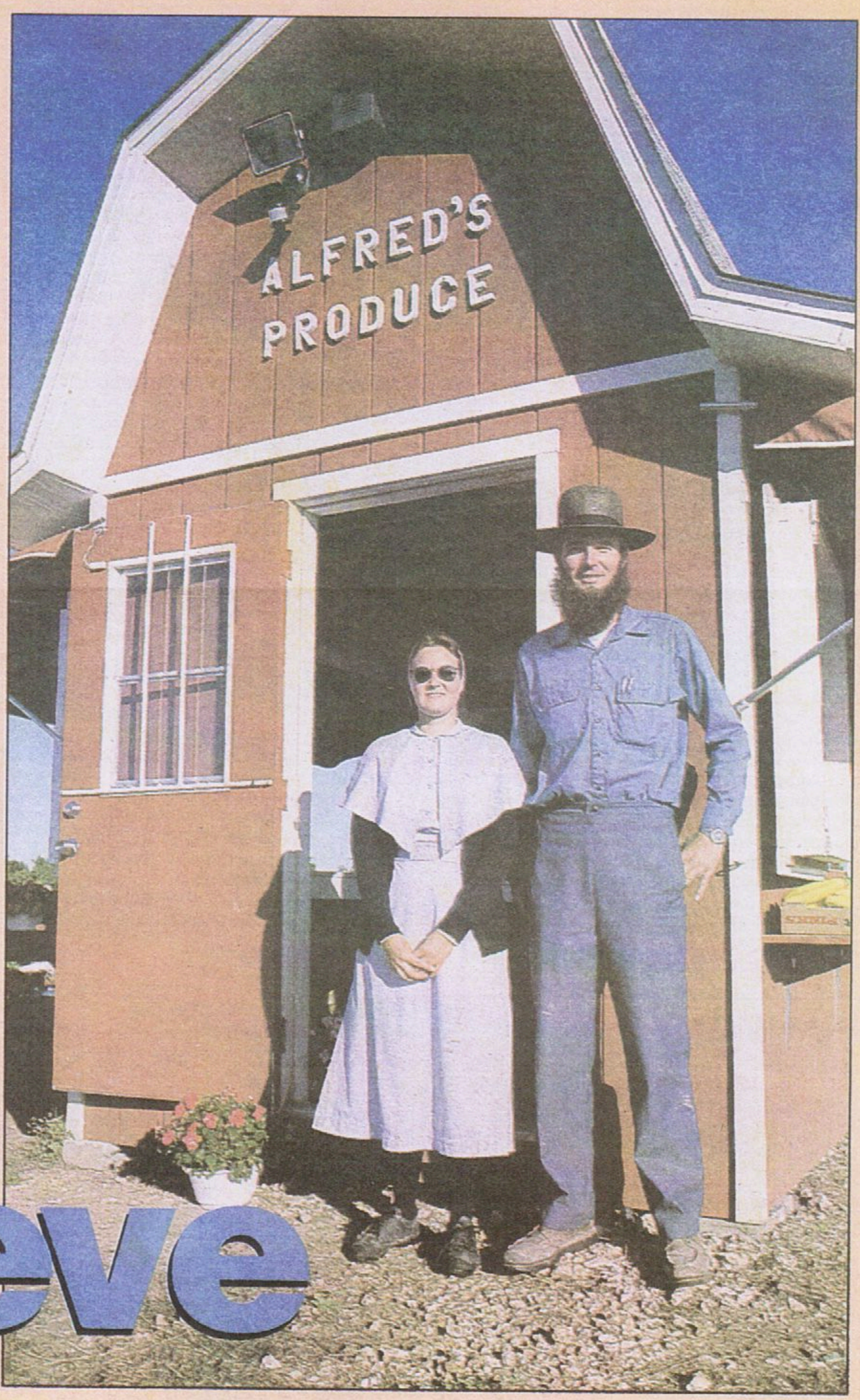
MAY 1, 1994

TROPIC

THE HERALD

Albino catfish who can live in a closet. Triple-breasted chickens. Yellow frogs with pitch black claws. An Asian leaf that's supposed to control diabetes. And a 13-pound cabbage. All growing in a neighborhood near you.

