

Dick Deuerling

Field gourmand

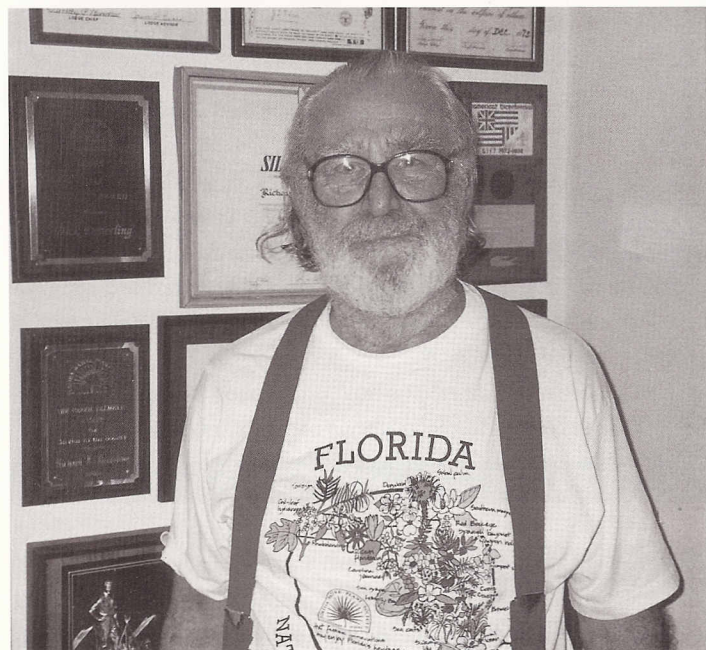
Interview by Sharon Lynch, Tarflower Chapter

Near the Deuerling fireplace, a lifetime's collection of plant books and newsletters are displayed on bookshelves that go all the way to the ceiling. There are even the "little wee books" Dick used as a youngster to help him identify the many plants, trees, butterflies, and birds found in the woods outside of the city where he was born. When asked how long he had been interested in plants, Dick's response was "since I could crawl."

Richard J. Deuerling was born at home in Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, on November 12, 1920. In 1939, he graduated from Allegheny High School and "being pretty good at arts and crafts," his teacher procured him a job making the high school's jewelry at a local jewelry company. For the next several years, he worked 48 hours a week making high school class rings and pins for the graduating classes. He was paid \$7 a week for all this creative work. After not receiving a higher salary, he left the company and took a job with a company manufacturing many different kinds of jewelry, and ended up being a journeyman jeweler.

After serving in the Army Air Corps 8th and 9th Air Force from 1941 to 1946, Dick decided he wanted to do something else besides

making jewelry. He didn't like being tied down all the time, especially during hunting season and the times he wanted to be out in the woods, so he decided to buy a farm. He married his girlfriend, Dorothy Novak, on November 19, 1947, and they spent their honeymoon in the Okefenokee Swamp (they also celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary there!). Within a year of their marriage, they bought a 60-acre farm near Conneaut Lake about 90 miles north of Pittsburgh. Over the next several years, they purchased two more farms and had four children while Dick worked the third shift at Westinghouse, doing welding and structural fitting. Later on, he was straw boss on nine production lines at Westinghouse and was responsible for the setup, materials, and quality control of 68 women and five men. With one day's notice, Westinghouse decided to close the Meadville plant and he was out of work.



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Without the extra income, "everything went to pot." So Dick came to Orlando, stayed with his older brother who was already established, and began looking for a job. While he was here, the Civil Service Exam opened up, so he took the exam because welding and fitting jobs were not paid well. He then returned to Pennsylvania, looked for another job, and continued the business of farming. A short time later, he received a phone call from his brother saying, "Get your butt down here, you have a job at the Post Office!" He moved to Florida in 1959, leaving his wife and four children on the farm. A few months later, Dorothy drove down to Florida with their children, hauling a trailer with their few possessions.

Dick was very involved as a volunteer with the local Boy Scouts of America, was a Charter member of Troop 76, and soon became the proud father of his fifth child. Once he was established with the Post Office as a mail carrier, he had plenty of free time to spend in the woods. Having donated all of his collections to the North Catholic High School on Troy Hill, a community on the north side of Pittsburgh, he started all over collecting and mounting specimens

here in Florida. Quite a few of these specimens have been donated to the Herbarium at the University of Central Florida.

