

The New York Times

NATURE

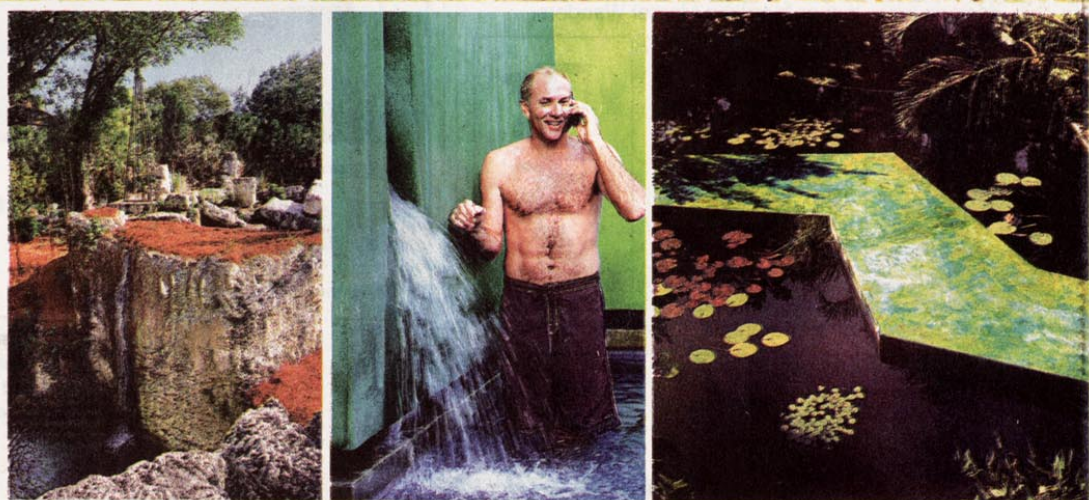
Unmown Florida: A Call for the Wild

By ANNE RAVER

Beating back the spread of landscaping clichés.

WHEN you have a name like Raymond Jungles, maybe you are fated to rip up lawns to bring the jungle back to South Florida. These are invented jungles, to be sure, with rare palms from Madagascar, African mahogany trees and Asian bamboo. The plants may not be native, but the idea of restoring a sense of wildness to Florida echoes the thinking that has gardeners growing prairies instead of lawns in the Midwest and growing rocks and cactus in Phoenix. Mr. Jungles, a landscape architect based in Key West, is fighting the kind of tyranny that makes a yard in Oregon look like a yard in Texas. "The landscape is so disgusting around here," he said as he drove his BMW along a winding road in Coconut Grove. "Florida McMansions and these plops of plant combinations on an overabundance of lawn." Too many royal palms. Too much impatiens. Ixoras clipped into hedges. "It is not so much that the plants are bad, but how they are used," he said. "So sterile. No layers to it. Doesn't provide any habitat." He

prefers a landscape where the wild things are. He pulled up to one of those landscapes, a 1920's Spanish-colonial-style house. It was framed by two magnificent South American oil palms. "See how the tall trees create a space for the house?" he said. Instead of the ubiquitous driveway leading up to the front door, a raised green plaza made of satiny smooth saturnia stone and velvety grass now greets the visitor. "Before, all this stuff was jammed up against the house, with these two clichéd date palms on either side of a circular driveway," he said. Why put a vehicle in front of your door? Why not create a garden room there? "It is all about spaces and transitions," Mr. Jungles said. "I want you to linger." These are universals that apply to any land-



Photographs by Lanny Provo for The New York Times

LUSH LIFE Raymond Jungles, at center above, asks gardeners to think beyond conventional plantings and circular driveways. Top, arching palms frame a gate; above left, coral islands; above right, a path zigzags across a pond.

Continued on Page 6

TWISTED Raymond Jungles's signature is curving trunks, like the sabal palms, right, at a coral quarry turned garden in Coral Gables. As with anything imperfect, they lend a venerable, happenstance air to new landscaping.



FALLING WATER At his home and design studio in Key West, above, Mr. Jungles transformed a scruffy yard into a water garden with a three-part wall. Each segment of the wall has a vertical trough spilling water into a serpentine pool. Dwarf black mondo grass surrounds oolite paving.