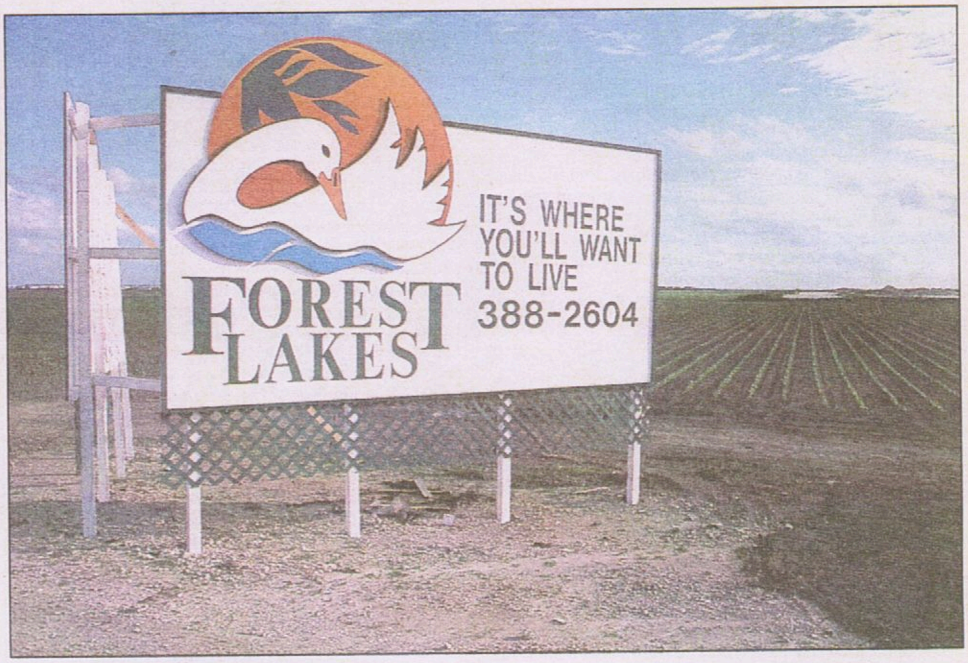


Farms you won't believe

Sandlot Basketball: More Than a Game — Page 14

Bury my heart at the shopping mall

Will a gale force of suburban development succeed where a monster hurricane failed?



Across the street from Bub's U-Pic, the last remaining farm on Kendall Drive, a new subdivision is about to spring from the fertile soil.

STORIES BY
EG LAUGHLIN

HOTOGRAPHS
BY MICHAEL
CARLEBACH

In early March when developer Armando Codina announced he was starting a new development company, he said: "We are looking at this vast amount of land to the south of us which may have tremendous development potential without so many of the restrictions."

Looking at vast amounts of land with an eye toward unrestricted development has been the story of America: Any land without buildings is considered "empty," waiting for a "higher use." Sometimes, the land spends decades in limbo, planted in crops or groves. But eventually it comes into its *ultimate purpose* — to be covered with homes, malls, industrial parks. The logic of all that empty space being filled is powerful: "Who's going to absorb our growing population?" asks county planning chief Bob Usherson. "Who wants more density in their own area?"

Fresh peppers from the Brubakers' best harvest in years lie in wait on a shelf.

For the Armando Codinas of the world, and all of us who want to live in the sun, the Redland — about 20,000 acres of farmland in South Dade — may be ready and waiting. But a lot of small farmers like it the way it is. They like the subtropical climate, the open space, the decent living they make, and they like each other for being willing to fight to preserve it.

Most of the farms, five to 10 acres, are tiny by agricultural standards. But it's the smallness that makes them so interesting because it forces the farmers to make every square foot count. There are fish farms, fern farms, orchid farms, groves, row crops. Carambola, yucca, litchi. The worm farm. The waterlily farm. The herb farm. And on and on. And if economic necessity isn't a powerful enough force to spawn creativity, Hurricane Andrew underscored the message of diversity by destroying small groves and nurseries and forcing farmers to turn to things that would allow them to make a quick comeback.

For the most part, they have succeeded. The Redland is still a little raggedy, but the farms are in full recovery.

As I wandered around the Redland recently, a year and a half after Andrew, the sky, vast and open, was the emptiest thing about it. I picked flowers, drank strawberry milkshakes and came home loaded down with corn, snapdragons and sticky buns. And every morning, I looked forward to going back.

But as I enjoyed the fruits of rural life, I got an education: While developers are eyeing the empty horizon with an eye toward filling it up, opposing forces are rallying to keep it as it is.

Watching suburban developments sprout in the midst of avocado fields, a coalition of community organizations, businesses, farmers, preservationists, as well as county, city and state administrators have joined together to try to keep the Redland an agricultural community. Since the agricultural value of the land alone cannot hold back development, their strategy has been to sell the Redland's future as a haven for small farmers as a tourist attraction — a flatter, more humid and exotic version of California's wine country.

"With the Urban Development Boundary Line projected to move steadily westward through the year 2010, Redland has, in effect, already begun packing its bag," the plan's authors warn.

But the "preservation and tourism plan" is met with resistance by powerful forces who say they support individual property rights. The Dade County Farm Bureau, a private lobbying group with 4,000 members, 1,200 of whom are farmers, is one of the groups opposing the plan. Tom Kirby, the bureau's director, asks: "If an old farmer wants to retire and sell his land to developers, shouldn't he be able to get the most for his investment? Whose business is it if both parties are satisfied?"

Kirby says his organization is all for preservation of farmlands, but the preservation people need to be more realistic about what farmers want.

"Farming is about money, not utopia," he says.

The farmers featured in these pages beg to differ. Some are making a good living; others are barely holding on. But for many of them, saving their small plots of land from becoming subdivisions has as much to do with utopia as money.

Meanwhile, the Redland is the only producer in the country of subtropical fruits, vegetables and nursery plants. It is also the No. 1 producer in the U.S. of winter vegetables. Its climate is unique and so are its farms and people.

"So unique," says Redland farmer Gabriele Marewski, "that if we get pushed out, there's no place else to go." ■

Ten Acres and a Prayer

"It's OK for the big farmers who can hold on. But we little people don't compete very well."

The dirt gets on their fingers and under their nails. They bend into it, crouch in it, look at the world from it. The dirt makes them who they are. But this is not something you will know when you walk up to Alfred and Arla Brubaker in the small, wooden harvest shed on the edge of their 10-acre farm in the Redland.

No, on this cool day in late March you will only know this: They, like the vegetables and fruits stacked around them, are full of color, shiny with health and clean, clean, clean. You will not know that Alfred, 32, tall with doe eyes, heavy black beard and wide-brimmed black hat and Arla, 31, smooth-skinned with green eyes, in her gauzy prayer cap, came to this point from the dirt.

