



Spring 2026

A Message from the President



Since the transfer of Higgs Beach land ownership from Monroe County to the City of Key West on May 1, 2026, we have all had lots of unknowns and lots of questions. West Fort Martello has been owned by Monroe County since the 1940's, and all of you and our predecessors have loved and tended to this Fort since 1955. All of us had a tremendous amount of apprehension, as well as the number one question. What does this mean for our future?

I am here to assure you that thus far, our conversations and meetings have been extremely open and cooperative. The Mayor, City Manager, and staff have welcomed us with open arms and a lot of excitement for the future. Now, that does not answer all our questions, as your Board and Officers continue to have questions on a weekly basis: What if? Will they? Will we? And that is very important and acceptable at this time in the learning process.

Do we anticipate some changes? Most likely. Some of which may have a positive or negative impact on our operations. But I can also tell you that our lease, which was made in 1997, was not fully held up by Monroe County either. So, as we move ahead, we will all learn together.

We finished our fiscal year at the end of April 30th with a positive income. Visitor donations and visitor numbers are up. And with all the projects and activities we share in this newsletter, it shows how very productive your Garden Club and its volunteers are every day.

We are heading into the summer weather and are fortunate to finally receive a bit of rain this week. We have been having a severe drought, but the gardens are so beautiful you wouldn't know it.

Mary



The City of Key West taking over Higgs Beach

As of May 1, 2026 the City of Key West has taken over the management of Higgs Beach from Monroe County. According to the BOCC "The property exchange reflects a shared commitment between Monroe County and the City of Key West to ensure that public spaces are managed by the agency best positioned to serve residents and visitors. With Higgs Beach located within city limits, the transition allows for more streamlined management, maintenance, and future planning at the local level."

"This is a win for everyone who loves Higgs Beach," said Parks and Beaches Director John Allen. "It's one of the most active spaces in Key West and having the city take the lead means it can continue to grow with the community."

Mayor Danise "Dee Dee" Henriquez, County Commissioners Jim Scholl and Craig Cates, and County Administrator Christine Hurley were in attendance at an event at Higgs Beach to celebrate the transfer. Jim Scholl, whose district Higgs Beach falls in, gave several county sand commemorations to longtime tenants Salute! and the Key West Garden Club. Mary Olson, Club President and Hazel Hans, Fort Curator, were recipients of the sand commemorations.



Propagation/Plant Nursery

The Tiki in Propagation needed to be replaced as it had irreparable termite damage. Our wonderful "resident" architect, Nell Smets, member Mike Sheehan and others have done an amazing job.

This is a vital part of plant propagation as it allows some shade while plants are being potted and repotted. Kitty Somerville presented Nell and Mike with a neat cartoon of their working together.

The Tiki is almost done with a wider thatch roof, new sink and stainless-steel drawers. There is a composite tabletop and the floor area will be tiled. It is looking great!



Our propagation area has evolved to such a great degree that it could be classified as a **plant nursery**. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Division of Plant Industry came to inspect us on June 3rd and we received a **five out of five rating!**

Nursery stock passes inspection and meets certificate requirements. No stock listed was found infested or infected with plant pests needing immediate attention.

Congratulations to Kitty and her hardworking weeding team!!

Air-Layering Project



Nikki Ceurvorst and the propagation crew made an air layer on the Crape Jasmine in the Perfume Garden. Air layering is a plant propagation technique that encourages a stem to grow roots while still attached to the parent plant. This "chop-and-extend" method is ideal for woody plants.



Master Gardeners Marcia, Kitty, Marianne and Nikki work really well together.



A *big* Thank You Shout-Out to the Summer Volunteers. It's **hot!!!**

Lynne Bentley-Kemp in the Garden

"The garden is always a work in progress and is a never-ending exercise in aesthetics and design. I am very pleased with the reactions from our visitors and the questions they have regarding the plants. Even though there are fewer visitors in the heat of summer, those who do come appreciate the space and a chance to cool down in the shade, observe the ocean and delight in the flora and fauna that live in our little slice of paradise." (*Lynne Bentley-Kemp*)

Lynne is constantly working to make the Gardens beautiful. She has redesigned many areas. The bromeliads at the top of the hill give color in a garden that must survive salt wind and unrelenting sun.



