

Words: Merilen Mentaa

Jungles' gardens

Merilen Mentaa meets Florida-based landscape architect Raymond Jungles to discuss form, inspiration and Roberto Burle Marx

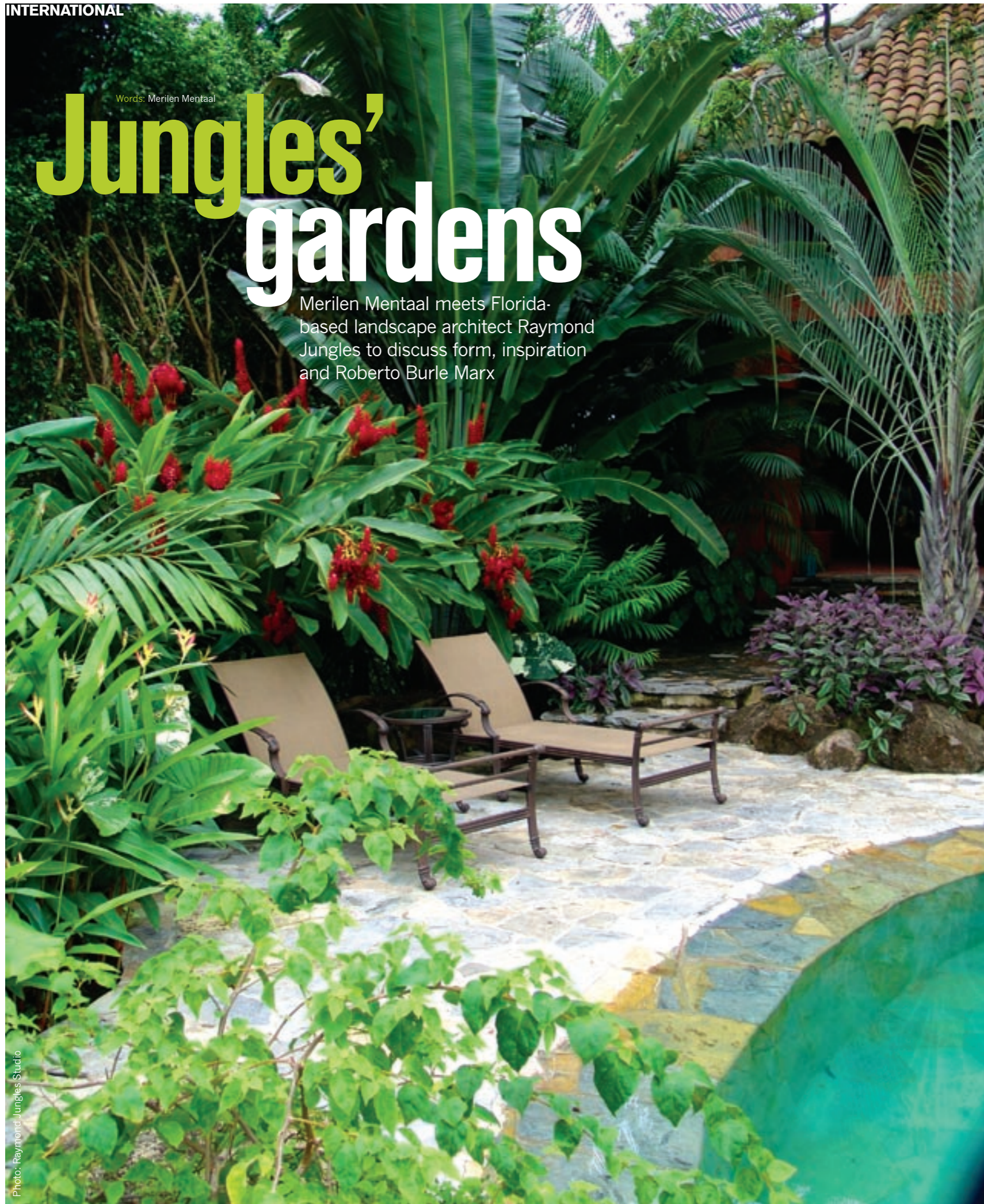


Photo: Raymond Jungles Studio

Admired and awarded,

with more than 100 residential and municipal commissions in the United States, the Caribbean and Europe, Raymond Jungles is a Florida-based landscape architect who currently lives in a high-rise building with no garden of his own.