It is in the dirt that their life is made: planting the crops, fertilizing them, pulling them up and giving thanks for them. The most formal thank-you comes at their yearly foot-washing ceremony in November, when their fellow German-Baptist communicants in South Dade gather together for the Lord's Supper and communion. It starts with a lesson in humility: the washing of each other's feet. They sit on their knees on the floor to do the washing, using their bare hands to scrub off the dirt from their fellow communicants' feet. They bend to the ground, heads down, hands working, ever mindful that in the pedestrian lurks the sublime.

They pray aloud at this formal ceremony, just as they pray silently when they work in the fields.

"But in the fields," says Arla, "It's not a word prayer. It's deeper than that. Everything together on a beautiful day makes you *feel* God."

Arla and Alfred met 10 years ago at Knaus Farm, the German Baptist farm in the Redland known for its sticky buns and strawberries. Albert was farming in Miami on his own five acres in 1984 when Arla came from Ohio for the winter to work in the Knaus bakery down the road. They already knew because of their religion that they believed in the same things: a simple, gentle life, lived in humility. And they soon found they had other things in common. They both wanted a sincere, caring mate, a family and a "truck-patch" farm with enough row crops to fill the back of a pickup every week or so and go to market. So, they cast their lot together, got a loan and bought 10 acres.

"It gets hard," says Alfred. Then he corrects himself: "No, not *hard*. That's too harsh a word. What I mean is we have to adjust to changes."

Changes like having to put a watchman's shed on their farm to keep thieves out of their harvest shed. Changes like having to adjust their irrigation schedule to keep from bothering anyone in the nearby subdivisions with the noise from the pump. Changes like fending off complaints about the smell of pesticides and fertilizers. Changes like meeting the mounting licensing fees they pay to spray their crops. And, changes like the effects of Hurricane Andrew.

"It's OK for the big farmers who can hold on," says Alfred. "But we little people don't compete very well."

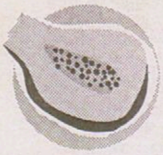
This has been the best harvest Arla and Alfred have had in years — robust peppers, tomatoes, zucchini, bibb lettuce, radishes, scallions, strawberries. They wash and groom them, sprucing them up to look better than what is sold in the best gourmet markets. They have every herb you can think of. The snapdragons blow in the March winds, like delicate plumes. Full of thanks, they bend to the dirt under a blue-blue sky, the sun warm on their backs. But most of the time they are alone in their prayers.

"We want to be farmers," says Alfred. "But if business doesn't pick up soon we're thinking of becoming carpenters." ■

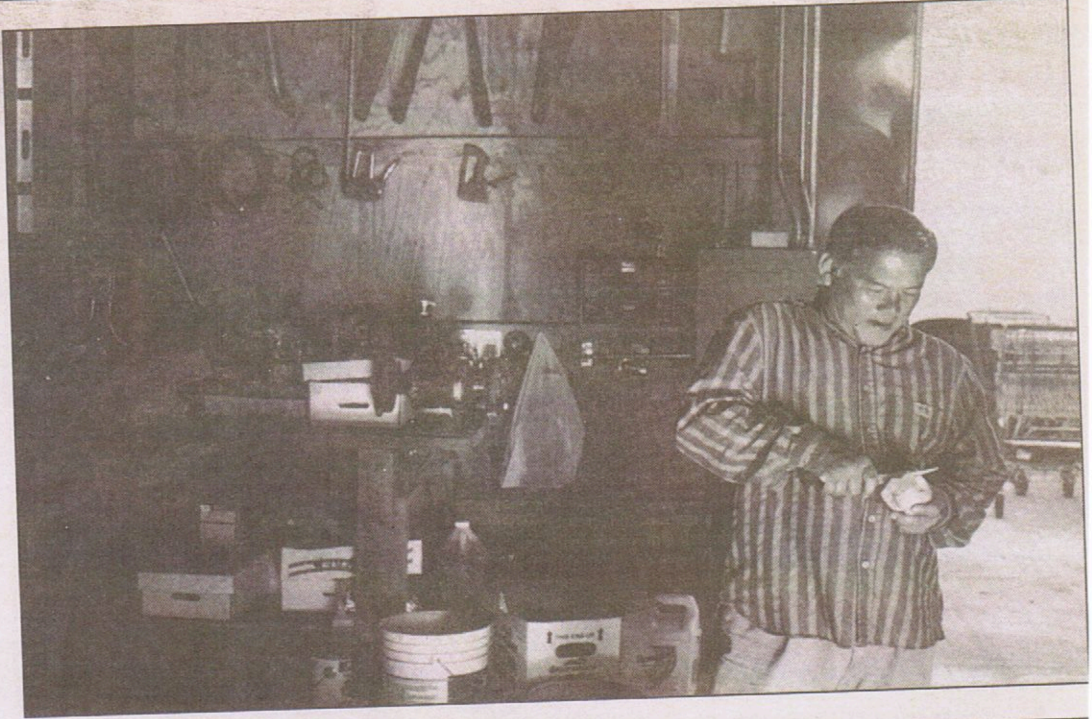
Alfred Brubaker loves being out in the fields alone with God and his strawberries. "But if business doesn't pick up soon," he says, "we're thinking of becoming carpenters."

Bury my heart

Leaves of Gold



"It is not the same here. It is lonely."



Deth Souphanthavong doesn't work from sunup to sundown. He works from sunup to midnight, most nights. Ask him why, he'll look at you as if you're not making any sense.

