LOTUSLAND’S STATUS AS A WORLD CLASS GARDEN IS WELL KNOWN.
Less apparent are our international collaborations and prominence in
the scientific community. We have maintained a strong international
presence during our 25 years as a public garden by attending conferences
ranging from cycad biology to plant conservation. The knowledge gained
and the professional relationships fostered make these experiences invaluable.

Last November I had the opportunity to represent Lotusland at the International
Conference Utowana at the Cienfuegos Botanic Garden in Cuba. The theme,
“building botanical bridges,” is more relevant than ever as botanical networks
become increasingly interconnected and function as collaborative units that work
across borders. In fact, botanic gardens hold more than 30% of known plant
species in their living collections and 40% of those are known to be threatened.

The Cienfuegos Botanic Garden is the oldest in Cuba, having been established
116 years ago originally as a collaboration with Harvard University. As the garden
was evolving in the early 1900s, a scientific expedition arrived in Cuba on
a ship called the Utowana carrying the renowned North American plant explorer
David Fairchild. Many of the important plant collections at Cienfuegos can be
attributed to his explorations. Fairchild and the Utowana “established a bridge for
exchange” and the conference was named in honor of these contributions.

The conference covered many topics from plant collections management and history
of plant collecting in the Caribbean and Central America, to Cuban floristic
studies and horticultural practices in public spaces. I was honored to open the
conference with a presentation on the “Importance of Botanic Gardens and
Their Living Collections.” I emphasized Lotusland’s collections management
techniques, the mission of botanic gardens to raise conservation awareness
and the value of sharing plant material between institutions to help assure the
continued survival of threatened species.

Two months prior to the conference Cuba was raked by Hurricane Irma, leaving
a devastating swath of destruction. I had planned a trip to visit Hemithrinax
ekmaniana, an endemic Cuban palm with a distribution restricted to three mogotes,
or limestone hills, but unfortunately it was directly impacted by Hurricane Irma and
the area became practically impossible to access. This palm is believed to have
survived the storm. Fortunately, it is also found in the collections of eight botanic
gardens, including Cienfuegos, but six of these gardens were also damaged by
Irma. It is crucial for us to protect these threatened species, but in this case the
gardens themselves proved vulnerable.

From a practical point of view, the more widely the plant is distributed the better
for long term survival.

At the end of the conference we vowed to continue the construction of the bridges
we had begun. — Paul Mills