Our furniture has been powder-coated and the new, recently renovated arch (Thank you Nell Smets and friends) makes the space especially elegant.

Lynne has put in new plants by the waterfall and all looks so peaceful and beautiful.



Scholarship

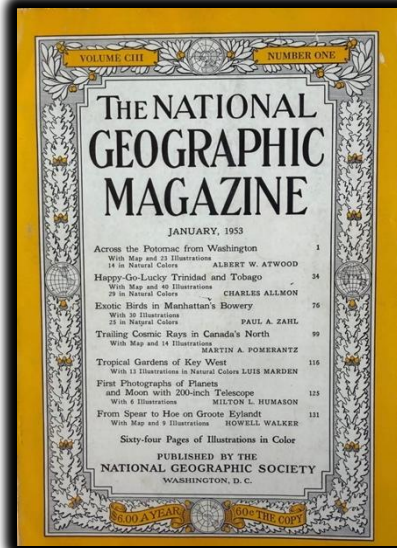
The purpose of the **Key West Garden Club Scholarship** is to assist an individual interested in pursuing a career that reflects the interests of the club's mission. Support is designed for students with a major interest in agriculture, biology, botany, conservation, ecology, environmental science, landscape design or related fields.

This year we offered this **\$2,000** scholarship to all of the students in the Florida Keys and the response was overwhelming! One student rose to the top of the list with an amazing application filled with stellar academics and a variety of volunteer work that aligns perfectly with the Key West Garden Club. **It gives us great pleasure to award the 2026 Key West Garden Club Scholarship to Alexandra Konecna, Key West High School with a GPA of 4.540.** Alexandra was born and raised in Key West and has interests in Civil and Coastal Engineering to "benefit environment, ecology and marine wildlife". She is planning to attend the University of South Florida. Congratulations to Alexandra!



The 10:30s

The Educational sessions on Mondays at 10:30 continued to be a popular event for the volunteers. In March Lynne Bentley-Kemp gave a little history lesson about the Flower Shows held at the Club January 1953. We were in National Geographic and we have a collection of catalogs and brochures from Martha Watson Sauer's collection. In that collection was a Flower Show catalog from 1956 that featured a painting by Dwight D. Eisenhower on the cover.



Bonsai!

DeAnn Schofield gave a demonstration on caring for Bonsai. DeAnn has been our "Bonsai Whisperer" and is doing a wonderful job of renovating and nurturing our collection. Penny assists her.



Orchid Classes

Kitty Somerville and Pam Van Soest have held “how- to” orchid classes and they have been a big success. Here are some graduates with orchids they learned how to mount. The classes, which deal with the different types of orchids, have been sold out and the proceeds are split between the Club and the Orchid Society.



New Master Gardeners

Nikki Ceurvorst, our new Treasurer and Jeanne Richbourg, our new Recording secretary, and Ann Lugbill (sorry, no picture) graduated from the Master Gardener Intern Class. Nikki and Jeanne are pictured with Liah Continentino, Environmental Horticulture Agent and Master Gardener Volunteer Coordinator for UF/IFAS Extension Monroe County.

The 2026 Master Gardener Cohort Commencement Event was on April 14th at the Key West Tropical Forest & Botanical Garden. It was a delightful potluck and there was a poster session where the trainees' final projects were explained. Many Congratulations to Nikki, Jeanne and Ann for their accomplishments!



The Florida Master Gardener Program is an outreach program composed of UF/IFAS Extension certified volunteers who are trained to provide research-based horticultural education to Florida residents. Participants of the program must complete a 50-hour-plus training course provided by the University of Florida and local county Extension office.

After they are certified, Master Gardeners work through their county Extension office, contributing 75 volunteer hours and 10 learning hours within the first year of certification, in accordance with statewide program bylaws. Certified Master Gardeners serve their communities by answering gardening questions from local residents, participating in community and school garden projects, supporting youth activities, and more. To become a Master Gardener, you must have an interest in gardening, a desire to help others in your community, and a dedication to complete the training and service hours.



