

OL features

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GER



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100 VISUAL ARTS: SHADES AND SHAPES OF THE SEASON

The Central Florida arts scene will be unleashing a fresh burst of creative energy as it presents its 2007 - 2008 visual arts season. From handmade folk art and contemporary sculpture to historic masterpieces and architectural photography, the imaginative menu of offerings will lure art enthusiasts into museums and galleries all year long.

110 HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

Beautiful lines and graceful details are enhanced by pops of color and artistic touches in this home that's gracious without the grand scale. The collaboration between the builder and designer resulted in a gorgeous space punctuated by framed paintings, bold objects d'art and sculptural elements.

114 THE ART OF NATURE

Randall Quirk has taken quite an interesting life trek. But for the Orlando-raised naturalist, botanist, adventurer, tropical tour guide and modern-day explorer, the treasures he seeks to share and preserve are not gold, silver and precious gems. His quest is about the riches of nature, from exotic flora to near-extinct fauna.

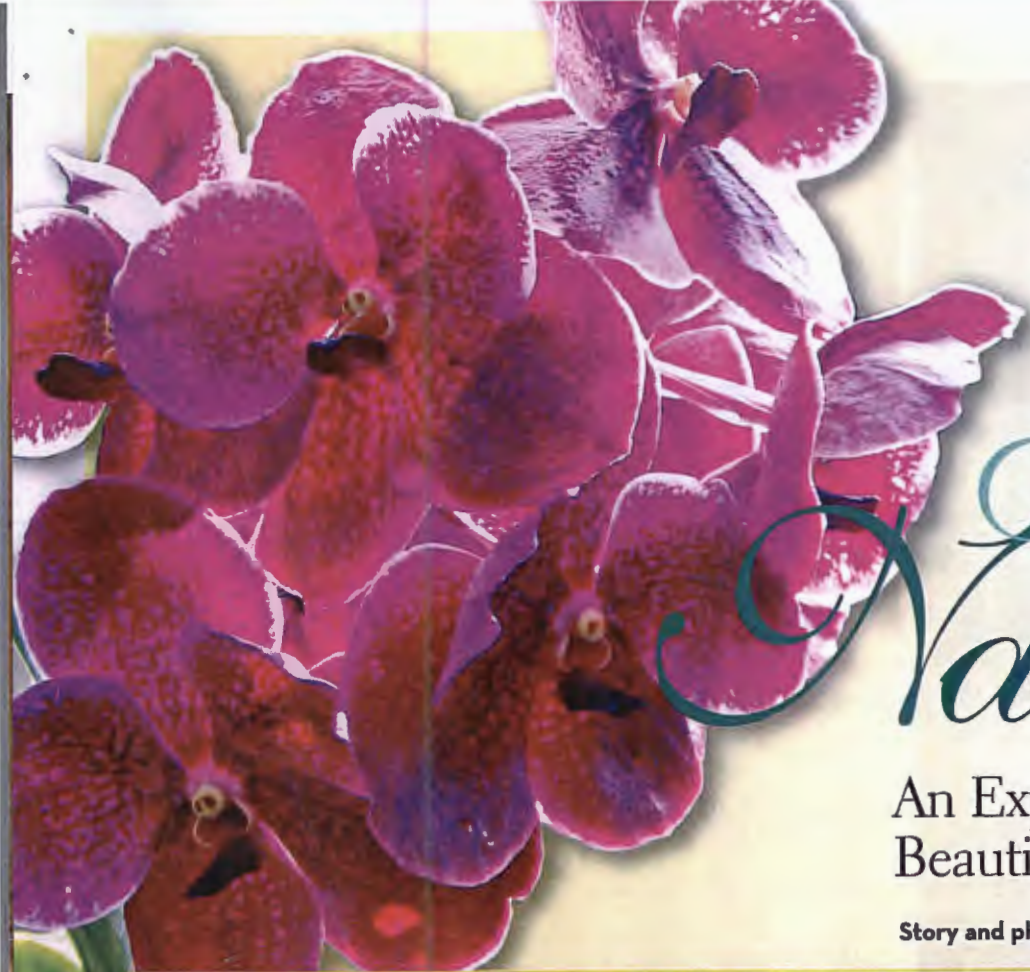
SPECIAL PROGRAMS

2007 LAKE MARY-HEATHROW FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS
AT COLONIAL TOWNPARK

103.1 WLOQ 30TH ANNIVERSARY

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the Art of Nature:

An Explorer Discovers Beautiful Rarities

Story and photos by Christi Ashby



From University of Florida cheerleader and marine biology major to cruise ship and Broadway performer to explorer of the jungles and shores of Brazil, Randall Quirk has taken quite an interesting life trek. But for the Orlando-raised naturalist, botanist, adventurer, tropical tour guide and modern-day explorer, the treasures he seeks to share and preserve are not gold, silver and precious gems. His quest is about the riches of nature, from exotic flora to near-extinct fauna.

