

Push Back the Sea

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
February 2017

A landscaper fights to save water one garden at a time



Meet Howard Tonkin, landscaper with a message.

He runs a business with a mission: to postpone or prevent Miami-Dade's slide into the sea by reverting to native plants, one garden, one yard, one city at a time.

"The Earth is the patient," says Tonkin, "Fossil fuels are the disease. Trees are the cure."

Tonkin, age 46, started his business, Urban Habitat (website: thinkbeyondthehedge.com) from his house on the canal side of Griffing Boulevard, north of 125th Street, five years ago. He left behind his nightclub job and show biz ambitions to sell native plants from Legion Park at 66th Street and Biscayne Boulevard every Saturday.

He still does that, but he's also built more than 200 projects around the county, mostly from North Miami to Miami Shores, digging 12-foot holes in backyards with a backhoe, moving boulders, sometimes by hand, and planting habitats for butterflies, birds, and bees, so freshwater can go straight into the aquifer -- where the salt water keeps rising -- instead of into drains that lead to Biscayne Bay.

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He often shows up at North Miami's city council meetings -- a trim, bearded gent with an Australian accent, waxing eloquent on the environment -- where he can inspire, provoke, or annoy. A few months back, Mayor Smith Joseph threatened to call in the police to remove him from a council meeting when he tried to chime in on a presentation about a pesticide from a University of Florida scientist (scientist: safe for humans. Tonkin: nope).

While Tonkin is neither a scientist nor a holder of certifications, he has fans in high places. North Miami Councilwoman Carol Keys got the city to commission Tonkin's \$5000 landscaping project at Keystone Boulevard and Bayshore Drive in Keystone Point. He used 59 native species, of which 19 are endangered and two are extremely endangered.

"I took a leap of faith with Howard, and we're lucky to have him," says Keys. "I went to see a lot of Howard's projects and was just awed -- not just by the beauty, but by the sustainability. If everyone would follow in these footsteps, we could mitigate flooding."

While Tonkin was showing the *BT* the Keystone triangle last month, a neighbor walking his dog stopped to ask, "Can you make it look good?"

That prompted Tonkin into a discourse about native species and climate change, and how the new plantings would indeed flourish with greater color once the spring rains come.

"See, that's the mindset I have to work with," Tonkin says, referring to our accustomed habits of being satisfied with the green, trimmed lawns, neat hedges, rioting impatiens, and seasonal plantings encouraged by codes and ordinances from Miami Shores to Coral Gables and beyond.

"Lawns and golf courses are consuming 60 percent of our drinking water," Tonkin says. "This is a black hole of resources."

But Tonkin knows he can't affect behavioral change with doomsday scenarios.

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“We have to present sea level change issues in a way that doesn’t terrify people,” he says. That means starting by growing plant species closer to the water and putting more native plants, not grass, in your lawn. It also means encouraging your city government to permit more native plantings in yards, and restoring permeable (gravel) driveways that are currently banned -- anything to keep rainwater on your property, rather than going down the drain.

Tonkin is partial to low-maintenance native plants and lignum vitae, podocarpus, and Dade County pine, whose numbers have been decimated (some say by 98 percent) by residential developers and by Hurricane Andrew.

Yet as much as Tonkin does not wish to terrify, the urgency in his voice is real.

He points to flood maps, showing trouble ahead for Keystone Point, Sans Souci, Belle Meade, Morningside, Bay Point, and much of the inland 2800-acre-plus Arch Creek basin from 135th Street to the Biscayne Canal. It’s there that the Urban Land Institute has declared at least 78 properties prone to repetitive flooding from rising tides or even suitable for demolition and reclamation as sloughs.

In notably better shape, he says, is the SoLeMia area, built over nearly 200 acres more than 11 feet above Biscayne Boulevard and 151st Street, atop a landfill; and the FEC railroad track on the ridge, eight feet above sea level.

“There are big changes coming that people don’t want to talk about,” Tonkin says. “The water doesn’t care about the lines on the map, how rich or poor you are, or whether you care about climate change or not.”

The afternoon that Donald Trump took office, climate-change references disappeared from the White House website. Meanwhile, the wire services were reporting on scientists’ observations that an Antarctic ice sheet bigger than Delaware cracked another six miles in three weeks, up from 11 miles January 1, and that 2016 was the third consecutive hottest year on record. A few months before, carbon levels in the atmosphere passed 400 parts per million, perhaps permanently.

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Anyone can see water levels along the Biscayne Canal around Griffing Boulevard and 128th Street, the pent-up Biscayne Canal floodgate near the ninth hole at the Miami Shores Country Club golf course, or Arch Creek around 128th Street and NE 16th Avenue, where half-century-old sandbags guard the houses below road level from flooding.

If the sea has risen nearly six inches since the no-name storm of October 2000, which dumped 15 to 19 inches of rain in 36 hours on Miami-Dade, what will happen next time?

Still, there is progress. The City of North Miami, like a growing number of other cities, has its own sustainability administrator and an evolving policy. Although much of the city lies in a floodplain, crisscrossed by the Biscayne Canal, Arch Creek, Little Arch Creek, and the Oleta River, it has identified and bought out houses that are prone to repeated flooding and has converted the lots into freshwater green spaces.

North Miami homeowners get a 25 percent discount on flood insurance, thanks the city's top rating for its efforts. Chief county resilience officer Jim Murley, who initiated an Urban Land Institute study of the Arch Creek Basin, says that every municipality should engage with the network of governmental agencies, from the county to the Department of Transportation to the South Florida Water Management District, which is responsible for the Biscayne Canal and its floodgate.

For his part, Tonkin is developing his next public-access project: a mini park with benches to be lined with Dade County pine, on the south side of Villa Maria Nursing Center, along 125th Street in North Miami.

"These trees should have been planted 20 years ago," says Tonkin. "They produce so much oxygen."

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