

## Little Remains of Brickell Hammock

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor  
March 2019

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### Simpson Park is a time capsule of early Miami



arjory Stoneman Douglas wrote high praise for pioneer naturalist Charles Torrey Simpson: “No one knew better than he the history of the plants and animals of South Florida.”

Simpson came to Florida in 1902, after working as a conchologist for the Smithsonian Institution and the National Museum of Natural History. He went on to become a botanist, writing books about tropical plants, and became recognized as a conservationist. His backyard near Biscayne Bay in Lemon City was a tropical hardwood hammock, part of the unique old-growth forest that had covered much of South Florida from the bay to the Everglades. He advocated for a national park in the Everglades and promoted local garden clubs.

“The Sage of Biscayne Bay” lived here during Miami’s development and foretold the destruction of our natural environment. All that’s left of the once vast Brickell Hammock can be found in only a few spots: the Barnacle in Coconut Grove, Virginia Key, Alice Wainwright Park, and Simpson Park Hammock in Brickell, named for the naturalist in 1927.

Originally called Jungle Park, Simpson Park’s first 5.6 acres were donated to the City of Miami by Mary Brickell in 1913 at the urging of Simpson. Eight years after his death in 1932, additional acres of nearby hammock were added, for a total of 7.8 acres.

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In 1941 the Charles Torrey Simpson Memorial Garden Center was built with local oolitic limestone and Dade County pine at the park's main entrance, at 55 SW 17th Rd. This community center is where several local garden and flower clubs meet: the Shenandoah Garden Club, the Dadeland Garden Club, the International Flowers Club, and the Miami Flower and Garden Club -- the group led by Simpson decades earlier.

Visitors stroll through this time capsule of Miami's settler beginnings seven days a week, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (the east park entrance gate closes at 4:00 p.m.). Located amid high-rises in Brickell, the park is an oasis where one can escape from the city bustle. Free parking and free walking tours with a city naturalist are available.

Dade Heritage Trust (DHT) holds occasional staff meetings at the garden center. The non-profit's executive director, Christine Rupp, tells the *BT*: "We're hoping to expand our full educational program at Simpson Park, but we'll be offering field trips there for kids through the summer."

Rupp considers this historic park a favorite destination for DHT bike tours: "It's a gem that's hidden there. I think people probably walk or drive past and they don't even know what's inside," she says. "Part of what DHT is doing with our bike tours is trying to expose people to different districts in Miami."

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And for the urban community of Brickell, Simpson Park certainly provides something different.

According to the park's brochure, there are 162 plant species at Simpson Park, including 96 natives; 15 of the plant species are endangered and 9 are threatened. Names of these plants in trouble invoke a bygone era: yellow boxwood, wild cinnamon, strongbark, silver palm, and coffee colubrina. Simpson stopper, Spanish stopper, and the endangered redberry stopper are "stoppers" because Native Americans discovered that a tea made from these plants stops diarrhea.

Parks and Recreation assistant Marcos Rosler tells the *BT* that the park's endangered Gulf licaria tree, once considered the last of its species, was killed during Hurricane Wilma in 2005, and the city's senior naturalist Juan Fernandez listed the species as extinct.

But Wilma had reduced the tree canopy in the park, giving previously undiscovered seedlings a chance to grow. Today, Gulf licaria is no longer extinct but can only be found in Simpson Park.

To ensure the survival of the park's endangered plants, seeds and seedlings are collected and stored off-site. In 1996, Fernandez led the park's exotic plant removal project. In 2019, invasive

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species are the concern. Wild papaya, cat's claw vine, and air potato are routinely removed with help from volunteers.



Talal Algain, along with other Barry University student members of the Saudi Buc's Club, recently cleared invasive plants and lingering hurricane debris. "Simpson Park is such a unique place," he says. "Our club loves coming here every couple of months to help. Moreover, we're learning about different types of trees that don't exist back home in Saudi Arabia."

Hurricanes historically have taken their toll at Simpson Park. After Irma in 2017, it took two to three months before the park could reopen. The city left park cleanup there for last, knowing that it would be a monster project involving a team of arborists going from plant to plant. Currently, glimpses of high-rises can be seen in forest clearings, but in another couple of years, the dense canopy should be restored.

Simpson Park has 1.3 miles of shell-covered footpaths and rustic trails. Certain downed trees are left to decompose and feed the forest floor. The first-tier canopy reaches heights of 12 to 25 feet; the second-tier canopy is 50 to 80 feet high. A koi pond destroyed by Irma was recently brought back to life; nearby are three picnic tables and benches for visitors. Additional benches dot the trails, as do educational plant species markers. The original limestone wall still exists and is supplemented with metal park fencing.

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**May 17, 2019**

**8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.**