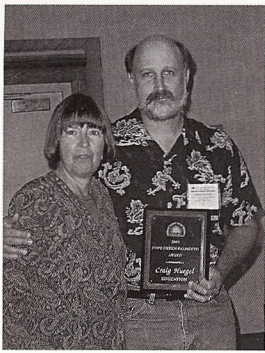


Members: the Heart & Soul of FNPS

Craig Huegel, Pinellas Chapter

Interview by Judith Buhman, Pinellas Chapter



Judith Buhman and Craig Huegel, with his 2001 Green Palmetto Award for Education.

Craig Huegel was the very first native plant person I ever met, back in late 1987, in the days when asking for a native plant in garden shops evoked responses ranging from curt dismissal to outright hostility. Having made the connection between critters and green stuff not found in yards, I'd recently acquired the Game Commission's dandy little backyard wildlife primer, *Planting a Refuge for Wildlife*. Ready to run with the concepts, I met frustration at every turn, found not sprig of coral honeysuckle nor glimmer of firebush. Then, in one of those lovely confluences of desire and event, the *St. Petersburg Times* ran a profile of the new Central Florida Urban Wildlife Specialist based at the Pinellas County Extension Office.

We've grown a rich friendship in the intervening years, making my presentation of FNPS's Green Palmetto Award to him at the 2001 Conference a deeply satisfying moment. Craig was honored for his sustained work of education about native plants and communities, work that has reached every corner of this far-flung state.

Let me tell you a few of the things that made it admiration at first conversation for me. Craig's big-picture, long-term thinking about the nature of nature, his sense of humor, and his utter lack of academic arrogance were, and remain to me, his most attractive features. Then, there is his unique and priceless ability to convey huge quantities of information to a diverse audience in the most disarming and entertaining fashion. And oh, yes, his energy.

Now Director of the Environmental Lands Division of Pinellas County's Department of Environmental Management, Craig lives the hectic, meeting-plagued life of an administrator, making long conversations between friends a rare luxury. We did manage one recently, thanks to cell phone technology (and a lot of whin-

ing on my part), giving me the opportunity to pose a few questions. Those who know Craig will understand there was no possibility for anyone save a court stenographer to record more than a few essentials from the spirited conversation that fell out of the queries, but herewith is my attempt to report the essence of our exchange.

Q: "Craig, you came to Florida with a doctorate in wildlife biology and took a job dealing with urban wildlife. Why did you put your shoes under FNPS's bed?"

A: He was, he said, struck by the near total lack of awareness of native flora and communities in the state. As Urban Wildlife Specialist, he fielded questions from the public that predominantly concerned eliminating or exterminating one creature or another, from frogs to dragonflies to bats, and of course, snakes. Perhaps a third of those callers sought information on attracting wildlife rather than obliterating it, and ecologist Huegel knew the answers involved native plants and plant communities. But where did knowledge reside?

Though the principles are the same, the components and structures of Florida plant communities are very different from those of Wisconsin or Kentucky, whence Craig came. His initial searches turned up no institution in the state that had more than a plant list or two. Finally, he found the best source of knowledge in the roster of the Florida Native Plant Society, and he began to learn from its member botanists and plant ecologists, passing on knowledge he acquired to the public as fast as he assimilated it. FNPS was and remains the logical center for the acquisition and dissemination of information about native flora and habitat. Some of the society's members have spent their lifetimes studying the subtleties of plant communities, seeking the factors that shape them, investigating the interactions of plants with their community members. So, Craig didn't join one of the wildlife-centered organizations, he threw in with us, to our great benefit.

Conservation and preservation, he believes, happen locally, one person, one yard, one local issue at a time. Without the community context, the understanding of

interrelationships, plant lists alone have little worth and less inspirational value to the fledgling backyard wildlife refuge manager. FNPS provided him with the ideal framework for teaching about conservation, the perfect platform from which to introduce thousands of people to a taste of the delicious complexity and wonder of native plant communities. Until his job prohibited it, Craig ranged far and wide, speaking to FNPS chapters and any other group that expressed an interest. Now and then he encounters someone who tells him what they've accomplished as a result of his presentation at some long-forgotten meeting. Sometimes it's personal, just the yard, but often it is a tale of informed activism, of impact on neighborhood, township, county.

Q: "You wrote two books for FNPS solely on your own initiative, and certainly not for profit. Both books [Butterfly Gardening with Florida Native Plants and Florida Native Plants for Wildlife] included plants nowhere in cultivation by even the most visionary (or lunatic) of the native plant growers. Why did you undertake these projects? Why did you highlight plants that couldn't be found for purchase in any market?"

A: A champion of "the unloved, the underdog, the weird things," Craig explained he was driven to devise ways of inspiring interest in those vital components of ecosystems, in hopes of creating a hunger for further knowledge. The glamorous species, the gorgeous or lovable, the mysterious or awe-inspiring, get the press and public attention. Attraction to charismatic megafauna arouses public interest. That interest can inspire a civic passion for conservation of essential habitat, thus protecting the underlying systems upon which the top-billed taxa depend. All this Craig understood. But he, schooled in the University of Wisconsin/Aldo Leopold epicenter of ecological awareness, also understood the vital importance of preserving and restoring diversity, long before "biodiversity" entered the common lexicon. Knowing demand is king in our consumer culture, he included in both the books many plants not in cultivation, some not even known to the small cadre of adventurous native plant growers,

to create that demand.

"There are more than three oaks," he said. "There are several bumelias, some great hawthorns," and a host of other native plant taxa that languished in obscurity. "We gain little if the planting palette simply switches to the ten best native trees, shrubs, or ground-covers for Florida landscaping," he averred. Craig believes that given good information about principles and a toolkit of options rather than landscaping cook-books, people will catch the wave of creativity. So his books, especially the second, *Florida Native Plants for Wildlife*, provided information essential for the creation of a landscape that supports wildlife year-round, rewarding its architect with a living, changing environment, liable to surprise at any time.

Q: *"You've been a member of FNPS since 1988 and for some years active on the board. What, if you were King of FNPS, would you change?"*

A: Expressing a long-standing frustration, he noted "FNPS is not a factor in policies of state, not a presence in the decision-making arenas. There is no unified voice loud enough to be heard" at the local, regional, or state levels of government. The society seems to bog down, repeating the same internal controversies year after year, never getting on to the next level of action. FNPS should define itself in a way that brings all members together in a common endeavor. "There has to be a coming together over some major issue, like habitat loss, approached similarly at the local level" by all the chapters. Society involvement at any level is hit-and-miss, but it is not for lack of talent or scientific knowledge, which reside abundantly within the membership.

Q: *"What do you think FNPS should be doing with itself in the future?"*

A: "The state is in a critical period in land acquisition," he answered. As counties and municipalities become more active in securing land, "FNPS should be guiding [these entities] in forming acquisition criteria and management policies. The society should be directing some of the big picture issues."

Meeting Craig changed the course of my life, and that of many others as well. His energy and vision were the engine that propelled the creation of the Pinellas Chapter and established its character and ethos. Now Craig is guiding the Brooker Creek Preserve toward its destiny as an innovative center of ecological and environmental research and education. ✨