

Members: the Heart & Soul of FNPS

Bill & Nancy Bissett, Heartland Chapter

Interview by Rob Hopper, Palm Beach Chapter

Bill and Nancy Bissett have been important contributors to the Florida Native Plant Society for many years. Some members might remember Nancy's quiet smile or Bill's outgoing manner from state conferences. Some lucky members may have had the opportunity to tour the Bissetts' beautiful nursery, The Natives, in Davenport, Polk County. But despite Bill and Nancy's extensive contributions to our organization, some members may not be familiar with Bissetts, because this couple prefers wandering in the woods to being in the spotlight.

Bill and Nancy wear many hats, and through hard work and inspiration both have developed careers involving native plants. Bill is a registered landscape architect and a talented artist. Members may recognize his work from the Association of Florida Native Nurseries' *Xeric Landscaping with Florida Native Plants*. A true Florida native, Bill grew up wandering through the undeveloped woodlands of Winter Haven in Central Florida. His family has lived in this area for some time.

Nancy is a trained horticulturist and noted botanist, and also applies her skills as an innovative restoration ecologist. Nancy chose to move to Florida after a childhood spread across many states and even continents. Wherever she was living at the time, Nancy sought out natural areas to explore and appreciate.

With this background, it is not surprising that the two eventually met, married, and built a business together. Their house, which they designed and built, lies perched between the scrubby uplands and forested wetlands of the Lake Wales Ridge region. Peaceful and quiet, the house includes their work offices and is adjacent to their extensive native plant nursery.

Admiring groundsel trees (*Baccharis* sp.) thriving along a lake's edge, Bill was already wondering about natives before studying landscape architecture at college. Even in college, Bill says his inclination was to restore native habitats in his designs rather than replace them. As further evidence of

his freethinking nature, he also tended to use windows rather than doorways when entering his classes. After eventually settling in Florida, Nancy also began exploring



Here we see the habitat of Bissetts, quiet, unassuming people reluctant to have their picture published. Come to an FNPS conference and we'll identify Bissetts for you.

native plants while completing her coursework with Dr. Gilbert at Florida Southern College. She, however, preferred doors to windows.

After they met and their interest in native plants grew, Bill and Nancy helped found and organize the fledgling FNPS Heartland Chapter. They have been involved with the Society ever since. Both say they enjoy the diverse membership, and that one of their favorite activities is attending the yearly state conferences. Bill has served as chairman for the Society's Landscape Awards Committee, and over the past several years, both Bill and Nancy have received numerous awards from the society for their service to the organization and their professional accomplishments.

Bill and Nancy say that when they first met, there were not many people growing native plants, and both of them were still learning the ropes themselves. It wasn't until 1982 that The Natives, Inc., was finally started. Both a full service landscape architecture firm and native plant nursery, the business has grown through the years as Bill's design work continues to expand and Nancy's restoration jobs grow ever larger and more complex. The family interest in native plants and the business has also con-


tinued to grow as well. All of Bill and Nancy's children have helped out at the business. Today, Nancy's daughter, Sarah Kiefer, manages the nursery in Davenport. There is even a popular native cultivar named after Sarah, the pink flowered *Itea virginica* 'Sarah Eve.' Paul Abel, Nancy's son, manages the restoration and landscape division of the business.

Bill continues to pursue his interest in multifunctional landscapes. His native landscape designs are more than just beautiful; they are low maintenance and often incorporate elements of habitat preservation and restoration. Timeless in design, these landscapes achieve a balance that can be enjoyed by both humans and Florida's wildlife. Bill says he enjoys the challenge of looking at the bigger picture through his design projects.

This dedication is reflected in numerous award-winning landscape projects located throughout the state. Dr. Carmody's dentist office in Rockledge is just one example of his site-sensitive designs. It preserves an existing ecosystem, incorporates pervious paving, and features a native landscape with waterfalls and bird and butterfly habitat. The irrigation system was turned off years ago, and has never been turned back on. Carmody's office may be the only dentist office that patients actually look forward to visiting — every patient's chair enjoys a view of Real Florida through large picture windows. Bill continues to focus on complex site planning issues today, with a particular interest in the design of environmentally sensitive parks within Polk County.

In an office adjacent to Bill's design studio, Nancy strategizes on how to successfully re-establish ecosystems that have been negatively affected by human development. Quietly assessing this year's wiregrass seed crop or reflecting on new harvesting methodologies, the successful restoration of large areas affected by cattle ranching or mining activities has become a personal challenge. Nancy is a pioneer in the direct seeding of large restoration projects in Florida. Among her many projects, she has focused on developing a viable method of re-establishing fundamental ground cover species such as wiregrass (*Aristida beyrichiana*), an important and sophisticated addition to habitat restoration technology in Florida.

One early example of Nancy's innovative projects involved installing over 35,000 native food plants for a gopher tortoise relocation project conducted by the Florida Institute of Phosphate Research. The tortoises proclaimed the project a success: after installation, baby gopher tortoise footprints were observed touring the new planted forage area. Recent projects include the restoration of portions of the Reedy Creek natural area. This project involved both large acreages and the complex restoration of entire habitat types, from trees to shrubs to ground cover. Nancy continues her explorations, and is now focusing on the development of an evaluation system for restoration projects as well as the cultivation of our own native grass species as sod alternatives.

And on the weekends ... Bill and Nancy's interest and commitment to Florida's native plants does not always follow a 9-5 work week. During the weekends, at least when not babysitting the grandchildren, Bill and Nancy still find time to explore Florida's wildlands together. These explorations have been very productive. Bill discovered a local population of the endangered scrub lupine (*Lupinus aridorum*) during one of these trips. The site has now been purchased by the federal government and remains the only significant preservation site to date. Nancy uncovered a new species of scrub mint (*Dicerandra*), a species so recently described that it has not yet received a formal name. The Bissetts originally coined many of the common names used for Florida's native wildflowers, such as sand lace and sunshine mimosa. Bill and Nancy both agree that with every trip to the field and with each additional project, there remains something new to be discovered. 

About the Author: Rob Hopper is a member of the Palm Beach Chapter, works for the South Florida Water Management District, and served as Chairman of the FNPS Landscape Awards Committee for several years. Rob steadfastly pursued the Bissetts for many months in quest of a few personal details.

Editor's Note: The Natives serves the wholesale market primarily but offers some retail service by appointment only. Mark your calendar for Oct. 5, 2002, a special retail sale day, and inquire about special retail Saturday hours this fall and in the late spring (April-June). A visit to The Natives is a special treat, so consider organizing a field trip for your chapter or other community group!