NATURE

Unmown Florida: A Call for the Wild

Continued From Page 1, This Section

scape. Meaningful entryways. Matching trees to the house. His boyish grin is younger than his 45 years. In his shades and Panama hat, he looked like Dick Tracy. Mr. Jungles (www.raymondjungles.com) is known for mixing exotics with natives and for his bold designs, which are uncannily suited to the lay of the land — and to the scale of the house. He uses a variety of plants: rare old man palms — *Coccothrinax crinita* from Cuba, which cost \$4,000 each; cycads, bromeliads, large-leaf philodendrons, fragrant native trees that create an understory beneath the great trees. Layers, in other words. Like putting redbud and shadblow under the oaks in New York. Or cactus under the ironwood trees in Arizona. He stopped short in his tour of the gardens. "Ooh, that's got to go," he said, frowning at a Philodendron selloum, as common as a zinnia, quickly reproducing itself at the base of a beautiful grove of black bamboo. "It's so mundane," he said. "And it's going to obscure the bamboo." He went off and spoke to the gardener in Spanish. Clients (and their gardeners) are wont to undo his work, to stick some silly bird of paradise on top of a minimalist fountain. They can't help themselves. "I try to design as defensively as possible," he said. "I try not to plant things that people will clip into a hedge." He found converts in Victoria DiNardo and Stephen Montiflore, who gave up a loft in SoHo, with a huge roof garden, for a waterfront Art Deco paradise in Miami Beach. When the couple saw the house four years ago, its clean lines were hidden under latticework and Italianesque columns, and the yard had the usual hodgepodge of plants. "It was all lawn with these dopey royal palms across the beach," Ms. DiNardo said. "There was a huge arborvitae that



OUTBACK Anne and Jackson Ward, above right, rest on a cot perched on a ledge among their coral islands (top). A cottage they use for birdwatching and viewing sunsets, above left, stands amid native and exotic plants.



blocked the entire back window, and these yellow rocks. We couldn't even give them away."

The circular driveway was gussied up with a clunky precast concrete fountain. The little pool house reminded Mr. Montiflore, a clothing designer and manufacturer who grew up in Miami, of a Motel 6. But he liked the lines of the house. He could see its potential. And he loved the sweep of the land to the water. Ms. DiNardo, a hat designer, was tired of potted plants dying on her SoHo roof. "One year I lost 30 roses," she said. That never happens here. Her 10-inch agave with cream edging — which traveled from SoHo to Miami by FedEx — is now the size of a bumper car. A croton that started in a four-inch pot is now a six-footer. "The stuff you see in Kmart grows like mad here," she said. "You stick orchids and bromeliads on a palm tree and they grow." The couple told Mr. Jungles they wanted a pond. So he turned their front yard into a water garden, with a low bridge of concrete slabs, stained green with copper oxide. The silvery trunks of triangle palms are reflected in the water.

In this, as in many things, Mr. Jungles was inspired by the teachings of Roberto Burle Marx, the legendary Brazilian landscape architect whose landscapes, from Copacabana to Biscayne Boulevard, celebrated tropical flora as the material

A client says the look is lush, but not cluttered.

for abstract art. "Burle Marx always juxtaposed triangle palms near water," Mr. Jungles said. They met in 1979, when Mr. Marx lectured at the University of Florida, where Mr. Jungles was an undergraduate. Their friendship lasted until Mr. Marx's death in 1994. And cuttings from Mr. Marx's Brazilian gardens live on in Mr. Jungles's gardens.

Small native trees cloak the entrance to the house, lending a sense of mystery to its approach. Mr. Jungles scattered the royal palms throughout the garden, and spiky succulents now bloom in front of curvy coconut trees that frame water and sky. "It's lush, without being cluttered," Ms. DiNardo said.

She didn't understand how beautiful a grove of seven green Bismarckias — graceful palms with striking fanlike leaves — would look standing by the pool. But then, a good landscape architect may make you stretch.

"When Raymond talked about these trees, I thought, 'No, too many trunks,'" Ms. DiNardo said. And he kept saying, "No, some of them will be curved." She couldn't picture the tall Alexander palms either, soaring 40 feet over the L-shaped wing of the low house. "But Raymond would run over and stand there with his arms up, to help me see the verticals," she said. "He bounds all over the garden, like a Labrador retriever."

