

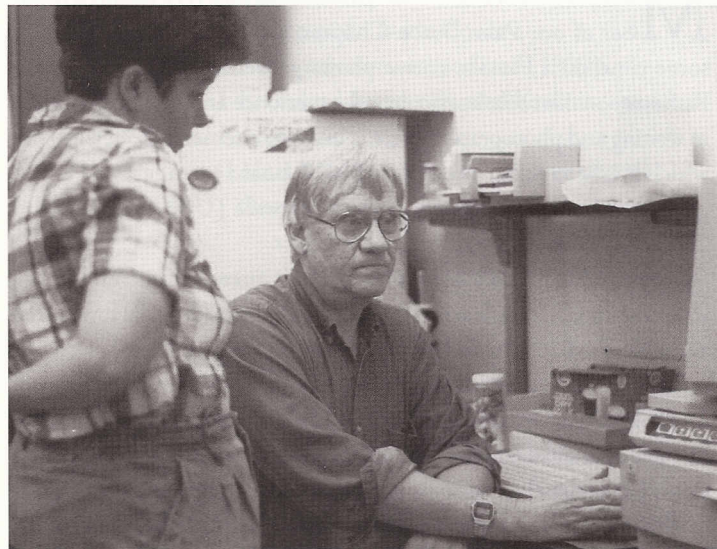
# The People Behind the Plants

## Members: the Heart and Soul of FNPS

Part I in a Series

The Florida Native Plant Society is a volunteer led and managed organization with more than 2500 members in 25 chapters throughout the state. This year, 2000, we celebrate our 20th anniversary. In looking forward to our future, it is also appropriate to celebrate our past by honoring the experience and wisdom of our most senior members. Chapters were asked to interview some of their special "oldtime" members and the response has been heartwarming. The following, listed alphabetically by last name, are just a few of our very special "people behind the plants." Additional interviews will be published in future issues of *The Palmetto*.

Photos by interviewers except where noted.



**Dan Austin**

As an undergraduate, Dan was interested in wildlife biology, but a longer interest of his surfaced as his graduate and doctorate course of study progressed – ethnobotany – the study of human uses of plants. He selected this discipline partly from his long-time irritation with people who, when shown a particular plant species would ask him, "what good is it anyway?" Dan got into his specialty interest, CONVULVULACEAE, primarily due to his major professor at Washington University. Dan has become a world-renowned expert on CONVULVULACEAE of the American tropics. He constantly receives specimens from around the world, which are unpacked and sorted by his free labor pool (undergraduate assistants). He notes that he is several thousand specimens behind.

Dan married his wife, Sandy, in 1969. She is also a botanist and currently teaches part-time at Broward Community College and Florida Atlantic University. Upon receiving his doctorate in 1970, Dan and Sandy relocated to South Florida and he took a position as Assistant Professor at Florida Atlantic University.

Before FNPS was organized, Dan had attempted unsuccessfully to start a plant society in South Florida. As FNPS was getting off the ground, he was a strong supporter and member. Also, Dan was one of three individuals that started the Palm Beach Chapter of FNPS. The other two individuals were his wife, Sandy, and Sara Davis.

When asked why he had joined FNPS, he stated that for a long time he'd been promoting people's interest in plants (that ethnobotany thing again) and trying to get those with similar interests to come together, much like the Audubon Society. However, he hoped they would focus on a bigger picture: plant communities. Such an organization would create another concerned voice for the environ-

### **Dan Austin**

Professor of Botany and Director of the Environmental Sciences Program at Florida Atlantic University.

**Interview by Ray Miller, Palm Beach Chapter**

**D**aniel F. Austin, Ph.D., was born May 18, 1943, in Paducah, Kentucky. He went to high school in Paducah and went on to study LAMIACEAE (mints) at Murray State University in western Kentucky, where he obtained a B.A. degree.

When asked how he became interested in environmental issues, Dan said he was like many of us – Peter Pans who never grew up. We have retained a fascination about things around us that people who grow up seem to lose.

Dan's parents were supportive of his interest in the sciences and let him select his own path of study, although they had hoped he would have chosen medicine. However, he said he had seen enough blood and guts in the zoology and general biology lab at Murray State to discourage him from that career.

While at Murray State University, he attended a seminar given by Dr. Walter Lewis, a botanist from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. After the seminar, Dan had the opportunity to talk with the botanist, and was encouraged by him to apply to graduate school at Washington University. Dan applied for the graduate program, where he received both his M.S. and Ph.D.



ment and would allow an exchange of information.

