



Ken Nedimyer tends fledgling staghorn coral colonies in his Keys nursery.

How Does Your Garden Grow?

A one-man success story that just might spread across the Caribbean.

BY NED AND ANNA DELOACH WITH PAUL HUMANN

➔ **EACH YEAR AS** spring rolls around, I invariably pop a few tomato plants in the ground even though my luck in such endeavors is unfailingly abysmal. My annual horticultural shortcomings sprang to mind a few weeks back as Anna and I sat in a Key Largo restaurant listening to Ken Nedimyer, a local aqua-culturist, describe his success propagating and transplanting staghorn coral—a prodigious feat of pragmatic husbandry that contrasts sharply with my forever withering tomato crops.

Ken's blue eyes danced as he related

how in the late 1990s he began nurturing small buds of rapidly growing staghorn coral that settled by chance on his offshore "live rock" farm—a most exciting event for a veteran naturalist who, over the past three decades, watched 90 percent of the Florida Keys' most prolific coral species disappear.

No one knows for sure what caused the decline, but researchers tend to point their fingers at the usual suspects: excessive coastal runoff, pollution, white-band disease, bleaching, cold snaps, warming temperatures and storms. After years

of trial and error, and with research help from the Nature Conservancy, Ken has, almost singlehandedly, pioneered a practical method for cultivating, nurturing and transplanting large quantities of coral, and his survival rate hovers at about 90 percent. This sounded like something Anna and I would have to see.

Ken readily agreed to take our group of REEF surveyors to his undersea nursery, and since he had us for the morning, he figured we might as well work. Before the excursion, he explained the science behind asexual coral propagation and gave us a crash course in creating coral colonies. The next day, a dozen REEF divers knelt on the sand 30 feet down, taking 1-inch coral cuttings clipped from a mother colony and epoxying them onto numerically coded pedestals. Each mini reef was secured to one of several hundred cinder blocks that marched off in neat rows as far as the eye could see.

Next, the group headed to a site on Molasses Reef where, in 1984, the oceangoing freighter M/V *Wellwood* ran aground, destroying nearly 7,000 square feet of reef. Federal agencies began extensive restoration of the site in 2002, including the emplacement of numerous high-profile limestone modules. To date, those structures have recruited little new coral growth, but alongside, Ken's rapidly growing staghorn gardens show the heartening result of private initiative and volunteer service.

If government permitting allows, Ken plans to have local dive businesses sponsor and maintain their own staghorn reefs by year's end. Shortly afterward, he will incorporate volunteers to expand his nursery and allow mass coral transplanting to begin.



Worth a Look

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT KEN'S CORAL RESTORATION FOUNDATION AT CORALRESTORATION.ORG. AND DON'T MISS REEF IN ACTION. WATCH ANNA'S VIDEO OF VOLUNTEERS TRANSPLANTING CORALS ON SCUBA DIVING TV AT SCUBADIVING.COM. CLICK ON PHOTO/VIDEO AND THEN THE DELOACHES' ENCOUNTERS.