Happily, Raymond is content to bask in the emotions that the gardens he has created reflect back at him. Sunny, open and friendly, I met him at his riverside studio to talk about his gardens and landscapes, many of which show a subtle influence of his Brazilian mentor Roberto Burle Marx.

Jungles is the name he was born with.

Roberto Burle Marx called himself an artist, a poet foremost. Would you call yourself an artist or a landscape designer?

Actually Burle Marx, depending on what he was doing, would call himself a gardener. I would say that I am someone who makes gardens. I'm not a gardener because I don't get to get my hands dirty as much as I used to, but I'm a lover of nature, the natural environment and plants. I am also influenced by art and architecture.

I don't like to think that I have any style other than where I am at as a designer, a combination of my principles and what I

have determined as being my sense of aesthetics, what appeals to me, what is right and what is wrong as far as man's intervention in the environment.

Artist, or poet? Designing a garden is a rare art form that not everybody can do. It involves working with living things rather than inanimate objects. It's about space, light, habitat, architecture. It is about solving problems, enriching lives and giving people the best of what's available on this planet.

What do you think makes someone a great designer?

It's the same thing that makes someone a great artist, a great politician or a great businessman. It's a passion for what you do and being good at what you do but it is also being true to what you feel should be done.

I have a special ability to design gardens because I see three dimensionally. I have always been very perceptive about my surroundings. When I was camping or fishing, I knew the names of the birds, the names of the trees and the Indian tribes that lived in that area.

I think the difference between someone who is really good at what they do and someone who is ok, is having a confident sense of what it is that you like and don't

Opposite & below: Anagrethel and Samuel Lewis Garden, Panama City

Below right: Raymond Jungles

like. If you can't see your environment, you can't make those kinds of judgments. You can't make a decision because you don't have a foundation to make a decision on and so you can wallow around and get nothing accomplished. You have to fight for what you believe in and what you can do, you have to show it. You need to keep progressing to expand your horizons by being aggressive.

It also helps to be a salesman to some degree, so you can convince someone of your vision and what you want to do.

What inspires you?

The work, the individual projects, the challenge of finding the right solution. Only a small part of my time, perhaps ten per cent, is spent designing. That doesn't mean I am not using my brain when I'm driving around, doing this or that.

I love the time I spend designing. I can't believe people pay me to do it. In fact, they probably don't pay me for designing, they pay me for all that other stuff that I have to do to run a functioning business. Designing is what really appeals to me.

How do you work? Is there a process?

I have to spend time on the site. If I could make it work, I would design all my projects on site, taking the time and do them over an extended period... but that's not reality. A lot of my work is overseas, the fees are not large enough to live off one project over the course of a year. So we have 20 to 30 projects at different stages.

I have a photographic memory when it comes to places. I can come on to a space and absorb it all. I have been doing this for so long, I know what triggers my attention and is critical for the design process. I try to stay very open-minded when the project is starting to formulate. I like to procrastinate ☺