When he arrived in South Florida, very little printed information about plants and their communities was available. The notes by John Kunkel Small (from his early, brief travels through South Florida) were it, essentially. However, Dan knew that other local individuals, mostly non-professionals, had a wealth of information and observations to share. Dan wanted to tap into this source by bringing these people together.

When Dan was asked about his thoughts on the future of FNPS, he said that things can always be improved. However, he is very pleased with the direction that the organization is going and feels it has become a positive voice in the state. Dan's word of wisdom for FNPS members is "Don't be afraid to ask questions, ask everybody and anybody, call up the professors to seek your answers. Also, become involved."

He feels that we need to promote the society more and make sure people know that FNPS can be found on the web. He also suggested that in addition to targeting the Hispanic communities with the new brochure, we should all target the smaller, but growing, Creole-French speaking community.

On the future of FNPS, I mentioned that over the last few years the number of FNPS members has remained the same, while costs have gone up. His response was that a number of organizations he belongs to have declining membership and at least we are holding our own.

Dan has received accolades from his peers over the years, including numerous nominations for Distinguished Teacher Awards and certificates of appreciation from county and local governments. In 1993, he received the Green Palmetto Award for Science and Education. He received a second Green Palmetto in 1995 for outstanding contributions.

Dan has written or collaborated on several books. They include *The Florida of John Kunkel Small*, *Pine Rockland - Plant Guide*, a series of plant identification guides for coastal hammocks, coastal dunes, scrub communities; and a soon to be published guide for pine flatwoods. He has published a tremendous number of scientific papers – so many, his Curriculum Vitae resembles a book in its length.

In 1985, Dan and Dr. Grace Iverson produced a document entitled "Inventory of Native Ecosystems in Palm Beach County" which identified and described some of the critical remaining natural areas in Palm Beach County. This document was instrumental in providing justification for passage of the \$100 million bond referendum in 1992. Through the referendum, Palm Beach County has purchased over 22,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land.

Dan has also been involved in the Society of Economic Botany for a number of years. He is currently on the journal's editorial board as the Book Review Editor. In the past, he has coerced some of his graduate students (myself included) to do book reviews for the journal.

He has been involved with the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council (FEPPC) since around 1991 and proudly wears the moniker of caretaker of the FEPPC Pest Plant List, which is reviewed and updated every two years. In 1999, he received the Outstanding Mem-

ber Award for his work on developing and maintaining the pest plant list.

When asked to cite some accomplishments that FNPS should be proud of, he notes *The Palmetto*, to which he has been a frequent contributor. He considers it an outstanding communication between the membership.

Dan has a number of other interests, but he mainly likes to visit different places and get out in the field. He also frequents different libraries to look up rare books or visits other herbaria to study their collections of plants. Staying in Everglades City and hiking around the Fakahatchee Strand is a holiday for him. In fact, the Fakahatchee Strand and Big Cypress area are his favorite places in South Florida and he has taken many students and others on hikes into these areas. Outside Florida, he likes to visit and do research in the mountainous regions of southern Arizona. He hopes to retire in this area of Arizona in the next five to six years. He likes its openness and smaller population. He has fond memories of a year-long sabbatical that he and Sandy took to southern Arizona, where they camped out over a hundred nights.

He feels the greatest challenge facing FNPS (and FLEPPC) in the next few years will be flack, or resistance, from the horticultural industry to do the right thing and consider the consequences of promoting exotic landscape vegetation. He states that "They [the industry] seem to think they can't make a profit from selling natives. Some very powerful industry people can make our future work promoting natives difficult."

Dan feels that the biggest threat to our natural areas are people, and he fears that encroachment to the edges of these areas will increase as the population increases. He hopes that FNPS can help change peoples' view of plants. Dan feels that most people in First World countries think of plants as furniture. This concept is a result of too many people concentrated in urban areas. Plants are living things and deserving of the same consideration as other creatures.

It will be difficult for many of us when Dan Austin retires and moves away to Arizona. However, I am sure we will all be welcome to stop in on him and Sandy when we are in the area. You can even take your unidentified plant specimens along. Just remember that Dan doesn't do grasses.

## Paul & Sherry Cummings

Past President of FNPS (Sherry) and first Palm Beach Chapter President (Paul)

**Interview by Christine Lockhart, Palm Beach Chapter**

**A** trek down a dirt road will lead you to the home of Paul and Sherry Cummings, two of the pioneers and founders of the Palm Beach Chapter of FNPS. In the late 1970s, there were no native plant nurseries in Broward or Palm Beach Counties. A birding trip to Sanibel-Captiva Island led the Cummings to visit a fledgling native plant nursery there, which prompted them to establish one of the first native plant nurseries in Palm Beach County. Their nurs-