Deth Souphanthavong doesn't have time to talk to a reporter. He doesn't care who writes about his leaf farm or who reads about it. He has work to do. Today, the trucks come to haul off the crop he and his help picked yesterday. Tomorrow, they pick again. It is always like this.

A decade ago, when he and his family spent three years in the United Nations refugee camp in Thailand just over the border from their own country, Laos, *then* he had time to talk. He told his friends he hoped to be placed in the United States. He thought it seemed reasonable since he had worked with U.S. agricultural people in Ventiane, the capital of Laos.

"I know fertilizer," he told placement interviewers when they called him in. "I know chemicals. I know ag men from U.S."

When he got his way, he settled in Providence, R.I., with Dalath, his wife, their two babies and his brother. After working in a jewelry store, he started a small grocery, full of Asian vegetables, spices and herbs. Every time he signed the bill for the produce shipments from Southern California a thought crossed his mind: "If I raised these, I would go to South Florida and sell for cheaper."

The more produce bills he signed, the larger the thought got, until, in 1989, he sold the three groceries he owned by then and bought farmland in the Redland.

His daughter, Athittaya, 14, and his son, Lamonh, 16, whisper: "It is not the same here. It is lonely."

In Providence there were relatives and friends: stores, restaurants and shops where everyone spoke their language, understood their tastes, looked like them. They hung out at each other's houses, cooked potluck suppers, told the same stories over and over.

"Now," says Athittaya, "I play with the dog."

On this day, she plays with the dog at home. Her school, South Dade High School, had shut down for a day because of a brawl between black and white students. The racial tension adds to Athittaya's feelings of not belonging. She wouldn't want to take sides. But, she says, even if she did, neither side wants her.

The two kids do their chores for no pay and without question. It is simply what a family does, says Lamonh, who, along with his sister washes leaves and puts them in crates to be shipped to Providence and groceries all over the northern U.S. where there are large Asian settlements.

The leaves: It is through them that the family returns home, to the good talk and smells and tastes. They smell of cinnamon and lemon and mint. They taste of pepper and turnips and cress. They curl and pucker and stick. Deth calls off the names: "Kapao, sadao, pakvan, kai, kaothong . . ." He likes to tell about them: "This, cook with fish. This, to control diabetes. This, steam with meat to make a bad smell good."

Some grow on arbors with gourd-like vegetables as a bonus; others grow like ground cover. Some grow on trees and curl up poles. While still others grow in water. The pakvan, which grows in water, is Deth's favorite. He harvests both the leaf and the root, and sells them separately. The root tastes like a mild curry, the leaf like a cross between basil and cress. They bring in his best profit and are the least labor intensive. Unlike the others, he doesn't have to gently uproot each plant and change its soil every year.

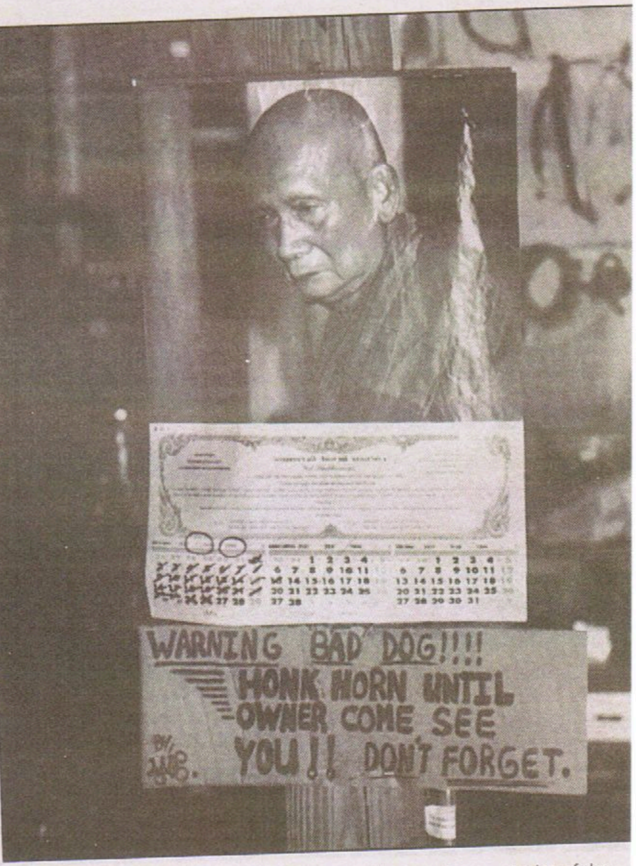
Deth Souphanthavong doesn't work from sunup to sundown. He works from sunup to midnight, most nights. If you ask him why, he'll look at you as if you're not making any sense. His son asks him to go fishing. His son and his daughter tell him that other families take vacations together.

"I have a dream of our family sitting around a campfire in the woods," says Lamonh.

