

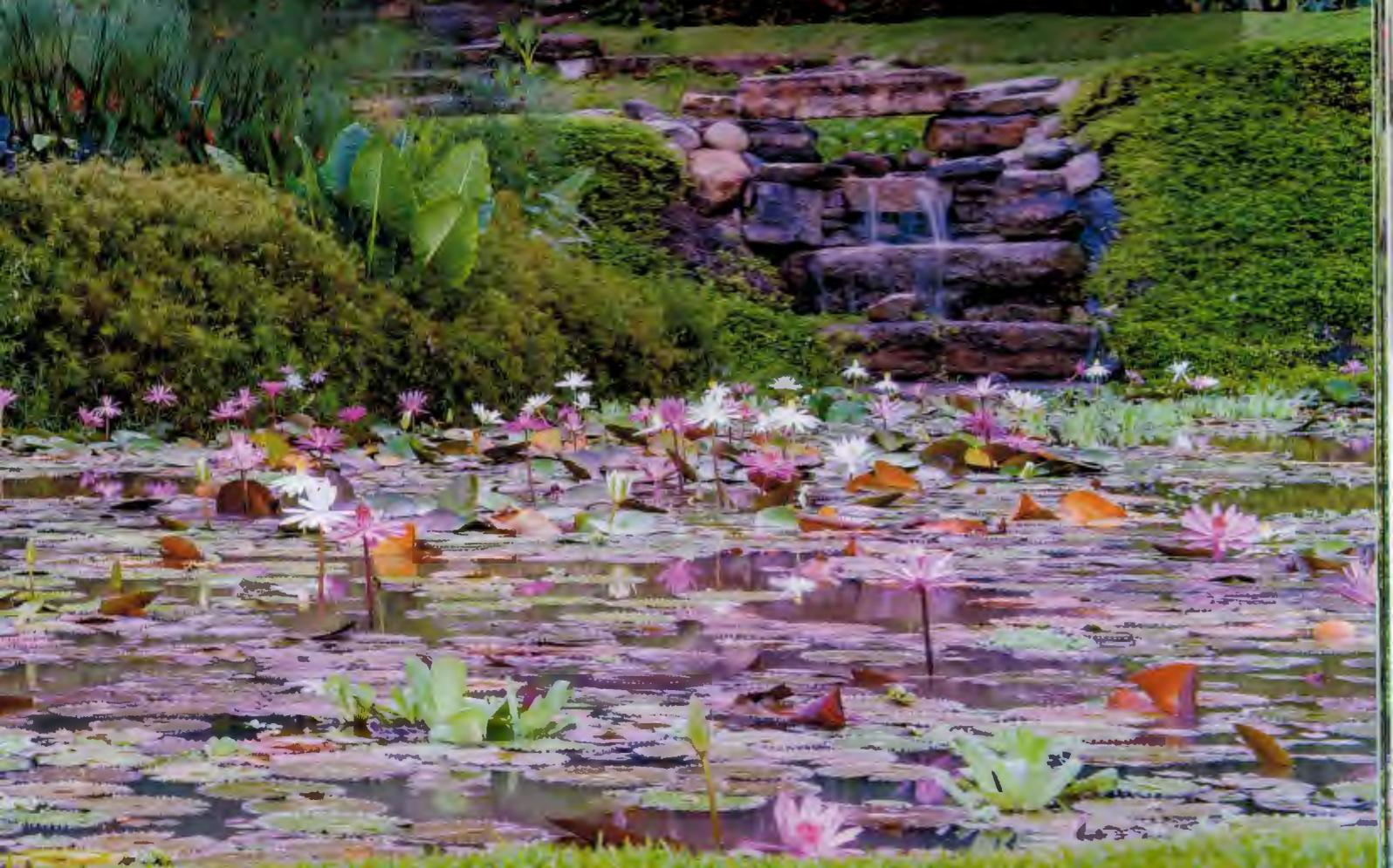
ABROAD

# TROPICAL IMMERSION

Long Island's Dennis Schrader creates a Costa Rican showcase for his beloved tropical plants, including water lilies, *Calathea*, and *Heliconia*. He even shares his take-home-to-cold-climate planting ideas. The larger-than-life, tree-house-like structures put the abundant flora and fauna at arm's reach.



