Ruth Danforth (left, with Mary Burnhardt, right)

Alva. Don’t let the name fool you. The nursery is Ruth’s. Dan supported her decision to open the nursery but let her know in no uncertain terms that he would not be involved. Ruth continues to work the nursery with the help of a few other people and she is 73 years young.

Her nursery is a delight to visit. She has both native and non-native plants. Her property itself is gorgeous with Spanish Moss draped oaks and a pond surrounded by native wetland plants. Her peacocks will greet you and follow you about, waiting for a handout of a caterpillar or two. If you are looking for a larger sized native plant, or a hard-to-find species such as yellow elder, call Ruth and she may very well have it.

In June of 1981, Jean Burnhardt, another nurserywoman who was serving as FNPS Membership Chair at that time, and Ruth decided that they would attend the FNPS conference at Rollins College in Winter Park. When asked why she and Jean decided to attend the conference, Ruth said that they believed more native nurseries were needed in Lee County, so they went to learn about native plants so that they could include them in their nurseries. Ruth tells me that she has a photograph of the plant sale and everyone having lunch under a large tree at the conference.

Ruth and Jean came away from the conference convinced to start an FNPS chapter in Lee County. Jean was chosen to be president and Ruth was secretary and treasurer. The new chapter began meeting in people’s homes and when their numbers grew, they began to meet at Terry Park and eventually the Calusa Nature Center, where the chapter continues to meet now.

Ruth has served as unofficial photographic historian for the Coccoloba Chapter for many years and keeps a picture album of significant events in the chapter’s life. She also keeps news clippings about the organization. Ruth will proudly tell you that she has every copy of The Palmetto starting with the 1981 issue.

Ruth belongs to two garden clubs, LeHigh Acres and the Alva Garden Club. She has given demonstrations and spread the word about natives through those organizations. She says that being in the nursery business, she encourages people to use native plants in the landscape. Many folks come to tour her nursery and learn about natives. She recently had folks from Glades County come to take a tour. Her husband, Dan, has a little park to take people through to show them the natives there.

Native plant sales are one of Ruth’s favorite activities with FNPS. Ruth is a natural educator and loves the education that is part of native plant sales. Ruth remembers the first native plant sale that the Coccoloba Chapter held was at the Calusa Nature Center and though they didn’t have large numbers of plants to sell, chapter members did talk (and talk and talk) to people about natives. Ruth says, “Our plant sales are much larger now than then, but we sure did a lot of educating at those sales.” Ruth is still working hard at each of the chapter’s plant sales. She shares so much information with customers; they love her and often visit her nursery after the sale.

Last year, when the Coccoloba Chapter was asking for people to take oak leaves to use as mulch in the hardwood hammock area being restored at Manatee Park, guess who raked and delivered about 30 large garbage bags of oak leaves? Yes, it was Ruth.

Ruth wishes that she had more time to be even more active in FNPS, but her nursery business takes a lot of her time. She says that she likes what the Coccoloba Chapter is doing with its native plant sale, native plant workshop, monthly newsletter, and community projects such as the one at Manatee Park, and advises us to “just keep up the good work.”

Ruth is a great example of how one person can make a difference. Keep on educating folks about native plants, Ruth!

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.

Dick Deuering

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 Melling, “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 Deuering’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-
crating 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!"

**Don & Joyce Gann**

Past President, Dade Chapter (Joyce) and Legendary Native Nurserymen

**Interview by Diane Otis, Dade Chapter**

The Ganns are both Dade County, Florida natives who were raised and made their lives in Dade, mostly in the Perrine, Homestead, and Redland agricultural areas. Don farmed tomatoes for 30 years. Joyce raised a family, attended college, and worked as a Dade County Park Naturalist before opening their nursery. The Ganns remember the Homestead-Redland area of the 40s and 50s when it was a small community and "everybody knew everybody else."

Joyce's interest in native plants developed during her elementary school years when studying native plants was part of her girl scout troop's program. The troop participated in the planting of a native arboretum in Homestead in the mid-1940s on the county-owned grounds where the troop met. This restoration was a full-scale community operation including resources from the girl scouts, local Rotary Club, City of Homestead, Dade County, and others, and which involved the transplanting of mature trees with the use of convict labor and many volunteers. Although the understory has been lost, the mature trees of the project stand today at the corner of Fourth Street and Fourth Avenue in Homestead.

As a young man, Don rode his bicycle all over the Homestead-Redland area and learned to appreciate the land. From the beginning, Don has been interested in the various habitats, the high, low, wet, and dry areas, and the rare flora that made certain parcels of land unique and valuable. Don describes a particular hammock that he used to relax in during his farming years as being "like a cathedral."

Eventually, the Ganns had an opportunity to buy some acreage and build a custom house. They were torn between living in a hammock or a pineland. They eventually chose the hammock habitat and had a local architect and student of Frank Lloyd Wright, Alfred Browning Parker, design the home – choosing exposures, building materials, and air circulation patterns suitable for hammock living without air conditioning. "The architect saved us his fee by having the lumber cut to exact measurements without any waste," Joyce told me.

The Ganns have made major contributions to our Florida environment, FNPS, and the Dade Chapter of FNPS. They were present at the first organizational meeting of FNPS and were also instrumental in the formation of the Dade Chapter.

Joyce remembers the first organizational conference of FNPS. People were sitting on the floor because the number of participants far exceeded expectation. She recalls being inspired in brainstorming sessions, realizing the enthusiasm of the group and the diversity of interests in native plants and the varied backgrounds and professions of the people interested. She realized that this was going to be a strong, viable organization and not "a group of little old ladies in tennis shoes who will only want to know where the rare native plants are so they can rip them off," as had been expressed to her by a local native plant enthusiast. After the conference, Joyce and Don called their son, George, who was away at college, and told him about this wonderful new group that was being organized, full of people who loved native plants as much as they did.

Joyce remembers meeting people from around Florida at that first conference, who eventually became friends over the years. Some she has lost contact with, but many she and Don still keep in touch with, if only at annual conferences. Joyce also felt the growing pains as FNPS voted to become independent from the Florida Conser-