

A Green Space, Recycled

Written by Jim W. Harper -- BT Contributor
February 2013

Once a forest, Biscayne Gardens Park is now a fairly welcoming, if somewhat oddly situated, suburban oasis'



ast month I was taking my dead Christmas tree to one of the county's official recycling centers when, lo and behold, I saw arising in the east a park -- a park called Biscayne Gardens Park.

I wondered, what are you doing here? You, the park, I mean. Not me, the observer. I was clearly there to grab some free mulch made from discarded Christmas trees.

Where exactly was I? Nearly in the shadow of the concrete pretzel known as the Golden Glades, this combination recycling center/walking park belongs to Miami-Dade County, and the surrounding Biscayne Gardens neighborhood remains an unincorporated section of the county (with plans afoot to change that status). It is primarily residential, with quite a few large, undeveloped lots, which by default makes it a greener space than most other local neighborhoods.

Biscayne Gardens Park is an interesting experiment. Not many years ago, these three acres were covered by a forest composed mainly of invasive Australian pines, as I recall from previous trips to the recycling center. It is unclear why the county chose to develop this lot into a park. My repeated phone messages inquiring into this went unreturned. (The park has no direct phone line; it shares a number with nearby Oak Grove Park.)

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The name of the park and neighborhood lends itself to confusion. Both are located far west of other “Biscaynes,” namely, the Bay and Boulevard (and, for that matter, the Village of Biscayne Park). Furthermore, another nearby county park shares a similar name: Biscayne Shores and Gardens Park. With so many “Biscaynes” and “Gardens” floating around, one could be excused for feeling disoriented.

Now for the double-take: This newer park, Biscayne Gardens Park, looks almost exactly like the older Biscayne Shores and Gardens Park. They are nearly identical in size and perfectly rectangular, and both have a circular path in the middle that surrounds a crop of towering royal palms. The main difference is that one is located near Biscayne Boulevard, and the other one is located near I-95.

Another common trait shared by the nearly twin parks is flooding. According to my informant, Carol Helene, a resident of the neighborhood since 1950 and a member of the Biscayne Gardens Civic Association (and a dedicated *BT* reader), the park floods after every rain. I didn’t see this effect during my visits in the dry month of January, but I have seen the floods at

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Biscayne Shores and Gardens, so it's easy to visualize. Just imagine big puddles in the grass, and you're there. (Now these parks are *really* starting to feel alike -- creepy).

Flooding would actually be helpful to the smallish cypress trees in Biscayne Gardens Park, because some of them look brown and overly dry. But most of the native plants look healthy, and they form the park's main attraction. In this part of Miami-Dade, it is rare to see so many native plants together.

In this park, it might also be rare to see people. Helene was not aware of the level of foot traffic in the park, but from my observations it appears very lightly trod. Besides the trees, there's not much to see.



Helene says the park did not meet many of the civic association's requests for additional amenities. The association wanted a gazebo and restrooms, but what they got was a grass field, a walking trail, and a dense mass of native plants.

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Sounds like a nice place to walk the dog, right? It was -- until some residents complained, according to Helene, and now the park has signs to scare away potential dog walkers. Too bad, as there is plenty of space for everyone.

Back to the collection of native plants. There is one very striking tree that I do not recognize. It has bright red berries and stands about 15 feet high. It's probably some type of holly tree (and definitely not an invasive Brazilian pepper), but I cannot recall seeing this tree anywhere else. Would a kind horticulturalist please visit the park and identify these trees?

The huge royal palms must have been growing here for decades, as they are well above any height that would allow them to be transported. It's nice to see that existing native trees were maintained on the property, while the exotic trees were ditched. Around the edge of the park are some nice pigeon plums, and several sabal palms along the walking path.

Biscayne Gardens Park has the potential to become much larger, as acres of open land exist in patches either adjacent to the park or within walking distance. It would be a gift to the neighborhood to see these patches connected into a green zone.

The area as a whole deserves some more attention. Helene says that, until lights were installed last year, the neighborhood was in the dark, thereby discouraging visitors. (How many residential areas in this part of the county still lack nighttime lighting?) Even if the area is lightly traveled, it has schools, churches, and many places that people call home. They deserve to have safe spaces as well as green spaces.

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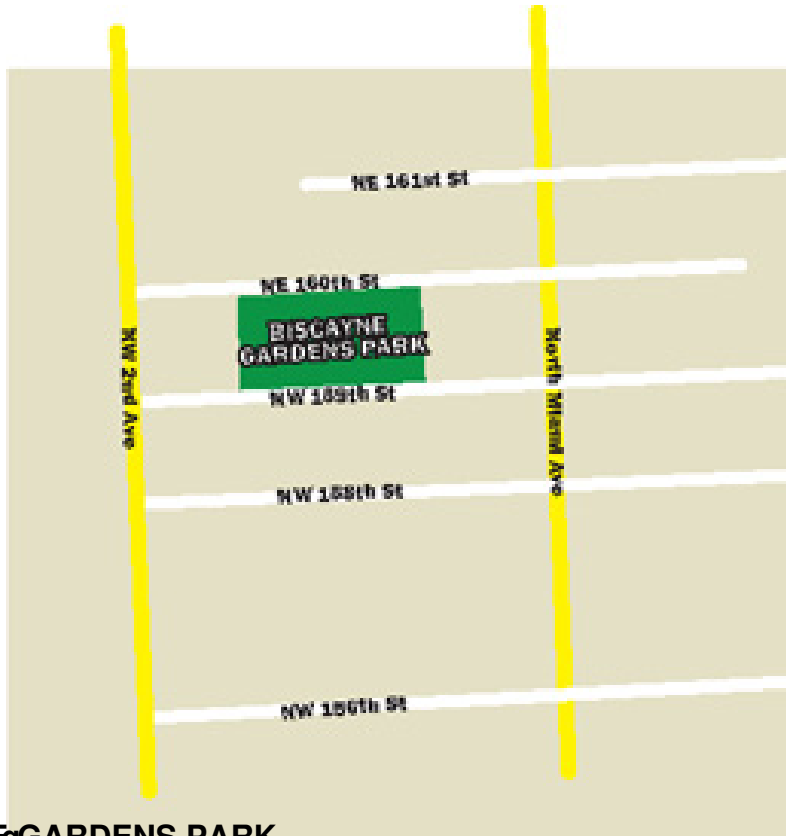
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BISCAYNE GARDENS PARK



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