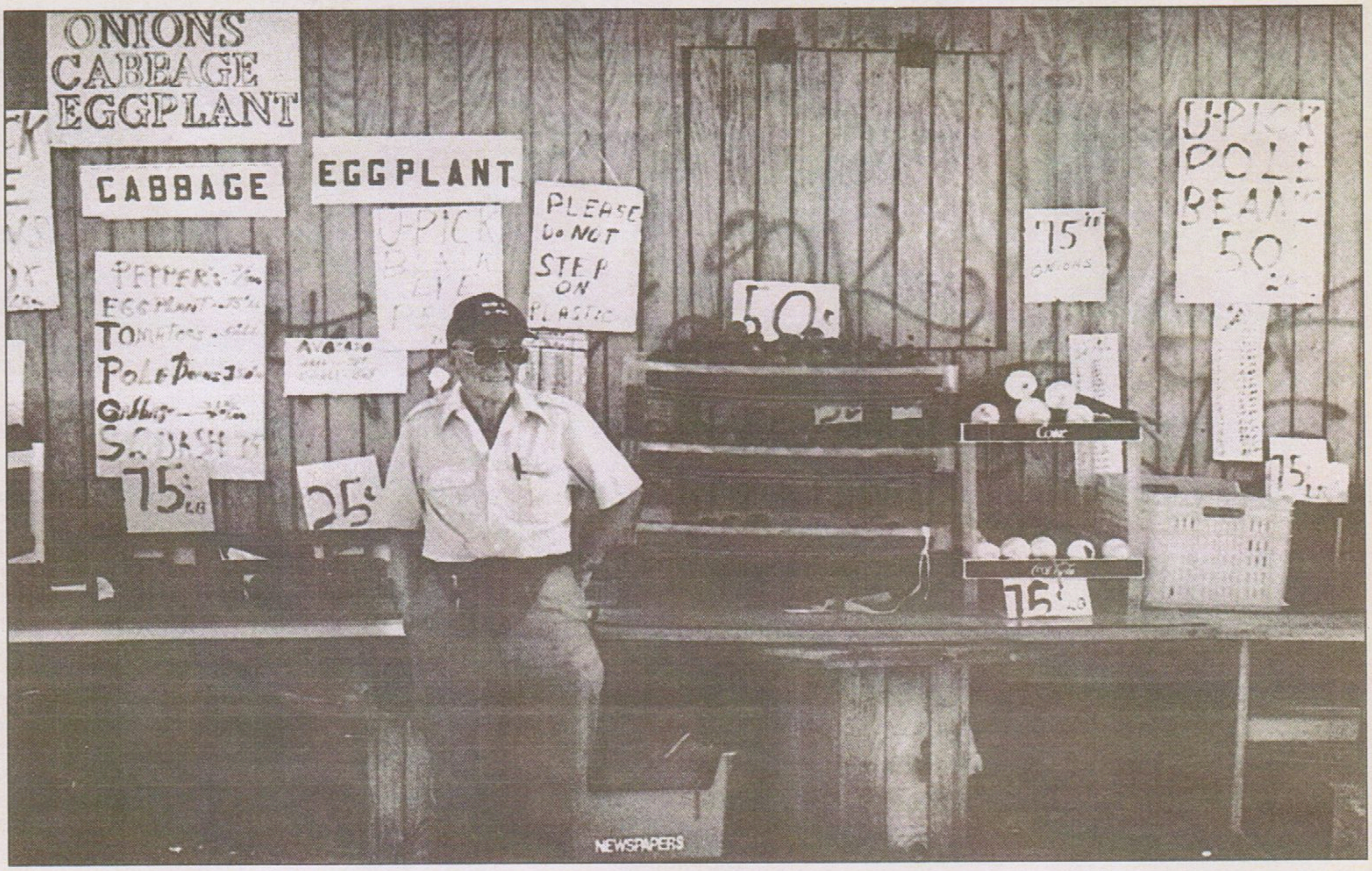
But Deth says not now. He must work to keep the farm going, to get more to put back into it. Maybe in 10 years, he says, he'll squeeze in the camping trip.

The family lives in a little cottage on the farm. Dalath makes most of their clothes. The kids don't want designer clothes, video games or cars; they simply want to belong and to take a vacation.

"For now," says Deth, trying to cheer them up, "we go out together to the grocery." ■

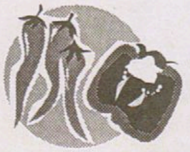


On Deth Souphanthavong's Asian vegetable farm is a reminder of the land he left — a photo of the venerable Dalai Lama.



Duke Johnson waits for buyers at Bub's U-Pic. Soon, Bub's field will be paved over. "Push, push, push," says Bub. "Don't people realize how important farms are to this country?"

The Last Harvest



"There's one word that says it all. CEE-MENT."

Up comes Bub. Duke Johnson, the U-Pic clerk, is relieved. He has been trying to explain to someone from the newspaper what it's like to have the last farm on Kendall and is about to give up, when he spots Bub Woodfin's big, black sedan heading toward him. Bub will tell you what it's like, says Duke. He's in charge of the farm.

"There's one word that says it all," says Bub: "CEE-MENT."

He points to the edge of the 15-acre farm rented from a British developer. Scraping right up against the pole beans are condos, houses, parking lots, sidewalks and streets, all made with one basic product: CEE-MENT.

A few years ago, says Bub, that was all farmland. Now what's left is about to go too. In a year, his farm will be slabs of you-know-what. The lease is up and it's subdivision time for the farm. Used to be, he says, you had these pesky little strips of road dividing up the farmlands and the forests and confusing the animals. Now you've got these pesky little strips of crops dividing up the cement and driving the developers crazy.

"Stars, child," he says, "concrete has to meet concrete."

Across the busy street from Bub's U-Pic the crops have been tilled under and fill has been packed onto the land to bring it up to road level and keep it from flooding. Over that, white gravel creates a blinding glare. Soon, Forest Lakes, a new subdivision, will go in across from the Wal-Mart.

"Push, push, push," says Bub. "Don't people realize how important farms are to this country?"

