

# MASTERFUL GROWTH

## THE GAME-CHANGING TRANSFORMATION OF MARIE SELBY BOTANICAL GARDENS

BY CHRISTY PESSEMIER

There's an exciting buzz going on around Marie Selby Botanical Gardens' Downtown Sarasota campus. If you've driven past recently, or visited the gardens, you've probably noticed things are changing in a big way. These changes are not only having ripple effects throughout the community, but also throughout the country—and the world.

When the Selby Gardens Master Plan is complete, it will make its mark internationally as a leader and true model in sustainability. Selby Gardens' Downtown Sarasota campus will house the world's first certified net positive energy botanical garden complex, net positive energy living community, and net positive energy restaurant. This has never been done before.

"When we set out planning this project, I gave the team the direction to do everything as green as we can," President and CEO Jennifer Rominiecki said. "One day, I got a phone call from the team, telling me that they only needed to add a few more solar panels to put us in a realm all by ourselves. They asked me if I would like to proceed with that goal. I said, 'Yes. Let's do it!'"

Announced publicly in the fall of 2017, the Master Plan had been an idea in the works for a while. When

Rominiecki was interviewed in 2015 for her current role, she and the Board of Trustees discussed the need for a master plan. She knew when she relocated to Sarasota to take on the role of CEO that this was going to be a significant endeavor. She says it makes it that much more gratifying now to see it happening.

"I think the community is so excited to see this come to fruition, and it will be a game-changer for our city—and, really, for our region, and our state, and our country—because it's a landmark project," Rominiecki said. "It's extremely innovative and very transformational."

Phase One, representing more than half of the overall three-phase project, is scheduled to be complete by October of this year, with grand-opening festivities slated to take place in early November. This will unveil a new Welcome Center; a state-of-the-art Plant Research Center that includes a new herbarium, plant laboratory, and library; as well as many garden advancements and features, plus much more open space.

Additionally, construction is well underway on the Living Energy Access Facility (LEAF). This multi-use structure will include parking, a garden-to-plate restaurant, a new plant and gift shop, and close to 50,000 square



feet of solar panels on the roof. Additionally, Phase One includes a cutting-edge stormwater management system that will gather water and filter it as it's channeled into Sarasota Bay.

When designing improvements for the gardens, the landscape and building architecture teams that Selby Gardens assembled wanted to make the layout practical, while also freeing up space. Some ideas included moving the reception area to a more central location, updating old buildings, and opening space on the property to bring in critical new buildings. By moving parking to the corner of the property and using the former surface-parking area for Master Plan improvements, for example, the construction of the LEAF effectively doubles the size of the gardens, as well as the amount of open space.

Another improvement is the new Multiuse Recreational Trail (MURT) along the perimeter of the Gardens, which provides a welcome outlet for walking, biking, and in-line skating. It gives pedestrian and cyclists access to the gardens, as well as to the bayfront and downtown while enjoying the beauty of nature. This paved trail—12 feet at its widest—offers more space than the previous sidewalk that ran along campus on Mound Street and Orange Avenue. As the first piece of Phase One to open to the

“I THINK THE COMMUNITY IS SO EXCITED TO SEE THIS COME TO FRUITION, AND IT WILL BE A GAME-CHANGER FOR OUR CITY—AND, REALLY, FOR OUR REGION, AND OUR STATE, AND OUR COUNTRY—BECAUSE IT’S A LANDMARK PROJECT,”

—JENNIFER ROMINIECKI

public, the MURT is already being utilized by visitors and residents. But Rominiecki notes that beautiful landscape plantings and a section of brick pavers have yet to be installed once construction is farther along. "It's really a gift to the community," she says.

Selby Gardens' ability to make this transformational investment in its campus and downtown Sarasota wouldn't be possible without the generosity of many philanthropists.

One such donor, Evelyn Mink, volunteered at the Gardens for 25 years, contributing almost 5,000 hours of service, before she passed away in 2021 at age 101. Mink left a major gift to Selby Gardens in her will that has supported Master Plan construction. It will name the Evelyn S. Mink Volunteer Suite in the new Plant Research Center for her.

Another donor who Selby Gardens has recognized recently for his impressive vision and generosity is Richard Matson. A longtime Selby Gardens supporter along with his wife, trustee Cornelia Matson, he recently made an additional gift of \$1 million through a bequest pledge in his estate plan. "The Master Plan just floored me," Matson says. "It was perfect."

Nearly \$56 million has been raised for Phase One so far, with almost all donations coming from private philanthropy. Rominiecki says they only have about \$1 million left to hit their goal for this phase of construction.

Though still in the planning stages, Phase Two will focus on hurricane-resilient glass houses for the living plant collections, and an indoor/outdoor learning pavilion for education programs, including classroom space for both children and adults. Phase Three will include restoration of the Payne Mansion, a Sarasota landmark that houses the Museum of Botany & the Arts, as well as building up the seawalls surrounding the property and completing and unifying all the gardens' walking paths.

Aside from adding new buildings, garden features, and the history-making advancements of the net positive spaces, research will be made more central. When all three phases of the Master Plan are complete, Selby Gardens' scientists and their work will no longer be a hidden aspect of the gardens but will be brought front and center. This will help bring awareness to the necessity of their important work.

With 230,000 visitors every year, Selby Gardens is known internationally for having the world's best scientifically





Artistic rendering



Current construction photo

documented collections of orchids and bromeliads. It is also the only botanical garden in the world that focuses on the study and display of epiphytes, or air plants. Though it's already a popular attraction for residents and tourists, the draw is expected to increase even more in the coming years.

The "living buildings" that Selby Gardens is creating through its Master Plan will be part of that attraction. By pursuing the Living Building Challenge, Selby Gardens will ensure that its new buildings surpass LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification, a framework for efficient and economical green buildings. "To build buildings that don't harm the environment, that actually help the environment—we had no idea that we would be in such a category," Rominiecki said. "Now it's really happening."

Nine months from now, the community will enjoy a completely new look and feel at Selby Gardens, while the institution's historical and botanical legacies are secured and preserved. Rominiecki can't wait for Phase One's completion this coming fall.

"Everything has come together so beautifully, and now we're in the final stretch," she says. "It's really exciting."

For more information about Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, visit [selby.org](http://selby.org).