I was invited into Randall's world via a visit to the Nature House, his home in Winter Park. He particularly wanted me to see an uncommon orchid in full bloom. I never could have imagined the universe I was about to enter as I stepped across the threshold. Greeted warmly and led in by my host, I was overwhelmed by the view. On my left, I saw an intricately carved, painted statue and a tribal chief's headdress. To my right was a stunning floral arrangement featuring a Heliconia rising 5 feet above the table, and straight ahead, a glimpse of the outdoor garden containing the precious live specimens.

A perfect gentleman, Randall offered a freshly-made Caipiriñha cocktail of passion fruit, muddled with lime and palm sugar and served over crushed ice with a kick from a sugar cane-based spirit (Cachaca) from Brazil. He explained that the little black seeds from the passion fruit dotting the inside of the glass were known to lower blood pressure. The drink was served with a tray of just-cut mango, dragon fruit (also known as red-skinned pitaya) and papaya, along with chunky guacamole — all from Randall's garden.

As we sat, I was surrounded by hundreds of collected nature items, from butterflies and moths to scorpions and beetles, ensconced in glass display boxes. A nearby basket displayed large, smooth shells and craggy coral. Hanging down like long tails were feathers of every shape, size and color.

Although frequently away on around-the-world adventures, with the natural souvenirs to document them, Randy still makes Central Florida his base. "This is my home. I was born here but moved to Europe when I was 4 to live in Germany for five years," he said. "We then moved back, and my father was the last colonel at McCoy [the former Air Force base where Orlando International Airport now sits]. He saw all these pools and palm trees here and said 'That's what I want.'"

So the family stayed put, and Randy went to Catholic schools St. Margaret Mary and Bishop Moore before heading off to the University of Florida. It was at UF that the real travel



bug bit. He recounted flying around the country to football games on a DC-3 named the Blue Goose.

"I guess I got my break when CBS filmed a cheerleading spectacular and invited the top five teams in the country to Los Angeles," Randall said. "Cheryl Ladd, Gene Kelly and George Burns were there. We got to meet the real Hollywood legends."

While on that journey, Randall announced to his teammates his decision not to return to UF. Instead, he would be spending two months in Bora Bora diving in the coral lagoons. All his life, he had dreamed of taking this trip to study marine biology. If he didn't go now, he thought he might never have another chance.

At 23, Randall made his first solo expedition to Bogota to perfect his Spanish. A year later, he found himself making the journey every other month, armed with a machete and a backpack, to Rio Madeira in the Amazon. Randall developed a keen taste for green bananas and other native fruits and began collecting and photographing orchids and other tropical plants.

"I would lay in a hammock with my journal and record all the fish we caught, the orchids and details of the day's adventures," he said.

But the entertainment itch was still in Randy's system, so he lived in New York for nine years, pursuing acting and dancing as well as musical endeavors. He appeared on stages, from Broadway to Bangkok, and even performed on Royal Caribbean's Sun Viking cruise ship with his former cheerleading partner. It was a far cry from the remote terrains he never could really escape.

He continued to yearn for the rough and rugged life of an explorer and began taking other travelers with him on his adventures. "I ran expeditions to Costa Rica, escorting some very important scientists, researchers and dignitaries," he explained. "On white water rafting trips, I had to keep reminding my passengers not to touch the trees along the way since they held killer beehives."

Randall soon discovered Brazil, which has become his primary passion. He has made nearly 30 trips to the country, learning both Portuguese and local customs. "Now, it's probably my second home," Randall said. "I know my way around Rio [de Janeiro] better than I do Winter Park. Rio is the most magnificent panoramic harbor in the world with 3,000-foot mountains dropping straight down to the sea. Not only is it breathtaking, but it contains every eco-system in the world."