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB CARDILLO





It was bound to happen. Since the early 1980s Dennis Schrader has immersed himself in tropical plants, first with a design-build firm, then with the wholesale nursery Landcraft Environments, Ltd., which he runs with partner Bill Smith on Long Island's North Fork. Their greenhouses supply boldly colored and foliated tender plants to summer gardens throughout the Northeast. And he wrote a book with Susan A. Roth called *Hot Plants for Cool Climates* (Timber Press, 2005), offering ideas for bringing tropical magic into unexpected places. Apparently, all of this didn't quite satisfy.

But the gardens he created around his Costa Rica villa did. The villa is a getaway for relaxing, entertaining, and sharing with guests, but it's also a showcase for Schrader's beloved tropical plants—and a chance to experience them in a natural setting outside the greenhouse.

After searching the world for a tropical hot spot on which to build a winter-escape home, in 2009 Schrader with Smith and their friend Ilene Vultaggio found the kind of location they had been looking for: "Where the rainforest meets the ocean." Near the sleepy little surfer town of Dominical, this piece of land on Costa Rica's southwest coast was part pasture and part jungle, with nice views of the Pacific.

Their first steps were big ones. Extensive grading and land-sculpting created service roads and sites for a home and guesthouse—which set the stage for naturalistic rock walls and water features that serve the essential function of controlling the abundant runoff. After that came extensive planting of large-scale trees: *Erythrina variegata* (tiger claw), *Kigelia pinnata* (African sausage tree), and *Couropita guianensis* (cannonball tree); palms (royal, coconut, Bismarck); and bamboos, then adding groundcovers and mass

plantings of flowering and foliage plants.

The three called their creation Villa de Agua (water villa), the first of the houses built in the compound of Los Elementos, named after the five Indonesian elements: earth,

**Facing Page:** Dennis Schrader says that one of the main reasons he built ponds on the property was to grow *Nymphaea* spp. (tropical water lilies). Rising above pads as pristine as if cut from paper, these near-fluorescent blooms grow from plants found locally.



Like a tree house, the home and multi-level deck rise above the forest canopy for views of rainforest and Pacific Ocean.

The outdoor kitchen and dining area has a panoramic view of the rainforest, one direction through handmade iron screens from India. A large, reclaimed, tropical hardwood table, sourced in Bali, sports three floral arrangements created from plants on the property.





## TAKE-HOME TROPICALS

SCHRADER RECOMMENDS THESE FOR COLD-CLIMATE GARDENS—OUTDOORS AS ANNUALS IN SPRING AND SUMMER, OR IN CONTAINERS INDOORS FOR THE WINTER.

- 1** *Caryota mitis* 'Variegata' (variegated fishtail palm): Stunning palm for a container in a large sunny room. In summer move it outdoors to a partly sunny spot, and keep soil moist.
- 2** *Clerodendrum ugandense* (blue butterfly bush): Grow this tropical shrub as a long-blooming summer annual in a container or garden bed. Provide full sun and well-drained soil. Will grow up to 6 feet tall.
- 3** *Hedychium coronarium* (white butterfly ginger): Large, very fragrant white flowers. Plant in a large container or garden bed in full sun. Will grow 3 to 5 feet tall.

wind, water, jungle, and fire. And an Indonesian theme, particularly Balinese, runs throughout the houses, decorated with Asian-style carvings, fabrics, and furnishings. The main home, designed for outdoor living, has the feeling of a comfortable and elegant tree house, with kitchen and living spaces transitioning through sliding glass walls to terraces and a swimming pool. Two sides of the house offer close-up views of the forest. "You can watch toucans from the sofa," as one guest said.

The landscape is also rooted in Southeast Asia, particularly its pagoda, ponds, lakes, rice terraces, mossy statues, spouting urns, and other artifacts. The plants come from tropical regions all around the world, including the local forests. In this tropic clime, the rainy season extends from May through November. As Schrader says, "It can rain for a week straight." The major horticultural challenge is the contrast between the deep shade and moisture of the forested areas during the wet season, and then a dry season when many of the deciduous trees drop their leaves and let in the ground-scorching sunlight. Schrader relishes the year-round warmth that spurs on "garden-ing at high speed"—bamboo can grow 20 to 30 feet in just one season.

