Saving the Grimal Grove, Restoring a Legendary Tropical Fruit Collection and Establishing Grimal Grove as the Southernmost Tropical Fruit Park

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The Grimal Grove was originally founded and designed by the late inventor and horticulturist, Adolf Grimal in 1955. Grimal was a reclusive genius who spent the better part of 40 years designing optimal growing conditions for tropical fruit. Grimal was highly regarded by fellow horticulturists of his day for being able to grow and fruit ultra-tropical fruit trees found nowhere else in the continental United States. He was successful thanks to the unique climate of the Florida Keys and Grimal’s engineering design of the property. Currently under the management of Patrick Garvey and the Growing Hope Foundation and in partnership with other organizations like the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, the grove is emerging as the Southernmost Tropical Fruit Park education center and an important agricultural and community resource for the Florida Keys.

“It was a good collection. It was by no means comprehensive in any family or big group, but it had the best of some of those things.” Carl Campbell, the late University of Florida emeritus professor of tropical horticulture and an original member of the Rare Fruit Council, was quoted back in 2000 in the Miami Herald as saying of Adolf Grimal’s tropical fruit collection (Bermudez, 2015).

Patrick Garvey’s mission to Save the Grimal Grove began with his work in government food programs when in 2010, he was compelled to tackle the lack of food justice within these programs. He led a small movement to create edible gardens at food stamp outreach sites. During this work he started a nonprofit: Growing Hope Initiative. The goal was to empower communities within South Florida through sustainable agriculture, sustainability, arts, and entrepreneurship. From this work, he happened to stumble upon the Old Grimal Estate and the obscure story of the “Reticent Plantsman” (Gollner, 2008).

Born in 1910, Adolf Grimal was an inventor and engineer from Michigan. Grimal started coming to the Florida Keys in the 1950s and quickly became interested in tropical fruit. He joined the Rare Fruit Council International in the late 50s–early 60s. Along with his colleagues, he traveled the world and brought tropical fruit trees back to South Florida.

He chose one of the highest elevations on Big Pine Key for his property at 6–7 ft above sea level. Grimal cleared the entire pine covered property. He carved reservoirs and waterways into solid rock, and imported tons of rich soil from the mainland in order to create viable planting conditions for his collection of tropical fruit trees. He built many and massive raised beds of concrete. To supplement infrequent rains, Grimal constructed large catchment basins, cisterns, pools, and wells. His irrigation system, a labyrinth of underground piping, captured the humidity off of the leaves and rocks and funneled it into one of his many basins. He experimented with creating microclimates for the various plants he acquired from his travels around the world. Grimal had about 100 different species of fruit trees, and numerous varieties beyond that. Some of the rare trees he was able to fruit were rambutan (Nephelium lappaceum L.), alupag (Dimocarpus didyma), and nuaga sapote (Pouteria navage), just to name a few. His passion for nature exceeded fruit as he had butterfly and hummingbird gardens as well.

Grimal did not plant these trees for fame or for any commercial value. He did it because he loved to plant. He loved to experiment. Regardless, Grimal became renowned for his remarkable achievement.

Bill Whitman, another local plantsman, stated, “Adolf was unique, different, one-of-a-kind, with qualities that set him apart and made him a living legend. With his concentration and single purpose in life he made a great contribution to the plant world in an unfriendly Florida Keys environment where others have failed. He was the first to grow and fruit successfully many of the ultratropicals on the continental United States. He took his Big Pine Key Property of solid bedrock and turned it into a Garden of Eden.” (Whitman, 2001).

Many other esteemed plantsmen visited the grove, including Carl Campbell, Chris Rollins, and Richard Campbell. Tours came to see his garden, and it was becoming a place to see. However soon after Grimal’s death in 1997, the property fell into disrepair. It became a crack house, a homeless camp, an illegal dump site, an invasive jungle, and a neighborhood nuisance. The property amassed $850,000 in county code enforcement violations. It seemingly appeared a man’s extraordinary achievement would be lost forever.

When Patrick Garvey stepped onto the property in September 2011, he was overwhelmed by the chaos but saw the importance and wanted to save it. Over the course of two years he devised a plan to save the Grimal Grove. In Nov. 2013, he was able to purchase the property. With Growing Hope Initiative, he started a volunteer program to research and restore the historical landmark.

During the past 2 1/2 years, many people, groups and organizations assisted in restoring the Grimal Grove. The University of
Florida IFAS Monroe County Extension deployed their Master Gardeners program to assist with the property—thanks largely to Monroe County Extension Agent Kim Gabel. Work has been undertaken primarily by volunteers, and there have been many accomplishments. The property was cleared of invasive trees and garbage was removed. The grove was brought into compliance with Monroe County Code Enforcement. A court hearing ensued and the judge saw fit to reduce the fines from $850,000 to $10,000. Tropical fruit trees are being re-established. An after-school youth program was implemented. A community composting program was set in motion. Workshops and events are regularly held at the grove.

The Grimal Grove is more than a park—it is an agricultural renaissance. It is the first agricultural resource in the Florida Keys in a very long time. The vision moving forward is that it will be the southernmost tropical fruit park: a heart of tropical agriculture and research, a center for sustainability, as well as, a small tropical farm.

Much smaller than Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden and the Fruit and Spice Park, the Grimal Grove is only 2 acres, which allows an intimate community feel. Grimal Grove’s goals are to continue in the spirit of its original proprietor, Adolf Grimal: ingenuity, hard work, and passion, but it will be a community driven venture, including limited daily tours, events (both public and private), workshops, youth programming, and retail. The primary focus of the Grimal Grove is education and sharing experiences and knowledge, so that the grove will never be lost again.

**Literature Cited**

Bermudez, D. 2015. Saving the Grimal Grove, Tropical Fruit News, Miami, FL.