

YELLOW SCRUB BALM

by Steven Christman

Yellow scrub balm (*Dicerandra* sp. new), a shrubby mint that smells like Vicks Vaporub, occurs only in yellow sand scrubs covering about 100 acres on Florida's Lake Wales Ridge near Sebring. First recognized as a distinct species in April, 1987, this rare endemic is one of twenty endangered species of plants that are restricted to the vanishing ancient scrubs of central Florida.

Yellow scrub balm is a short-lived woody perennial that sends up deciduous flowering shoots in September. It differs from other members of the genus in its distinct odor, flower color, and leaf shape. Yellow scrub balm is restricted to disturbed areas of bare sand, where it grows with other central Florida endemics, including pygmy fringe tree (*Chiocanthus pygmaeus*), scrub plum (*Prunus geniculata*), scrub blazing star (*Liatris ohlingerae*), scrub morning glory (*Bonamia grandiflora*), and sand lace (*Polygonella myriophylla*).

Although scrub communities can be found in many parts of Florida, the scrubs on the Lake Wales Ridge are unique. Persisting on sand dunes that marked the shore line millions of years ago when sea levels were a hundred feet higher, the ancient scrubs of Florida's central ridges have perhaps the highest rate of endemism (endemics per unit area) of any continental area in eastern North America.

Today, this wealth of biodiversity is threatened with extinction as residential subdivisions, RV parks, and citrus groves replace the ancient scrubs. Already, two thirds of the Lake Wales Ridge scrubs have been lost.

The Archbold Biological Station, Saddleblanket Lakes Scrub Preserve, and the proposed Lake Arbuckle State Park contain ancient scrubs and populations of some of the scrub



endemics, but three species — including yellow scrub balm — occur only on private lands or road shoulders, and are protected nowhere. Seventeen species of central Florida scrub endemic plants have four or fewer protected populations; most populations are small and vulnerable.

The Florida Chapter of The Nature Conservancy has begun a drive to purchase some of the remaining ancient scrubs, but needs public contributions. Florida's Conservation and Recreation Lands (CARL) program ranks only one ancient scrub on its shopping list. Management of the Lake Arbuckle State Forest and the Ocala National Forest for commercial tree farming threatens populations of at least twelve species of scrub endemics.

Without active citizen involvement, several species of Florida's endangered scrub plants will probably go extinct in the wild within the next five to ten years.

(Steve Christman, who was awarded the FNPS Green Palmetto Award last May for his work, is conducting surveys of scrubs for the Florida Nongame Wildlife Program.)