But Bub's farm looks a little forlorn: lots of weeds in the field and lots of brown dry spots on the crops. At first, he blames it on the rain. Rotted the strawberries and tomatoes, he says. But then he concedes that with the end so near there's not much incentive to spruce things up. It's not like it was 20 years ago when they saw fields in all directions and made a decent living off them.

"Last year, I had a 13-pound cabbage," he says dreamily.

Right then, two women drive up in a shiny blue sedan and ask about one of the pickers.

"Hi Ruby," says Bub, tipping his hat. "Hi Mamma."

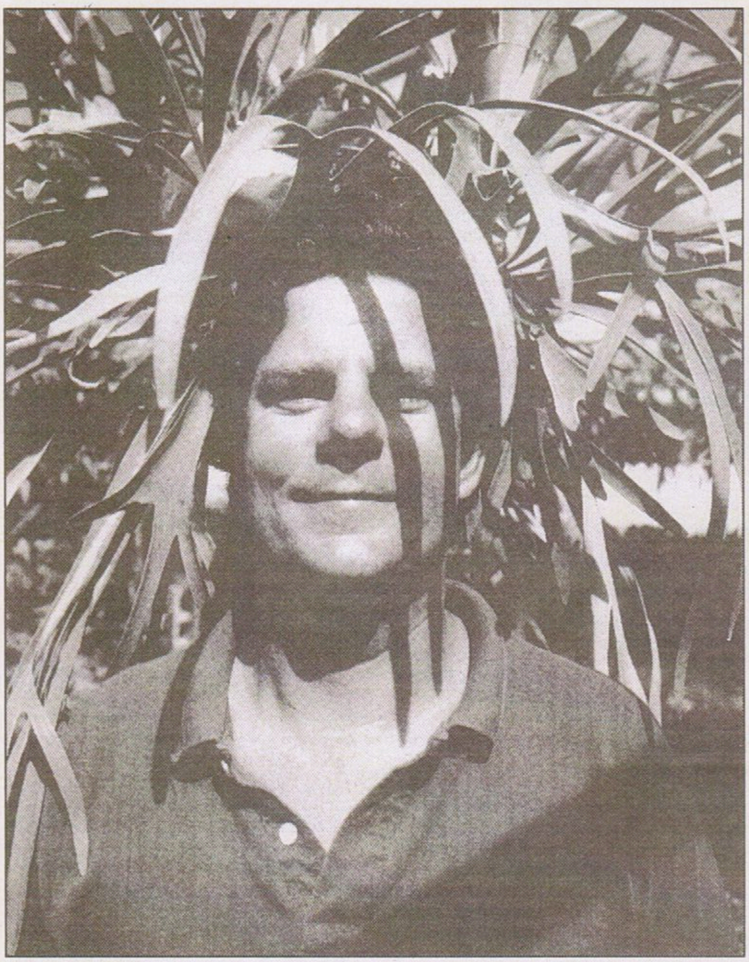
Mamma asks Bub if he can get Rodney's lunch to him.

"Yes ma'am," says Bub.

According to Bub, Rodney's out luggin'. Using a hand truck to bring the boxes of picked beans to a truck. Bub takes the brown paper bag from Ruby and assures her he'll get it to Rodney in the fields.

Hot, fried catfish, he says. On a bun with a slice of onion. He squints, trying to spot Rodney among the rows of pole beans that are as close together as the houses behind them. A swallow-tail kite circles overhead. Bub sniffs an oil spot on Rodney's lunch sack and groans appreciatively.

"Thank goodness," he says, "a few of us still know what matters." ■



Craig Reid used to be a rock-'n'-roll drummer. But now, like his mother, he's in love with the ease and calmness of life down a dirt road.

Lord Cheery's
FERN FARM
NURSERY

Behind this sign lies a laid-back enterprise that provides an object lesson in the spiritual benefits of being small-time Redland farmers.

A New Leaf

"Since I've become a fern farmer, I've thought about the phrase down-to-earth and where it comes from."

Five years ago, Janet Reid bought five acres in the Redland for one purpose: "To finish with my former life." She wanted to get away from the 50 years of country club balls, golf courses, men in suits, women in high heels and the competitive, corporate world that supported them.

It wasn't that she resented or disliked these things; it was just that she decided they weren't for her anymore. She grew up in a family of architects and builders. She married into a family of builders and developers. She had eaten, slept and breathed "development." She knew the lingo, the stakes, the ins and outs, and she knew something else: At 74, she wanted a more peaceful, spiritual life.

So, she took some of her inheritance and bought a small farm with an eye toward setting up some kind of low-key nursery. Something to piddle with, a pastime for her son Craig and her.

If you're driving down 153rd Court in the Redland, you'll see the sign: A big, chirpy sun wearing sunglasses. "Lord Cheery's Fern Farm," it says.

"I'm Lord Cheery," says Craig, frowning. "It's meant to be sarcastic."

Every day Janet and Craig make a new list of what they want to accomplish on the fern farm. Every day they check off what they've done and push a couple of things onto the next day. That way they can convince themselves they really are serious about their new business. That way they can tell themselves that they have settled in the Redland for business reasons — not simply because they longed for peace.

A day they get $100 in orders they consider a great day.

"The hurricane set us back," says Craig, who at 39 is not willing to admit he likes the idea of retirement. "But we're going to keep at it. In a couple of years, we'll break even."

Craig, who used to be a rock-'n'-roll drummer, lived a life of gigs, clubs and sleeping all day. But now he's up with the birds, out in the sunlight doing chores, puttering around. Like his mother, he's in love with the ease and calmness of life down a dirt road.

