set out but otherwise there was total reliance on rainfall (only a few households were likely to have a well on the property). Animal manure would be used to enrich the soil and in some cases wood ash.

There were no flower gardens as such, though over the years decorative plants began to be found elsewhere in the yard. Annuals (flowers) became the most important ornamental element of African American yards, most often grown in planters improvised from materials at hand such as old automobile tires, sinks or feeding troughs. Plants were not arranged in any order as to color or size, but reflected the gardener's own individual preferences. The area immediately in front of the house was where flowers were most in evidence and were regarded as a welcoming gesture to visitors; this was an area where people would gather to relax and converse with neighbors and passersby. The extensive use of containers for flowering plants has been ascribed to the fact that economic conditions in the rural south forced African Americans to move frequently.

Shrubs and Trees Scattered in the swept part of the yard would be shrubs and trees. The shrubs that were grown were often handed down as cuttings, roses (mostly Teas and Chinas) being a prime example. Shrubs were rarely grown as hedges, any barriers (usually to enclose domestic animals), being provided by fencing. In the past some plants, such as dogwoods, were transplanted from the wild. However the greater mobility afforded by more widespread use of automobiles, and the increased availability of inexpensive ornamental plants through chain store garden centers has made it much easier in the latter half of the last century to incorporate many more such plants in the rural African American yard.

Shade In W. African villages shade is provided by fruit trees (e.g. breadfruit, coconut and mango), however few of the fruit trees grown in the American South are useful in that respect. Indeed, where shade existed in African American gardens it was usually provided by pecans, oaks or sweet gums in an area of the swept yard that was often used as an extension to the kitchen, for food preparation, or as a workshop. A large neighborhood tree would often provide communal shade, a cool spot where people could meet and relax. Such neighborhood shade trees are still in evidence in certain parts of Miami-Dade according to local master gardener Willy Brooks. It is important to avoid excessive shade in planning an African American garden since it is not conducive to growing those plants that are the key features of such a garden: vegetables and brightly colored flowering annuals. Most of these plants will require a minimum of 6-8 hours of sun each day. Shade trees should be sited away from areas where plants will require this amount of sun.

Decorative Items The front yard frequently featured decorative items utilizing what was at hand, since there was certainly no money for garden ornaments.

Bottles, often made of colored glass, were used for edging and also hung in trees. Old bricks or pieces of fieldstone were also used to line the main path to the front of the house. Objects salvaged from work items such as cartwheels, old sewing machines and even hubcaps were used as pieces of garden art, to further personalize the yard. These latter items often had emotional significance with links to past events in the life of the owner.

Choice of Plants Subsequent sections of this guide discuss specific plants for use in planning an African American garden. The choice of plants for use in a traditional African American yard as it developed in the rural south is based on the resources listed in the section on '[Resources and Links](#)', and can be accessed using the hyperlink provided. By far the most useful source of information in this regard was Richard Westmacott's extensive 1992 survey of 47 rural African American yards in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina. This same publication also provides a detailed examination of the historical, social and cultural background to the development of African American yards from the era of slavery, through emancipation and up to the early 1990s.

Use the hyperlink provided to proceed to the next section: [vegetable and fruit crops](#).