Photo: Raymond Jungles Studio



Photo: Merilen Mentaa

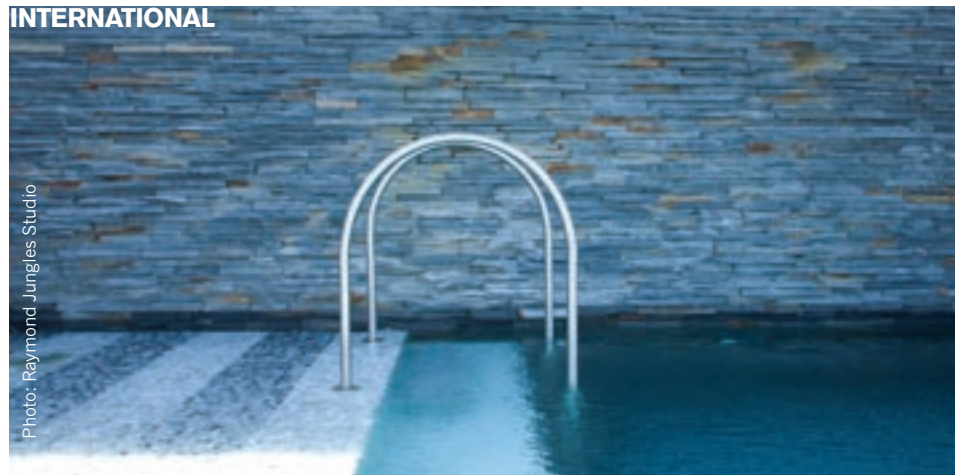


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I like natural water systems... then you will have birds, fish, even turtles, bringing a whole new dimension to the garden

so I like to start a project, then work on something else, and then come back and look at it afresh.

Any project would be better if you could spend more time but you can get the essence of a project sometimes in the first 20 seconds. What gives me satisfaction is knowing I have found the right solution.

To what extent are you able to collaborate with architects?

My philosophy is that if my clients have been paying for an interior designer, an architect and a landscape architect, why not have them working collaboratively? It allows everybody to be on the same page, giving the project a seamlessness, a harmony, a connection between all of the elements.

Many architects refer me in the beginning and I like to work with them because I have solutions that sometimes can make their buildings look a bit better on a site. Some architects are not so willing to collaborate. Like-minded people should be working together. I don't have time to work for someone who doesn't like what I like, or to work for someone who has a negative, pessimistic attitude on life.

Life is too short for that.

There is one project in your book which you designed before the house was built a few years later. How did that work?

I did studies of the house looking at how it would expand, so I knew that I wasn't precluding the future developments of the house on the site. For those particular

clients, the garden was very important. They didn't want to spend all their money on a house. These were the kind of people who love plants, and who prefer to be outside and live with nature rather than in interior spaces. These were people I liked working with.

How do you manage colours and contrasts? Which are your colour combinations?

Colour is a very personal thing; some people just don't like certain colours. I try to use colours that are appropriate and sometimes I use contrast. We have bright sun and strong skies here in Florida, so we can use strong colours without being brutal and aggressive.

Sometimes my choice depends on the colour of the house, the window frames, and the door frames. Everything has to go together. For instance if I'm working with a house that is all white, I may use different shades of greens and blues and softer tones, so that items link together and don't contrast too much. I use colour for specific reasons, either to blend in or stand out, to draw attention or to deflect it.

I used to use just colour, colour, colour. One day I was walking through a garden with Burle Marx. I had used this Thai plant that was beautiful. I had used it in many different places, even back by the garage in an area of peripheral planting. Roberto turned to me and said, 'What are you doing? Why are you using this colour here? You need to use colour for a specific reason'.

I learned right there and then to use colour very carefully. Now I really think about it whenever I use colour.

Top left: Ella Fontanals-Cisneros Rooftop Garden, Coconut Grove, Florida

Bottom left: Caminito Al Mar, Golden Beach, Florida

Above right: Miami Beach Garden, Florida

What is your ratio of planting to the negative space, the hard surface and lawn?

The first priorities are generated by the scale of the space and what the function of that space will be. The space always dictates the planting ratio. My personal preference is to create hardscape that is simple, clean and easy. It will be timeless, looking better with age. When the forms are strong and volumes correct I like to have my planting diverse because I love different species. I like planting to have depth, with some place for insects, birds and butterflies to frequent it. I also like the garden to look as though it is subversive, almost so that it takes over the hardscape, and that left alone eventually the plants are actually stronger, and more likely to last forever than the hardscape.

What are your basic theories of designing with plants?