On a crisp, sunny day in early March their list of things to do looked like this:

1. Put up rails in small shade house.
2. Fertilize fishtail fern.
3. Pot bird's nest fern.
4. Put palm food on rabbit's foot fern.
5. Sit and watch fish.

Craig mixed up the order of chores and did No. 5 after No. 1. Before noon, he placed a lounge chair and a cooler of ice water on the edge of the coral rock pond near the entrance to the farm, put on his sunglasses and watched the fish in the cool, clear water until he dozed off.

An hour later, he continued on down the list, with help from his mom. After all, it *was* their busiest time of year. The orchid show was about to open at Dinner Key, which meant all the orchid farmers were eager for maidenhead fern to place around their orchids to show them off better. We need to tend to business, mother and son told one another, relieved that business never got any more frantic than this.

This is the appeal of being small-time Redland farmers as opposed to developers, says Janet. No one ever seems to get that serious or rushed about ferns. The priority isn't how much you can do to stretch your investment; it's how well you can get to know other farmers and help them while still getting your own work done.

"Since I've become a fern farmer," says Janet, "I've thought about the phrase down-to-earth and where it comes from."

People who spend their days close to the soil really do seem to be down-to-earth, she says. She can see the change in Craig, and in herself. They are more touched and amused by small kindnesses and simple things. More patient. More relaxed. More like the other small-time farmers they do business with.

"I don't know how I stood the lounge life all of those years," says Craig. "It was more about selling alcohol than musical performance."

Craig says he started as a rock-'n'-roll drummer in the early '70s with high hopes. But eventually he got cynical about the life: The smoke and the crowds of people tanked up on drugs and booze. The sleazy managers and club owners who looked and acted like they were in the Mafia and always knew just how to get their way.

He went weeks at a time in a fog, never seeing daylight.

But now, he says proudly, all of that has changed. He knows what the days look like — from early morning on. And, he knows other things too. Like: The screening on a shade house needs enough slack to accommodate the Redland winds. The tiny brown spore on the back of a button fern is ready for propagation "when it looks like a pregnant woman's stomach." If you nurture it, that tiny brown speck of spore becomes a gorgeous, lush fern. And, when the stakes are small and people are down-to-earth, to *sleep with the fishes* can be a great way to begin the day. ■

Bury my heart

The Stronghold

"You have to be patient to do this work."

Bill Seefeldt is holding up his prize albino catfish for a visitor who is starting to worry that the fish will die if it doesn't get back in the tank.

"Don't worry," says Seefeldt. "He's so strong you can wrap him in wet peat moss in a towel and keep him alive in the closet for a month."

Seefeldt should know. His 10-acre farm in South Dade is called "Life Cycle Research, Genetic Engineering." What this means is that Seefeldt spends practically all of his time trying to make strong stock. Mostly strong fish. But also strong reptiles. Strong birds. Strong frogs and monkeys. Even a strong dog.

For the past 30 years, Seefeldt has been "up breeding" his animals — culling, selecting and testing to make sure that the strongest survive. And what Seefeldt means by the strongest is one of two things: great marketing potential, or the good sense not to bother anything that has great marketing potential.

As for the albino catfish, its ability to withstand being out of water makes it less frail and easier to transport. This tenaciousness added to its exotic looks makes it a great seller. At $25 to $45 each, Seefeldt made enough last year to keep from having to mortgage the farm, which he has had to do three times over the past 30 years to keep going.

Bill Seefeldt and his genetically engineered albino catfish. "Don't worry," he says. "He's so strong you can wrap him in wet peat moss in a towel and keep him alive in the closet for a month."

"Being a genetic farmer is not about money," says Seefeldt. "It's about being fascinated with your work."

If you tour his farm, you'll start with the chickens — odd looking bare-headed birds with puffed-out chests that look like their backs have been chopped off. It has taken him 10 years to come up with the particular breed of triple-breasted, no-tail, fanatical egg layer that he thinks promises to be his most important work. He dreams of donating his protein-rich miracle chick to hunger-ravaged Third World countries to get their stock going.

Moving right along, Seefeldt shows off his tank of albino frogs, pale yellow croakers with red eyes and pitch black claws. Something different for your natural pool, he says — to swim alongside your bug-eyed, pale orange, albino catfish and your jellyhead, red buffalo fish.

He enters the cage of dozens of red-beaked, ring-necked, green parrots "up-bred" to be tremendous talkers.

"Come here, Pizza Bird," he yells.

"Come here, Pizza Bird," echoes *ad infinitum* throughout the cage from dozens of red beaks, as Pizza Bird lands on Seefeldt's shoulder and whistles *Dixie*.

"*Plecostomus*," says Seefeldt to Pizza Bird, who will have to hear the word 30 times to say the Latin name for the albino catfish. These birds are supposed to be very slow to catch on, Seefeldt explains. But some breeding work has given them brains as well as beauty.

"Pluh-cos-toe-mus," Seefeldt enunciates touching his lips to the bird's beak.

"Pizza, pizza, pizza," says Pizza Bird.

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"You have to be patient to do this work," says Seefeldt.

He heads past the caimans that look like baby crocodiles. Past the diamond-backed rattlesnakes, the silver pheasants with houndstooth-patterned backs and the tortoises with red feet. Past the monarch butterflies and luna moths. Surrounding the quarter acre of tanks, cages and pens in the center of the farm are the ponds: full of all kinds of fish that will be wholesaled to pet stores. To the southwest of these ponds is the murky tortoise pond, an ominous pea green pit where Seefeldt dumps the animals that don't measure up to his definition of *strong*.