The Garden Club has many Master Gardeners as members and are very active in the program. For more info re: next year's program contact Liah at l.continentino@ufl.edu.

In Memorium

We are sad to report the passing of Joyce Drake in May. Joyce was a member of the Club and on the Board for many years and was always a delight to be with.

Joyce Drake

March 27, 1936 to May 11, 2026



Joyce was born in Northfield, Minnesota to Harry and Frances Parsons, second generation Swedish immigrants. She and her older brother, Phil, grew up on the family dairy farm.

She met the love of her life, David Drake, in kindergarten. They started dating as sophomores in high school and married after they both graduated from Carleton in 1958.

In the fall of 1958, the Drakes moved to Hyde Park. Joyce enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Chicago, earning an MA in History in 1964. Joyce and Dave stayed in Hyde Park for nearly 35 years.

Joyce spent her career in service to others. In the 1970s, she worked at Flexible Careers, a non-profit that helped women find rewarding occupations as they returned to the workplace. In the 1980s and 1990s, she was the regional Director of Medic Alert, working to help protect people with serious medical conditions.

They became full-time Beverly Shores residents in the 1990s, enjoying the wonderful neighbors and vibrant community. Among their favorite activities was supporting the Shirley Heinze Land Trust.

In 2002, they added a winter home in Key West, Florida. Dave passed away in 2011. Joyce continued her Beverly Shores/Key West two-community lifestyle – enjoying close friends in both locations – for the rest of her years. She was in generally good health until very late in life. She fell and broke her hip in late February, and never fully recovered. She passed in her sleep on the morning of May 11th.

Joyce is survived by her sons Winston and Andrew, as well as Andrew's wife Randi and their two children, Ethan and Clover. She was predeceased by her husband David, her brother Phil and Phil's wife Jean.

In her last weeks, Joyce took great joy in sneaking a piece of pie when her nurses weren't watching. Please have a piece of pie or your favorite dessert and think of her.

In lieu of a formal memorial service, Joyce requested that donations be made to the Shirley Heinze Land Trust (heinzetrust.org) or the Key West Garden Club (keywestgardenclub.com).



Rave Reviews

To remind all of you who support the gardens that it is all worthwhile, here are a couple of recent reviews. We support beauty, joy and peace in a world that can be sometime chaotic. **Thank you to our enthusiastic receptionists Karyn Bradshaw and Melanija Borlja.** They help make everyone's visit so positive! Please be sure you acknowledge them when you are at the Fort.

Relaxing and Beautiful 5-Star Review: Key West Gardens at Fort West Martello

Reviewed 3 days ago

I thoroughly enjoyed the gardens at this fort! It was fun and relaxing to walk through. Even my 18 and 22 y/o sons enjoyed it. We had a group of 8, and it was a great place for family photos. We went right when it opened to get great parking and stayed around an hour. It was not busy at that time. The staff were friendly and the gift shop very nice. The admission is free and works by volunteers, so please leave a donation.

Date of experience: May 2026



David Stein

Local Guide • 7 reviews • 21 photos

★★★★★ 3 hours ago

It is definitely worth a stop at Key West Gardens at Fort Martello. It is not an enormous place, but I could've spent a lot more time there.

It's really a triple threat: it's an historic fort with interesting history, it's a beautiful botanical garden, well stocked with tropical plants and great landscaping, and it's a beautiful view of the backdrop of the sea through the tropical plants in the garden. As a bonus, there is a peaceful labyrinth as well as many nice places to sit to enjoy the scenery.

I'm a little late getting this review in as we stopped there during our bike tour with Lloyd's tropical bike tours on Key West when our Celebrity cruise ship stopped there on Valentine's Day. I'm glad he included this in the tour because I might not have known about it otherwise. The volunteer at the entrance provided a fascinating narrative of the history of the fort and its protection from demolition by dedicated volunteers. I recommend having some cash with you for the donation.

Thank you for photos and story contributions from Kitty Somerville, Mary Olson, Hazel Hans, Melanija Borlja.

A special thanks to Lynne Bentley-Kemp.

Thank you to Christa Varacalli for proofreading.

Editor, Sue Sullivan