That same irrepressible energy transformed a property in Coral Gables, where a stone house once overlooked the usual pool, lawn and tennis court. The house was built in 1922 from coral rock quarried on the site. When the current owners, Anne and Jackson Ward, asked Mr. Jungles to build a home for their pet pig, Virginia, they discovered a coral ridge running beneath the lawn. As a backhoe operator began to dig a wallowing pit for Virginia, the excavator rock inspired Mr. Jungles to build a kind of never-never land, a series of rocky islands and deep pools, with shady paths descending down stairs of native Miami oolite. Instead of fighting the terrain, he exalted it. Which is another lesson for gardeners: embrace the site.

He planted live oaks and gumbo limbos, native pepper trees and Simpson's stoppers, sabal palms and coconut trees, groves of bamboo, *Aristolochia* vines that would dangle their sexy flowers over the tennis court fence. The Wards' yard is dotted with what look like campsites, including a tent fashioned from poles and canvas sheets. In the tent are cots with colorful cushions and lamps for reading at night. Across the pools, where islands of coral rock rise like little Gibralters, a blue glider sits beneath an old live oak.

The Wards do not rest much, though, between moving rocks and building funky trellises. Sunset finds them on the roof of their Tuscanlike cottage, drinking mint juleps and watching birds from the Everglades flying to Key Biscayne. "All this was waiting to be uncovered," Ms. Ward, 32, said.

A native Floridian, she wanted to put back some of the habitat she had watched disappear. So Mr. Jungles planted a native forest near the street, offering passersby a taste of old Florida: Jamaica caper, Florida boxwood, saw palmettos and thatch palms, darling plum and native silver palm, and plenty of wildflowers, like tickseed and bulbine.

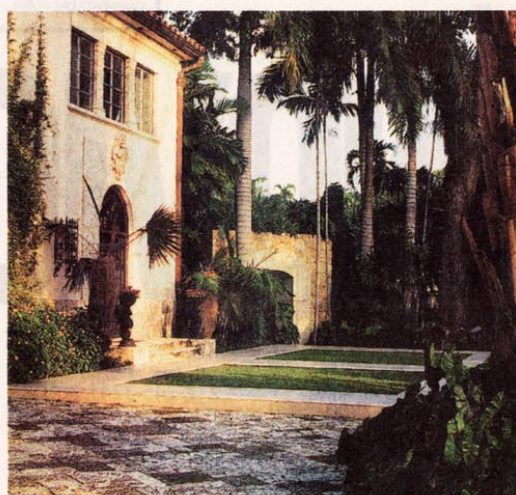
"Our work on the landscape will never end," Mr. Ward said. He is a 38-year-old Texan who sells real estate and has built malls and industrial parks in Florida's swamps, but he is eager to put nature back in his own yard.

Mr. Jungles, who grew up in the Midwest, discovered Miami on a motorcycle trip. He fell in love with the air, the light, the easy life. As a landscape architect, he has designed gardens not only for expensive houses but also for hotels and restaurants from Miami to Key West.

"With a name like Jungles how could I be anything else?" he said at the end of a long day, floating in a pool in his tiny backyard. Waterfalls pour from the green and blue wall he built to screen out curious neighbors. His own jungle rises all around him: gumbo limbos; Florida silver palms; Cuban sabals; a yellow *Tabebuia* caraba tree, complete with resident hawk; and Biscayne prickly ash and firebush for the butterflies. A vine he took as a cutting from Mr. Marx's Brazilian garden — Philodendron burle marx — rambles through the yard. That same vine is growing all over Miami. It is one of those exotics that fits right in here, as Mr. Jungles mixes plants from all over the world, and as his jungles keep pushing back suburban yards.



MAKING A GOOD ENTRANCE A geometric bridge, stained blue, leads across water to a hidden front door in Miami Beach; a grass-and-stone forecourt allows a mansion in Coconut Grove to breathe, bottom right. Above right, a variety of plants give the same house privacy, and interest the passerby.



Photographs by Lanny Provo for The New York Times