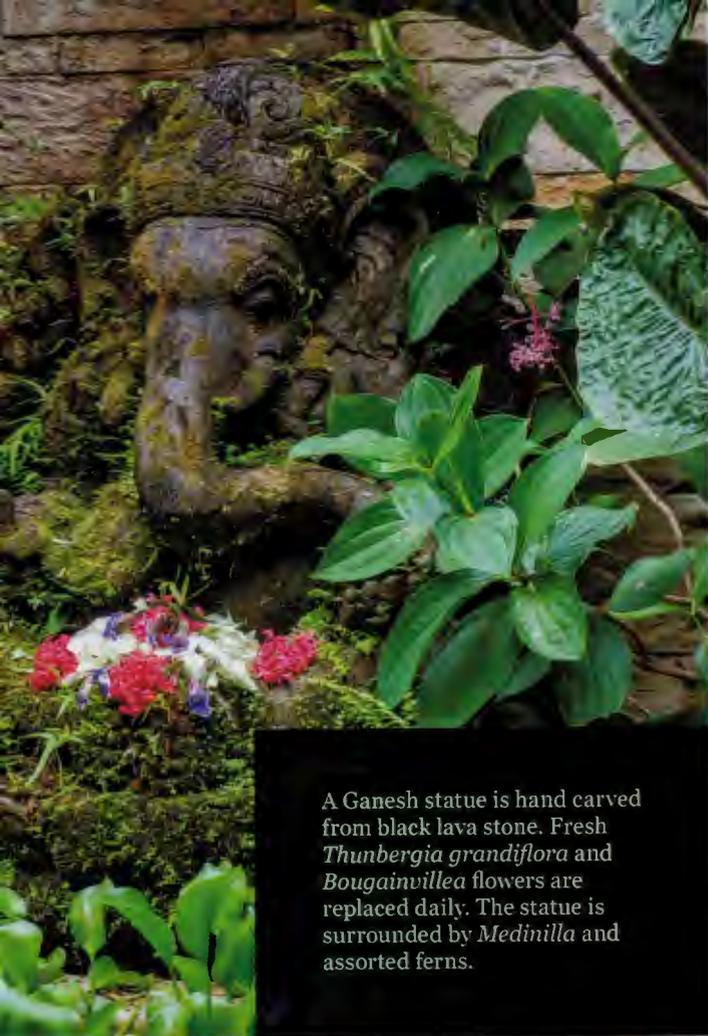
Schrader's climate-responsive design brings tropical plants front and center, out of the forest and into plain sight. Around the house he put massed plants in large swaths, positioned in layers for a natural look. A path allows close-up views of tropicals in bloom, particularly *Heliconia* and gingers, which both make outstanding cut flow-

Schrader's design brings tropicals out of the forest and into plain sight.

ers for indoor bouquets. There are some 40 kinds of *Heliconia*: a Schrader favorite known for waxy, bright-colored flowers and bold foliage resembling that of *Strelitzia* (bird of paradise). Another plant plays a different role: *Cananga odorata* (ylang-ylang tree), with curly, greenish flowers that are inconspicuous in appearance and powerful in fragrance. The ylang-ylang's flower's fragrance is used in perfumes, including the classic Chanel N°5, and here its scent wafts onto the terrace and even into the house.

Paths also lead into the natural forest, enhanced with groundcovers and low growers, including *Anthurium*, ferns, small palms, *Caladium*, and familiar American houseplants such as *Sansevieria* and *Philodendron*. Existing native trees—within easy view of the terrace and paths—are adorned with orchids and bromeliads. These jungle epiphytes are attached by tying them onto the tree trunks and branches with thin strips cut from bicycle inner tubes; the plants take root in a couple of months, and the rubber disintegrates and is removed.

*Calathea*, native to the Americas, is a particularly versatile plant used throughout the forest and elsewhere in shady spots—as a groundcover, in medium-height masses, and as accents. Different species range in height from



A Ganesha statue is hand carved from black lava stone. Fresh *Thunbergia grandiflora* and *Bougainvillea* flowers are replaced daily. The statue is surrounded by *Medinilla* and assorted ferns.



This larger-than-life floral display showcases *Heliconia chartacea* 'Sexy Pink', *H. mutisiana*, *H. wagneriana* 'Rainbow', *H. rostrata* 'Lobster Claw', *H. densiflora* 'Fire Flash', *H. linguata* 'Yellow Fan'.



This floral arrangement, a sago palm leaf, fern fronds, *Heliconia* 'Sexy Pink', *H. wagneriana*, and *Etilingera elatior* 'Burma Pink', is paired with a whale vertebra in keeping with the "water house" theme.



*Arundina graminifolia* (bamboo orchid) grows on palm trunks. *Strongylodon macrobotrys* (jade vine) tumbles over the Mollejon stone wall. Assorted bromeliads surround terra-cotta jars from Bali.



**VERSATILE COLOR**

Native to Central and South America, the many species of *Calathea* and *Stromanthe* can work as shade plants in tropical gardens or as house plants anywhere—provide indirect light, steady moisture, and, preferably, warmth and humidity. Many species exhibit nyctinasty, which means that their leaves curl up at night.

