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HISTORIC GRIMAL GROVE RE-OPENING, BECOMING 'GROVE OF THE FUTURE'



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GROWING HOPE

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Grimal Grove is hosting a Community Day on Saturday, Nov. 9 to celebrate its recovery from Hurricane Irma and reopening to the community. The urban farm, which specializes in rare trees and tropical fruits, is also celebrating its first steps to becoming a "Grove of the Future."

Grimal Grove was named after its original owner, Adolf Grimal, who created the tropical fruit grove of his dreams. After Grimal died in 1997, the property fell into disarray, becoming a cocaine camp and illegal dump site. Enter Patrick Garvey, a Canadian who ran across the run-down farm in 2011. "Someone pointed out the property to me as a great focal point for a local food movement," he said. "And then I became obsessed."

Garvey bought the property in 2013 and took on the challenges of overgrown trees, county fines and difficult soil for cultivating. "It was tough, but the community helped a lot, and we figured out a way to make it work," he said. In August 2017, the grove turned a profit for the first time on fruit distributions. One month later, Irma hit, and everything was destroyed.

Garvey didn't give up on his dream, though, staying through the storm to try and save as many rare trees as possible. "Irma was devastating. We lost about 85% of our trees," said Garvey. "Then, there was three feet of saltwater over the whole grove. Trees really don't like saltwater."

Garvey's associated nonprofit, the "Growing Hope Initiative," helped to subsidize some repairs. Always working with dedicated volunteers and members of the community, Garvey began to assess the damage and replant.

As he did so, he noticed that two of his three breadfruit trees had survived the storm and saltwater sprays. Similar species like jackfruit and pedalai all died. Not long after the storm, Garvey planted a few more breadfruit trees, all of which are still alive.

This highly nutritious fruit could be the key to food sustainability in South Florida in the upcoming decades. With more frequent and intensifying storms, increased storm surges and saltwater sprays threaten croplands in the lower end of the state. They could become difficult or impossible to farm on.

Except, perhaps, for breadfruit. Garvey suspects that some species of breadfruit are more tolerant to salt, and now has 25 plants in total. "It's a bit of an experiment. A lot of trees I planted didn't take well at that time, but breadfruit did." He now boasts the first breadfruit grove in the continental U.S.

The University of Oregon has taken note. It has invited Grove to earn a master's in environmental studies beginning in fall 2020. "I'm going to study climate change and the ability to grow breadfruit commercially, to feed people. It grows in our zone but not Homestead or Miami, so we're going to research what plant varieties are best, what management practices work, and how all that will change with the climate," said Grove. With the predicted increase in superstorms, having nutritious, resilient crops could mean the difference between food shortages and sustainability.

During this next phase, Grimal Grove will remain a community resource for food education and a green space for activities and events. But, with Garvey expanding his studies and research on breadfruit, he will also add an education center. "Before, it was more of a historical tropical fruit grove.

I want to make Grimal Grove the 'Grove of the Future,'" said Garvey. "It beats living in the past." The farm will also serve as a research hub for Garvey and others from the University of Oregon studying food resiliency.

"We're here, and we're almost back from Irma," Garvey said. "And we're going to get a lot better. Stay tuned."

Community Day will be a "pre-opening" for the grove. Garvey's goal is to re-open fully in January 2020 on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday's event, also from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., will include tours, cooking demonstrations, and workshops to help people connect to nature. There will, of course, be fruit, fruit trees and produce for sale. For more information, visit Grimal Grove on Facebook.

1. A basket of tropical fruits grown at Grimal Grove showcases how special the land is. This variety of exotic crops cannot be found elsewhere in the Keys. PATRICK GARVEY/Contributed.

2. Grimal Grove hosts the Boys and Girls Club for after-school programs.

3. Patrick Garvey picks breadfruit growing in Grimal Grove. The exotic fruit could become a staple for South Florida with rising sea levels and salting of farmlands.