

The House Refuge At Gilbert's Bar, built in 1875 by the United States Lifesaving Service, is the oldest building in Martin County. Originally there were ten Houses of Refuge along Florida's coast, staffed by a Keeper and his family to provide shelter and assistance to shipwreck survivors. People could make their way to shore, but few could survive without assistance in the Florida wilderness. The last one standing, the house is owned by Martin County, and operated as an historical site museum by the Historical Society of Martin County,

Allamanda Circle of the Garden Club of Stuart decorates the House Of Refuge for the holidays each year and serves as hostesses for their annual Christmas Open House as our civic project. The theme is rustic, using materials that might have been used by pioneer Florida families in the 1880's. We use native Florida materials to decorate.

This year we made 32 new wreaths from Railroad Vine, *Ipomea pes caprae*, to decorate the outside porches and gates. We gathered the vines from the beach surrounding the house in mid August 2017, stripped them of leaves, wrapped the long vines into 20 inch wreaths over the next few days, and laid them flat to dry. At the end of November, the wreaths were the first decorations that our Circle members put up, each with a fresh new ribbon bow. They are wired securely to the posts of the open porch where they withstand the raging oceanfront assault of wind and saltwater for the month of December. These wreaths can be expected to last for 5 or 6 years with care.

Inside the house a living tree donated by a local nursery serves as our Christmas tree. We usually use a South Florida Slash Pine, *Pinus elliotii*, and plant them in the community after Christmas. We decorated the tree the first week in December using seashell ornaments crafted by Allamanda Circle Members. Oyster shells painted to be Santas, angels made from seashells with paper doily wings, pine cones and cardboard stars with feathers and glitter, and snowmen made from wine corks and twigs are some of the ornaments, the tree is topped with a sea star. The kitchen fireplace gets a fragrant dried fruit and spice garland freshly prepared by a member.

A couple days before the Open House we gathered again, this time to use our floral design skills creating fresh greenery arrangements, primarily natives from our gardens, to finish our decorating.

That day we noticed that our little Slash Pine, in a smaller nursery pot than in past years, was suffering badly from lack of water. We found a last minute replacement, a Thatch Palm, *Thrinax radiata*, a salt tolerant native palm that will be planted on the grounds of the museum in the spring. The pine was taken to a members garden for rehabilitation. It continued to decline, she was pretty sure it was dead, but is now showing new growth after being planted in the ground.

At the Open House, members provided homemade holiday bakery, serving coffee and hot cider. Here again, we have a tradition. Historical research revealed that a visitor to the house in the 1880's brought mincemeat pie when she came to visit the Keeper's family, so we serve mincemeat tarts and simple cookies.

Each year one of our three Florida Master Gardener members presents an educational offering. This year Ann McCormick's presentation was about two historically significant native plants that provided the wood this old house was constructed of: South Florida Slash Pine, and Baldcypress.