- 1** *Calathea roseopicta* 'Medallion'
- 2** *C. lubbersii* Brazilian snow
- 3** *C. lancifolia* Rattlesnake calathea
- 4** *Stromanthe sanguinea* 'Tricolor'

**5** *C. bachemiana*

**6** *C.* 'White Jade'

**7** *C. ornata* var. *roseo-lineata* Pin-stripe plant

**8** *C. picturata* 'Argentea' Silver variegated calathea

**9** *C. ornata* 'Sanderiana' Pin-stripe plant

**10** *C. picturata* 'Vandenheckei'



## SHOW-STOPPING HELICONIA

Another big group of tropical natives, *Heliconia* make wonderful plants for tropical gardens. They grow in large clumps from knee-high to second-story height. Flower shops know *Heliconia* as long-lasting cut flowers.

### **1** *Heliconia chartacea* 'Sexy Pink' Pink flamingo heliconia

Waxy, pink, pendulous blooms make great cut flowers. Grows 7 to 10 feet tall.

### **2** *Heliconia psittacorum* 'Parakeet'

It's easy to see how it got its perky name. Can be massed as a tall groundcover, growing 2 to 4 feet high.

### **3** *Heliconia mutisiana* Red velvet heliconia

This is a big one with a flair for the dramatic. Grows 16 to 20 feet tall, with pendulous, bright, rusty-orange blooms 3 feet long.



*Etlingera elatior* 'Burma Pink'  
(pink torch ginger): Can reach 15  
feet high. A long-lasting cut flower  
on 1- to 3-foot stems. Likes  
full sun to part shade and rich,  
well-drained soil.

1



2



### A CLOSER LOOK

- 1** *Mussaenda* 'Marmalade': *Mussaenda* colors range from pure white to pink, peach, and vivid red. Long-blooming summer tropical in northern climates.
- 2** *Ixora coccinea* 'Sunset' (jungle flame): Attracts pollinators. Different forms reach 18 inches to 6 feet. Long-blooming summer tropical in northern climates.
- 3** *Cananga odorata* (ylang-ylang tree): Narrow tree growing 30 to 40 feet tall. The scent from the fragrant 2- to 3-inch flowers wafts throughout the house.
- 4** *Galphimia glauca* (golden thryallis): Grows from 4 to 7 feet high, up to 4 feet wide. Long-blooming summer tropical in cold climates. Blooms best in full sun.



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**Right:** A Jacana or lily-trotter stands beside the pond looking for lunch. **Below:** Fabricated by master carpenter Marco Rodríguez, the pagoda is made of teak and cédro wood. The teak furniture was designed by Schrader. A mass of *Colocasia* 'Black Magic' is planted in front of the pagoda. Bright flowering *Heliconia densiflora* is planted in front of and behind the structure.



ground-hugging to 6 feet, with leaves from a few inches to several feet long. Schrader calls them “wonderful, exotic foliage plants with eyes on the leaves reminiscent of peacock feathers.”

A path through the forest leads from the main house to the guest house, which overlooks terraces and lakes designed to capture abundant rainfall and let it flow down a stone waterfall. Terracing that resembles Balinese rice paddies are planted not with rice but grass-like *Liriope muscari*.

More paths lead around ponds for viewing the water plants. The ponds are 12 to 15 feet deep, and Schrader built shelves around the edges with sandbags full of soil. This created a shallow bog condition for water lilies, *Colocasia* 'Black Magic', and papyrus. It took less than a year for the lily pads, sporting flowers in white to vivid fuchsia pink, to cover the surface.

Nearby a tiered-roof, open-wall Bali-style pagoda, built of teak and cédro woods, offers views of lilies and sounds of “a symphony of frog and insect noises at night,” as a guest described them. Dennis, Bill, and Ilene consider the pagoda the perfect spot for relaxing and entertaining—their own tropical plant paradise. 🌿

Terraces and lakes capture abundant rain and let it flow down a stone waterfall below the guest house. The large bright-green leaves of *Alocasia macrorrhizos* speckle the hillside. Red-flowering *Ixora coccinea*, three single-trunk *Ptychosperma macarthurii* (Macarthur palm), a dark-leaved giant screw pine, and *Calathea lutea* fill the planting bed above the waterfall.



Bill Smith, Ilene Vultaggio, and Dennis Schrader stand in the entryway that leads to Villa de Agua—a paradise showcasing tropical plant treasures.

