



Platycerium angolense
(elephant ear staghorn)

Photo by Alexandra Miller

The Botanic Gardens

AT KONA KAI RESORT AND GALLERY

Gardens, an important aspect of any property, are oftentimes the pride and passion of their owners. Resort owners Joe and Ronnie Harris, who purchased this property in 1991, began planting The Botanic Gardens at Kona Kai in 1997, as building renovations on the hotel property were drawing to a close.

Soon after moving to Florida in 1994, Joe and Ronnie became members of Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, attending the plant sales at Fairchild, as well as acquainting themselves with the many nurseries throughout South Florida. By 2000, Joe and Ronnie had completed the acquisition of hundreds of new tropical plants to add to the mature mahoganies, gumbo-limbos, coconuts and washingtonians scattered throughout the property. The new landscaping quickly became part of the daily guest experience and it fell to groundskeeper Veronika Milar to oversee the two acres. Veronika has been overseeing the grounds for over 13 years now.

In 2007, Veronika and resort GM Tracey Weaver suggested a renewal of the gardens was warranted. Resort guests, loving the property, were coming as much for the warmth and sun as to enjoy the outdoors with all the plantings and the ever-crowded orchid house. Thus in mid-2008 bids were taken to re-landscape the property. But the economic crisis of September 2008 thwarted those plans. Not to be outdone by a mere economic calamity, Mrs. Milar, along with GM Tracey Weaver, insisted: "We can do it ourselves."

An "in-house" review of the plantings ensued. Upon realizing the true extent and variety of the existing plants, a new garden plan was drawn up, new plantings undertaken and a new passion was born that has become "*The Botanic Gardens at Kona Kai.*" It's hoped in the years ahead, *The Botanic Gardens at Kona Kai* will become an important part of the South Florida botanical garden scene, which already includes Fairchild, The Kampong (NTBG), Montgomery Botanical Center, Key West Botanical Garden, Mounts Botanical Garden, Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens, Vizcaya Museum & Gardens and many others south of Orlando.

Today, *The Botanic Gardens at Kona Kai* features over 42 different palm species; 25 native plant species; 21 types of grasses including 11 bamboo species; 15 tropical fruiting trees or plants; numerous bromeliad species; 150+ orchid specimens and a growing collection of cycads.

In the collection are plants whose existence can be traced back to the Age of Dinosaurs;¹ one of the most primitive living seed plants on earth;² plants with strange and unique names like zombi palm,³ elephant ear,⁴ elephant bush,⁵ Moses-in-the-cradle⁶ and crown of thorns;⁷ a tree whose wood has been used for belaying pins on the USS Constitution and police nightsticks⁸ and plants whose resin or sap is used on poison darts and blowguns.⁹ Perhaps most interesting of all, you're likely to have some of these unique and unusual plants in your own garden!

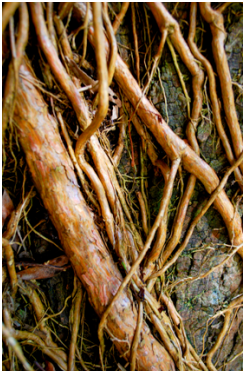
on the grounds of **Kona Kai Resort and Gallery**

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Selenicereus grandiflorus
(queen-of-the-night cactus) roots on a mahogany trunk

Photo by Alexandra Miller

Copies of the *The Botanic Gardens at Kona Kai* garden plan, along with a list of the plants in each of our 41 garden zones, is available to visitors. The plants are catalogued in our BG-Base database as well as in BGCI's botanical database. An ongoing educational label and numbering program has been instituted; by 2012 it's hoped visitors will also be able to access our complete database remotely.

Most botanic gardens are tens or hundreds of acres of land and oftentimes they prove to be quite overwhelming, especially to the plant novice. That's just one of the unique things about *The Botanic Gardens at Kona Kai*; our gardens are packed with many tropical species and genera, yet they are quite compact and are thus a dense, uncomplicated introduction to understanding the importance of the plant universe.