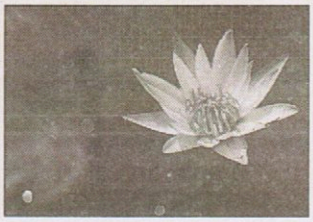
So far, the mild-mannered dog that has been flattened twice (once by a truck and once by a collapsing shed during the hurricane) has avoided the turtle pond, as has Gussie, the 15-year-old hen who deposits an egg on Seefeldt's desk every morning and Frankie, the toothless, castrated capuchin monkey and Kitty, the pet alligator. For all of them, unlike the animals with marketing potential, the right to survival is based on the fact that "they don't bother anything" — a standard Seefeldt also applies to himself.

Last year, when he needed more roosting space for his chickens, he moved the chickens into his house and moved himself into one of the roofed animal pens. His pen, near the ring-necked parrots, affords him about the same luxuries they get: water, food, a clean environment. He showers outdoors, cooks on a campfire and sleeps on a wooden bunk. He gets up with his animals and goes to bed with them. Except for an apprentice to help with the chores, a video camera to document his work and a reading light at night, Seefeldt only allows himself one other luxury: a closet where he can keep his clothes — as well as a large albino catfish wrapped in a towel. ■

Milton Millon no longer frets about being blind. What matters to him now is the way the soil clumps in his hands, the way the March wind vibrates against his face, the way a healthy pond smells.

At left, Margot Millon in the shade house with her many bromeliads.

Below, South Florida is the perfect place to grow waterlilies like this one. And a hurricane can't damage a waterlily pond the way it can pine trees and orchid houses.



The Comeback Kids

"Losing your sight really puts some starch into you."

At 67, Milt Millon can finally see what matters to him. Now that he raises waterlilies with his wife, Margot, on their five-acre farm in the Redland. Now that it no longer bothers him that he went blind overnight on the eve of their marriage, nine years ago, when an artery inexplicably swelled and shut off his optic nerve.

Before that, Milt, the owner of plant stores in Washington, D.C., was concerned with such things as cost effectiveness and marketing. But, now, what matters to him is the way the soil clumps together in his hands, the way the March wind vibrates against his face, the way a healthy pond smells.

His desk and worktable are outside in a little chickee-style shed. He takes orders over the phone to his left and calculates prices on the talking calculator beside the phone. In front of him are piles of soil, and to the right, coffee cans of slow-release fertilizer that looks and feels like mustard seeds.

He hears more, now. Smells more. Feels more too. He can tell you what bird is calling in the distance, what Margot is heating for lunch in the house, the difference between the feel of good and average soil.

His hands run across the table searching for a knife. He slices a papyrus plant lengthwise, then touches each part and describes it, as if he can see it clear as day. He points to the east to show you the bougainvillea growing up the pine stumps, the hibiscus to the north, along the fence, the bamboo to the south — all planted after the hurricane, all his design.

"I know exactly how it looks," he says.

It was after the hurricane that he and Margot decided to become waterlily farmers. What was a pine forest had become open land. What were orchid houses had become debris. (It cost $30,000 just to get it hauled to the roadside.) The orchids that had taken years to mature were destroyed. The question for Milt and Margot was this: What's the best use for five acres in the South Dade sun if we want to make a quick comeback?

Margot, who had been principal of Miami Springs Elementary before their marriage, loved the idea of waterlilies and bog plants. One of the things she was proudest of at the school was a five-year water project she oversaw. The kids and the staff at the school turned a mucky piece of land behind the school into a fresh water slough exactly like a slice of healthy Everglades. They dug the hole, figured out how to get it to hold water and what plants would maintain the oxygen balance needed to keep it healthy.

Milt liked the idea of waterlilies too, but for other reasons. More and more people were putting in natural pools. South Florida was the perfect place to grow the plants to landscape them. They could sell them both wholesale and retail and start a catalog business too. And, most important, a hurricane couldn't damage a waterlily pond the way it could pine trees and orchid houses.

They have nine ponds, each 18 inches deep. Milt points and describes: "Over there are the ones that go dormant in the winter. And, over there, you'll see the tropical ones that grow all year round."

The lilies grow on stalks and float on pads. They bloom at night and during the day. They are the softest pastels and the brightest colors. Margot can see them from her office, where she makes a part-time living counseling middle-aged people who are trying to make major changes in their lives. She keeps a microscope on her desk and, sometimes, when she sees something fall in the water she runs out to scoop it up and check it.

When snails or bird droppings fall in the pond, Margot envisions exactly what she'll see under the microscope and also what the bacteria will do to the plants. She thinks a lot about the effects of one life on another.

Milt likes telling about how well he managed alone when Margot took a 10-day trip to Sweden to see her son. He found his way around the farm by running his hands along rope lines. He heated up his meals in the microwave, identifying the containers in the refrigerator by the number of rubber bands around each. (Two for Chinese, three Italian.) At night, with Margot gone, he listened to talking books and took time to reflect upon his life.

He thought about how "losing your sight really puts some starch into you." He thought about how it no longer bothered him to be blind. He thought about how financially successful he was at waterlily farming — so successful he could plan the freighter trip around the world he had always wanted to take with Margot. And, most of all, he thought about how good life had been to a waterlily farmer in the Redland who knew a good thing when he saw it. ■