

# THE LOSS OF BEAUTY

by Marie B. Mellinger

"Ah, what were beauty lost, the fallen petal, and the drifting leaf, the orchid and the fern, forever gone, and still but seldom mourned..."

In Florida, where tourism is one of the largest sources of income, the loss of natural beauty hurts, both economically and aesthetically. The latest list of rare and endangered Florida plants put out by the Smithsonian Institution lists 222 threatened plants in the state. And many more species are threatened that are not on the Smithsonian list. All this in spite of the fact that Florida already has supposedly stringent laws to protect her rare and endemic plant species.

Ironically, many tourists destroy the very thing they come to see, either by mass of numbers trampling the habitat, or by individual greed, smuggling orchids or air plants out of the state for selfish purposes. Each person rationalizes by saying, "It won't hurt to take just one," but by the time "one" is multiplied by thousands, the effect upon the native flora is devastating. The fact that many rare plants are in State or National Parks in no way fully protects them, for even these areas are not completely free from selfish vandalism.

Yet, at least the Parks and Reserves make an attempt to protect Florida's rare and endangered species. In the rest of the state, natural habitats are disappearing at a rapid rate before the



A single plant of *Zamia integrifolia* in the pine woods near Naranja, Florida. Fire had cleared hundreds of acres of the oolitic limestone on which the *Zamia* grows. Many of the *Zamia* plants, too succulent to burn, were thus made clearly visible.

ever increasing onslaught of development and progress.

At one time Florida had more endemic species of fern than any other state. The lime sink fern grottoes around Pineola once had over twenty species, most of them rare and unusual. Much of the limestone area has been quarried, to the detriment of the grottoes and the ferns. The original hammocks in Dade County were extravagant gardens of ferns and air plants, wild peppers, and orchids. Back in the days of the early botanist, Dr. J.K. Small, the plant life of the hammocks was among the most unusual in the world. Cypress swamps and bogs once held a profusion of rare orchids and air plants. Plant collectors and nursery men carried carloads of them away for private gardens, or to offer them for sale.



Plant of large tree-orchid (*Oncidium undulatum*) on limb of live-oak tree, in Royal Palm Hammock, Dade County, Dec., 1917.

Still other habitats have suffered from the developments. Sand hill scrub areas, where a profusion of blue lupines and green eyes (*Berlandiera*) made natural flower gardens, have almost disappeared in Florida. Remains of once vast kitchen middens and shell mounds are now found only in a few protected areas, such as Turtle Mound and Crystal River. These mounds and middens once contained endemics such as the wild pepper (*Peperomia cumulicola*), found only on shell heaps.

The Okeechobee gourd, supposedly the ancestor of the modern pumpkin, once flourished around Lake Okeechobee. Now it is on the Smithsonian list. So, too, are all the species of coontie (*Zamia*).

There seems to be some confusion between the Smithsonian list of rare and endangered species, and those plants listed as protected by Florida state law. For example, the Smithsonian lists *Zamia integrifolia*, and Florida law lists all species of *Zamia*. And again, the Smithsonian lists only the parrot pitcher plant (*Sarracenia psittacina*), while Florida law protects all species of *Sarracenia*. Much of the difficulty in protecting plants comes from the fact that the experts cannot agree on what needs protection. And why are none of the bromeliads on the Smithsonian list, and only a few orchids?

The Florida law, as written in 1965, states, "...prohibits the injury, destruction, or removal of the following trees, shrubs, and plants from private lands without the permission of the landowner; or their transport, or offer for sale, unless grown under cultivation, or taken with permission." "The intent of the law is to preserve and encourage the growth of these native plants, which are rapidly disappearing from the state." The law, as written then, included all air plants, except the common Spanish moss, and all species of native orchids, both epiphytic and terrestrial, and most of the rare native ferns.

This law needs strengthening, updating, and upholding.

(The photos accompanying this article, courtesy of Mrs. Mellinger, were taken by J.K. Small, (1869-1938) who was curator of the New York Botanical Gardens, and wrote many articles and papers on the flora of Florida, including a volume titled, *Flora of Southeastern United States*, published in 1903. This book was reissued in 1932 under the title, *Manual of Southeastern Flora*.)