Living in Florida, he expanded his knowledge of which native plants were edible and how to prepare them. Sam Hopkins recruited this self-taught naturalist as a member of FNPS shortly after the society was formed. Soon Dick was treating members of the local Tarflower Chapter to gourmet meals prepared from nature's bounty at their monthly meetings. Each month, the table at the back of the room was laid out with delicious edibles like acorn candy made from the sweet meat of the white oak family, pickled wild onions, sassafras or pine needle tea, and prickly pear cactus jelly. I have often heard him say "If you don't like weeds in your back yard – eat 'em!"

It was not long before word began to leak out (beyond the doors of the monthly chapter meetings) about the many wonderful edibles that could be found by just walking into your own backyard. In the July 25th, 1991, "Orange Extra" of the *Orlando Sentinel*, you can find an article written by Nancy Imperiale entitled "Naturalist Finds Everyday Feasts in His Backyard." Soon we were watching a special produced by the local television station WCPX Channel 6. I watched as Dick took Ben Aycrigg out foraging in his backyard. He soon had him nibbling on the white blossoms of Spanish needle, the seeds of tangy peppergrass, and digging for the tasty tubers of Florida betony.

In the *Tampa Times* newspaper of April 12th, 1992, Terry Tomalin wrote an article entitled "It's Incredible, They're Edible" (soon picked up by the wire service). During this time, Dick was on Eastman Mountain in north Georgia visiting his good friend, Marie Mellinger, "who is in her own right a beautiful naturalist." Upon returning from a day of "scrounging out in the woods" around her home, he was astonished when she showed him the article printed in the *Anderson Independent* that had just been delivered to her home. There in large print was an article entitled "Naturalist Sees Great Outdoors as One Giant Salad Bar," and it spoke of the 71-year-old Florida resident who couldn't resist nature's grocery store.

Dick Deuerling's relationship with Sam Hopkins soon provided him the opportunity to meet Dr. Henry Whittier, a botany professor at the University of Central Florida. Dr. Whittier and Sam had taken a group of students on a field trip to Camp La No Che in Lake County. As Sam taught his program to the botany students, Dick would be explaining to Dr. Whittier which native plants were edible and how to prepare them. Dr. Whittier encouraged Dick to share this information with the class. For many years, Dick had been hiking the wilderness trails of Camp La No Che, always taking time to point out the many edible plants to the inquisitive young scouts. After several years of encouragement from Dr. Whittier to share this vast knowledge on edible plants, and with the help of Peggy Lantz, the Florida Native Plant Society published his book, *Florida's Incredible Wild Edibles*, in 1993. You can find everything from Champagne made from elderberry blossoms to the infamous "black drink" of the Seminole Indians, using the leaves of the yaupon holly.

Soon Dick was putting on a program about "Florida's Incredible Wild Edibles" for many of the local nature clubs, garden clubs, civic groups and service clubs, always ending each program with a re-

cruiting plug for FNPS. Almost every chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society has tasted his native cuisine and every month our Tarflower Chapter still has an opportunity to taste the goodies made from native edibles in season that month. He has presented his programs in many of the local schools within the Central Florida area. Dick has received the "Silver Beaver Award" from the Boy Scouts of America and received so many other awards that there is not have enough room on his walls to display them all.

In 1992, the Florida Native Plant Society presented Dick with the Green Palmetto Award for his service to the society and in 1998 he was presented with the Mentor Award. These plaques and several of the awards from the Boy Scouts are proudly displayed on the wall as you enter through the front door of his home.

This self taught naturalist who loved plants since he could crawl, journeyman jeweler, farmer, mail carrier, scout leader, and author of *Florida's Incredible Wild Edibles* strikes an imposing image as he speaks of his many adventures. Even though he is almost 80 years old, you can still find him with his walking stick and backpack hiking through the woods and hammocks of Florida. He always takes the time to point out which plants are edible and the numerous ways to prepare them. When you are with him in the woods, you do not have to worry about going hungry. Around each bend in the trail is always something good to snack on or a new delicacy to try. When asked if there were any thoughts of wisdom he would like to share with members of the society, without hesitation he said "Enjoy Nature!"