The focus at *The Botanic Gardens at Kona Kai* is on the field of ethnobotany. "Ethnobotany (from 'ethnology,' the study of human cultures and 'botany,' the study of plants) is the scientific study of the relationships that exist between people and plants. Ethnobotanists aim to reliably document, describe and explain how plants are used, managed and perceived across human societies (e.g. as foods, medicines, textiles, tools, currency, clothing, in divination, cosmetics, dyeing, construction, literature, rituals and social life)."^A

The Botanic Gardens at Kona Kai will endeavor to improve people's appreciation of plants and their understanding of the role plants have played in the development of human life, from the beginning of recorded time through tomorrow. If you're a gardener, you probably already realize plants are an essential part of life. Plants provide the oxygen we breathe, the food and fuel we use everyday and the beauty and color we see almost everywhere outside and oftentimes inside as well. Plants display great diversity, adaptability and survivability. Plants also change as they grow from seedling to old age. Hopefully once you have toured our gardens, you will take away a new or renewed interest in this most essential element of our lives.

¹ *Cycas revoluta* (king sago) is a cone-bearing cycad which, like all cycads, traces its origins back to the ancient flora of the early Mesozoic Era.

² *Zamia furfuracea*, commonly known as a cardboard palm or Jamaican sago tree, is also a cycad, not a palm, whose ancestors have been around since the time of the dinosaurs and is noted for its big primitive seed cones with large red seeds.

³ *Zombia antillarum*, a palm whose needles are used in the practice of Haitian Vodou, is appearing as a garden accent plant in many local nurseries. Native to Hispaniola, it is the only member of the genus *Zombia*. In 1821 Michel Étienne Descourtilz reported that the wood was used for snuff boxes and tobacco cases, the kernel of the seed was used to treat scurvy and the sap had been used by Carib Amerindians "for its powerful properties."

⁴ *Platycerium angolense*, or elephant ear staghorn fern. Ferns are among the world's oldest plants. They, along with cycads, cone-bearing trees, mosses, lichens and a few other odds and ends dominated the earth's flora in the Age of Dinosaurs before flowering plants evolved.

⁵ *Portulacaria afra* is known as "spekboom" by native Africans and can constitute up to 80% of an elephant's diet. There is a symbiotic relationship between plant and elephant – during feeding the elephant breaks off branches that later re-root and establish new stands of plants.

⁶ *Tradescantia spathacea*, which most of us know as the green flowering oyster plant, is now considered a Florida invasive and is poisonous to pets and people. At one time it is thought to have been cultivated as a Mayan cosmetic.

⁷ *Euphorbia milii* has common names alluding to the legend that the thorny branches woven into the crown worn by Christ at the time of His crucifixion were made from stems of this plant. Interestingly, this plant's stems are pliable and can be easily intertwined into a circle.

⁸ *Guaiacum sanctum* (lignum-vitae), has the hardest wood of any commercially harvested tree. Lignum-vitae wood is exceedingly heavy (it will not float), close grained, split resistant and is valued for propeller shaft bushings, machine parts and other applications in which its natural resins make it self-lubricating. Lignum-vitae's resin was also once used in the treatment of syphilis and arthritis. The common name refers to its supposed holy and life giving properties.

⁹ The resin produced during the flowering of *Monstera* and *Philodendron* is used by *Trigona* bees in the construction of their nests. South American natives take the resin from the bees' nests and use it to make their blowguns airtight and watertight.

Another use of *Philodendron* is for the purpose of catching fish. A tribe in the Colombian Amazon is known to use *Philodendron craspedodromum* to add poison to the water, which in turn makes it easy for them to catch fish to eat. The fish are temporarily stunned by the poison in the water and rise up to the surface where they can be easily scooped up. And, the sap of *Adenium obesum* (desert rose) is poisonous and used by some native peoples to poison the tips of their darts.

^(A, 1-9) Our thanks to the "garden" of the Internet. Sources like Wikipedia, University of Florida MREC-IFAS site, floridata.com, tropicos.org, USDA-ARS, theplantlist.com and so many, many more have inspired us to learn all the above and so much more about the plant universe. We see differently because of all those dedicated individuals who contribute to the countless websites whose subject matter is plants. Perhaps it should be said that the Internet is the "root" of all our botanical inspiration.