

15 MINUTES

One great gardener

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Ruth Danforth is cool and direct like a haiku. She is 80 and appears to be, like the many flowers on her property and the house she built there with her husband and the focused summer light and daily cloudbursts, one of Florida's own natural fixtures.

In the intensifying heat, late on the morning of Aug. 21, Mrs. Danforth is standing near the front office on one of the amply shaded paths at Dan's Nursery, one block east of Joel Boulevard on Tuckahoe Road, in Alva. She runs the nursery and landscape business with her husband, Lorán "Dan" Danforth.

The nursery is lush, and built on the Danforth's three-acre property. It is filled with light filtered through trees that arch over the grounds, a web of leafy green under the sky.

A golf cart with a small trailer hitched to the back waits for Mrs. Danforth to drive customer and Alva resident Carol Golucki through the nursery's paths.

The first stop is for Indian Hawthorns. Mrs. Danforth inspects and loads two of the potted plants onto the trailer.

The second stop is for Mexican Petunias.

"Give me two more purple and four pink," Golucki said. "They look good mixed, don't they Ruth?"

Mrs. Danforth has lived in Alva, with her husband, since 1957. They spent 20 years on the land, running a chainsaw and lawnmower sales and repair business (still in operation), before transforming most of the acreage into the nursery it is now.

Mrs. Danforth held a job in the 1960s at Sims Drugstore on the corner of First and Hendry Streets in downtown Fort Myers.



PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Mrs. Danforth has lived in Alva, with her husband, since 1957.

"I worked on the corner there for six years," she said. "Dan was selling chainsaws at the time. That was the 1960s because that's when that first hurricane came - Hurricane Donna. I think Mr. Sims is gone now.

"When we bought this place it was just a cow pasture. I got my taxes yesterday and it was as much as we paid for the land a long time ago." That was about \$2,290, according to the property appraiser.

Mrs. Danforth is originally from Elyria, Ohio, about 20 miles west of Cleveland.

"They put the Ohio turnpike in our front yard,

so we decided to move," she said.

The Danforths built their own home after purchasing the land.

"There was a sawmill over in Alva," she said. "We used wood from it. And there was a Johnson's hardware in town. We got all the wood we needed and we just built it. We didn't need a permit."

It is a two-bedroom, one-bath home with a kitchen, dining room and living room.

"You can tell how long we've been here because the bamboo is so high," Mrs. Danforth said, pointing out a thick miniature forest of bamboo rising about 40 feet in the air, standing near the house.

Also near the house is a red Powderpuff, the first thing she planted on the property almost 50 years ago. It is now over 30 feet tall. Since then she has also planted a pink and a white Powderpuff, among other things.

There are now 18,000 inventoried plants on the land ("probably more now," Mrs. Danforth said) as well as "13 or 14 peacocks, 20 chickens and a dog."

All the Danforth's children - three boys - graduated from the Alva high school, which no longer exists.

"My youngest son was the last one to get his diploma there," she said.

One son, Jimmy, was killed in the Vietnam War. A small grave where his ashes are kept sits near the house.

A white, female peacock watches everything from the back of an old truck.

Mrs. Danforth steers the golf cart through the nursery, back to the front entrance where she will help Golucki load all her plants into a truck, then head for the office for lunch and a little cleanup time before the afternoon rain, she said. She spends about 10 hours a day out in the nursery.

"I'm used to doing everything by myself," she said, passing by a pile of remains: a shed crumpled by Hurricane Wilma.

"She came through here and destroyed a lot of trees and a lot of bushes. That was two years ago. We're still coming back from that one."

A Tiki hut appears along the path near the office, not far from the pond and falling water, she and Mr. Danforth: a place to rest, to study the calligraphic wakes of silent, and to listen to the wind, as assured and peacefully rustling as Mrs. Danforth's voice.

"We figure we've got the only spot left that looks like old Florida," she said. ■

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