Plants have a function. I choose them based on their natural growth characteristics. I choose them to define space or enliven space. Once I can see the space, the hardscape, grading, drainage, where I want the water to go, I know which plants will do better there. Trees always take precedence. They are like the foundation of the garden. Like Burle Marx would say, garden is a combination of all the volumes. It can't just be an over-story or under-story, you need the canopy, the intermediate range, the middle range, then you need the ground covers, and then the water, concrete, stone or grass.

It is always the trees first, especially if I'm designing a garden on site. I always put flags

on the ground where the trees go. When the trees are on place I will put the next layer in, the next volume in, stepping down in volume.

What are the differences between English planting style and your own, or Burle Marx's?

The English planting style was revolutionary after the Italians and the French. The English garden was highly structured up near the buildings, where the hardscape was the extension of the architecture. As you worked away from the architecture it got a little more natural or pastoral, which is something that we both have done.

There is a stronger similarity in what I do than, for instance, a garden that was designed on symmetry or axiality with the formality of the other European styles. That is not to say that symmetry is necessarily bad. In the tropics if you plan symmetrically and you have a hurricane, you will have more of a problem to recreate the garden. I like organisation, but not static organisation.

Name few of your signature plants.

Sabal palms (*Sabal palmetto*, Florida's state tree) are one, live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*) are another, certainly the silver saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens* 'Silver'). I love philodendrons and bromeliads and orchids certainly.

I like most plants to tell you the truth. There is a right plant for everything.

Water is often prominent in your gardens. Explain how you work with water features.

I think the main function of water in my gardens is visual. Water reflects and adds

another dimension, like framing the sky into the garden. But water can also create a calm moment in the garden; a combination of hard paving, grass and water are all really great for that. And water introduces sound, creating a pleasant ambience, and then life because of course water invites life.

I like natural water systems, not chemically treated sterile systems, then before long you will have birds, fish, even turtles, bringing a whole new dimension to the garden. My water elements tend to either look totally natural or very sculptural and man-made, depending on what I'm trying to achieve. One thing I feel sure about is that water features are an integral part of the garden. Luis Barragan, and other designers of that time, would say, 'Water is the heart and soul of the garden'.

What is the body without a heart, what is the garden without water?

Which scents creates memories for you?

I like the scent of so many things!

Jamaican capers (*Capparis cynophallophora*) have a great scent but the flowers don't look that spectacular. I also like the smell of the Sapodilla tree (*Manilkara zapota*) when it is in flower. It is musky smell that reminds me of Key West.

I love the smell in the evenings of mangos and guavas that have been cooking in the sun and then letting their aroma out at night. And there's a rare tree that grows down at the Keys that is called Joewood (*Jacquinia keyensis Mez*). That is probably my favourite plant fragrance.

Above: Jungles' Studio Garden, Key West, Florida

Describe one of your projects where you managed to create something extra special, a place where the atmosphere is magical.

My favourite garden is not mine but Roberto's. It is the Sitio garden outside Rio de Janeiro where he lived, and which he constructed over a period of more than 40 years. Natural settings create magic for me all the time; a stream, a mountain, a lake, a river, a field. Of my own gardens, the Ward garden at Coral Gables in Florida is one that I love. I feel so comfortable there. Every time I go there I see something that excites me. Another is the one that I built for myself in Key West. It is very casual, I didn't do any maintenance and I had a lot of animals there all the time. But the site is very sculptural, pleasing to look at and it is filled with natural sounds that enliven the space I have created. I really love that space. ☺

About the Designer

Raymond Jungles studied Landscape Architecture at the University of Florida and went on to become an award winning garden and landscape designer, working on domestic gardens and commercial projects in Florida, USA. His most recent projects include new designs for the Naples Botanical Gardens in Italy and a roof terrace for the Frank Gehry New World Symphony building in Miami. Raymond became a Fellow of the ASLA in 2006. *The Colors of Nature: Subtropical Gardens* by Raymond Jungles was published in 2008. www.raymondjungles.com