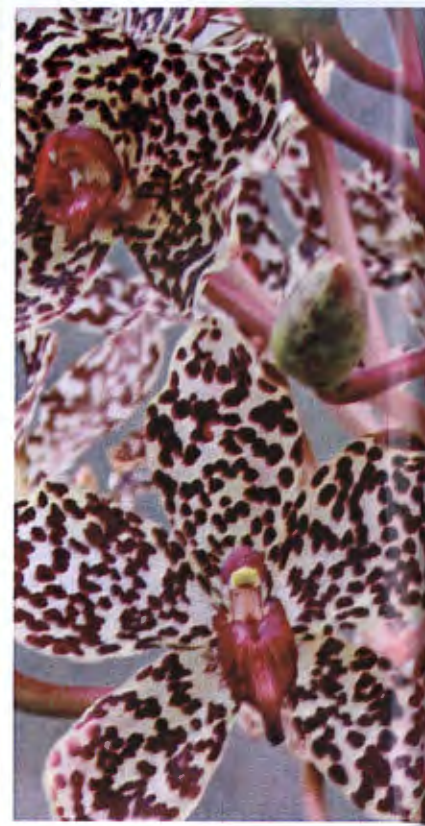
With primitive expeditions, there are a lot of elements to consider, yet Randall has his own philosophy. "My only fear is not trying something," he said. "Your attitude is everything. I look at the jungle like it's a great, big, beautiful world. Sure, there are mosquitoes buzzing and rhinoceros beetles scurrying around your base camp, but what you see outside is amazing." Most of his clients are from London, Australia and France.

One of his most memorable journeys involved visiting botanical gardens around the world, from Java and Singapore to Sri Lanka, and videotaping what he saw. "Years from now, I would like to be able to wake people up to the beauty in all of the flora and fauna," he said. That's why Randall has filled his

house with relics. It is a way to share with invited guests all that he has seen and experienced.

Stepping out into the backyard — more of a tropical garden — is like walking into a wonderland of vivid colors, interesting shapes and living art. Randall keeps everything at the right temperature and humidity, especially in the winter months when space heaters and coverings protect the precious tropical specimens. The most sensitive plants, including a multitude of orchids, are located in the hot house. When Randall is off on expeditions, he has someone come daily to water.

As we toured the tropical garden, he mentioned that he would be heading off to Brazil the next day to oversee the planting of palms found around the world on a 30,000-acre ranch named Fazenda Boa Esperanza or The Ranch of Good Hope. It is one of the very few places in the world where you can find the rare golden lion tamarin





When not trekking through the jungles of Brazil, Randall spends his time tending to his own carefully cultivated tropical rainforest. But he also loves to share his talents with others through the creation of enormous floral arrangements. For tabletops he fills wooden bowls with bright green avocados, dark pink dragonfruit, limes and mangoes. He also designs tropical rainforests for clients all over the world, including South African race car team owner (and former championship driver) Wayne Taylor, a Central Florida resident.

(*Leontopithecus rosalia*) monkey, which Randall, along with the ranch's owner, helped bring back from near extinction over the last five years. There are now more than 1,000 making a home on the property, and the Smithsonian has even been down to film these rare animals.

But rare plants are what keep him on the hunt. Two of his favorites are now at home: A 30-year-old, 180-pound *Platycerium superbum* (shown below), native to New Guinea, is the largest fern in North America, according to Randall. It is suspended between two Chinese palms in a custom-made crate. The second prize is a *Grammapophyllum peciosum* (orchid) from Bornea. "In 17 years, it never flowered, but before I went off to Europe on business this summer, I added 800 tadpoles I netted out of my pool. When I came back, three massive spikes had emerged. This is the world's largest orchid with specimens being recorded at weights of up to one ton," he explained proudly.

Even with all his explorations and

discoveries, there is only one place Randall wants to visit. "I would love to go to the Seychelles," he said. "There is a very rare palm that grows there called the Coco-de-Mer, and it makes the largest nut in the world. They are 45 pounds and found only on one island."

Surprisingly, Randall has never written a book, although his travels are documented through his several thousand photographs, from the Amazon to Borneo. "One day, it would be my dream to have my own TV show," he said. "I feel blessed. If God gives you a gift, you use it and if you waste it, it's a curse. It's time now to give back." Randall is planning a rain forest benefit in the coming months, and in the next 10 years, he would like to start his own preservation foundation.

In the meantime, Randall will continue his life's work leading expeditions, designing tropical rain forest gardens and doing what he may do best of all — telling entertaining tales about the world around us.

For information on Randall's work or expeditions, e-mail naturehouse01@earthlink.net.

