

THE FLORIDA NATIVE PLANT COOPERATIVE

What Is A Florida Native Plant Cooperative?

This is to inform the directors and members of the Florida Native Plant Society of the nature and purpose of a new organization that would be known as the *Florida Native Plant Cooperative*. Chapter 618, Florida Statutes, provides for the formation of agricultural cooperatives, which enable members to join together for mutual help, joint purchasing and marketing, and other group activities.

The foremost feature of such cooperatives is membership control. This means that the cooperative members who use the cooperative's services control the organization, instead of investor stockholders. Cooperative membership or ownership of common stock is limited to persons "engaged in the production of agricultural products" or qualifying cooperative associations composed of such persons.

Applying this statutory principle, membership in or common stock ownership of the proposed Florida Native Plant Cooperative would be limited to those members of the Florida Native Plant Society or any other persons (individual or corporate) who are actively engaged in the production of Florida native plant materials.

Any native plant nursery owner or tree farmer in Florida who would like to see an increased demand and better prices for his products should consider joining the cooperative.

Why is a Florida Native Plant Cooperative necessary? By all reports, the production and sale of Florida native plant materials is *under-capitalized, under-cut* (by intra-producer price competition), *under-priced, under-utilized* and generally *misunderstood!* By forming a cooperative, producers of Florida native plant materials would be able to set prices for their cooperative members' products; obtain financing from the South Carolina-based Columbia Bank for Cooperatives for production credit loans, land banking, construction of capital facilities, purchase of equipment, etc.; establish and market "pools" of native plant stock, grading them by quality, market demand, etc.; and develop exclusive sales and marketing agreements for cooperative pool members.

How will a Florida Native Plant Cooperative relate to the Florida Native Plant Society? Like most non-profit entities, the Florida Native Plant Society is sorely in need of a consistent, dependable source of funding. By contract or other written agreement, the Cooperative could pledge to provide the FNPS with a specific amount of funding, e.g., \$75,000 per year, in exchange for the use of the FNPS newsletter (*The Palmetto*) to educate FNPS members and *Palmetto* subscribers to the goals and purposes of the Cooperative, current activities, etc. Thus, a clear distinction could be made between the business-oriented activities of the cooperative and the educational functions of the FNPS.

Mr. Ralph Brown of the Florida Department of Agriculture's Division of Plant Industry; Ms.

Vicki Tschinkel, Secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation; and Dr. John DeGrove, Secretary of the Florida Department of Community Affairs and widely regarded as our State's "guru of growth management," without exception, were enthusiastic about the cooperative's prospects.

Terry Mock, Dex Bender, John Cauthen, and Dennis Koehler met with them to obtain comment, criticism, and endorsement for the Florida Native Plant Cooperative from key State officials; to identify possible cooperative funding sources; to encourage State officials to require the use of native plant materials in State construction projects; and to identify potential legal vehicles (e.g., the Native Flora of Florida Law, the Local Government Comprehensive Planning Act) for mandating/encouraging the use of Florida native vegetation in all new land developments.

Ralph Brown, a horticulturist and FNPS member, is principal author of the "Preservation of Native Flora" bill sponsored by former Senate President and nurseryman, Kurt Petersen. Brown said, "Native plants are in the public interest." His bill, which was approved by both houses of the Legislature (including the Senate on May 31) during the just-concluded 1985 Session, amends Chapter 581, Florida Statutes to:

"prevent the wanton exploitation or destruction of native plant populations, protect native flora from unlawful harvesting on both public and privately owned lands and encourage the propagation of native species of flora."

Brown urged the establishment of a cooperative to ensure future supplies of native plant materials, suggesting that Department of Agriculture-administered, "fee-based trust funds" or Federal endangered species grant monies "might be made available to the co-op." He suggested that existing nurseries could support the development of non-profitable native stock through sales of exotic materials, building native supplies for the future. He argued that landscape architects "must start pushing native materials, like cypress."

Vicki Tschinkel declared that the cooperative "is a terrific idea," suggesting a series of possible State actions to encourage or require the development of a market for native plant materials, including:

- requiring native vegetation in Water Management District-sponsored environmental restoration and enhancement programs (e.g., the Kissimmee River and St. Johns River projects)
- adding native plant requirements to State agency functional plans (e.g., Department of Natural Resources' park elements, Department of Transportation park bench, roadside rest area landscaping programs)
- getting native vegetation "buzzwords" inserted into local government comprehensive plans, through the Department of Community Affairs

- establishing State-sponsored public education displays, in such locations as the halls of the State Capitol.

Dr. John DeGrove declared that he is "totally devoted, committed, and in support of" the native plant cooperative concept. He suggested that his agency, which under the State's 1985 growth management legislation received significantly expanded powers to direct regional and local government planning efforts, could include native plant requirements as a new State planning agency review criterion.

Dr. DeGrove recommended that we identify "policy framework language" in the new State Comprehensive Plan that could be used to develop DCA rules containing native plant incentives or requirements. By reflecting such provisions in comprehensive regional policy plans, all of Florida's 400-plus local governments would be forced to adopt consistent local development regulations. Although Dr. DeGrove noted that this process "might take as long as ten years to implement," he pledged his support at the State level.

At the scheduled July 13th meeting of the Board of Directors of the Florida Native Plant Society, the following actions should be recommended:

1. That a "core group" of potential cooperative leaders be identified, and asked to develop a proposed set of cooperative goals and policies, including a financing plan.
2. That authority be granted to produce a draft set of legal documents creating a Florida Native Plant Cooperative, to be presented for consideration and action at the next quarterly FNPS Board Meeting.
3. That legal counsel be retained to draft all necessary documents establishing and incorporating the cooperative proposal.
4. That the core group of cooperative leaders be authorized to work with the Florida Department of Community Affairs to develop proposed DCA rules requiring regional agencies and local governments to incorporate native plant requirements into their comprehensive plans.
5. That members of the FNPS who are "actively engaged in the production of native plant materials" be solicited to become members of and form the first Board of Directors for such a proposed cooperative.

The time has come for the producers of Florida native plant materials to actively and aggressively promote the use of their products by landscape architects, developers, and governmental entities throughout the State. The Florida Native Plant Cooperative provides an ideal vehicle for this type of promotion, sales and marketing activity.

The Florida Native Plant Society should authorize and endorse efforts to establish a Florida Native Plant Cooperative.

● Dennis P. Koehler