

MARY FRANCIS BAKER

(1876-1941)

Wild Flower Enthusiast

by Eliane M. Norman

Many of us who are interested in Florida plants are familiar with Mary Francis Baker's *Florida Wild Flowers*. This book, first published in 1926, was revised in 1938, and has been reprinted several times. It is still available in book stores around the state.

I visited the herbarium and the archives at Rollins College in Winter Park to find out more about this eminent author.

M.F. Baker was born in Plainfield, Connecticut, in 1876. She was educated at Plainfield and Norwich academies and also had private tutors. She attributed her interest in plants to her mother, Sarah Kinne Francis, who had taught botany at the Battleboro Female Seminary before her marriage. As a young girl she learned the names of all the wild flowers around her home in Connecticut. From her father, John M. Francis, who was a Congregational minister, she came to love poetry and literature.

She spent the better part of three years in Europe when she was in her early twenties. She mentioned enjoying the alpine wildflowers and skipping out of sightseeing expeditions so that she might have more time to spend at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, outside London. By this time, she had become quite deaf as a result of an illness.

In 1912, Doubleday Page & Co. published Baker's first book in their Nature Library Series. Titled *The Book of Grasses*, it is an illustrated guide to the common grasses, rushes, and sedges of the northeastern U.S. Mrs. Baker's sister, Sarah Francis Dorrance, did the line drawings; there are also some very fine photographs throughout the book. Chapters dealing with usage, morphology, phenology, and ecology, as well as keys and technical descriptions, make for a comprehensive book on a difficult group of plants.



Nineteen hundred and twelve was also the year that Mary Francis Baker began to plan a book on Florida wildflowers. She had begun coming to Florida in 1905, but did not move here permanently until 1915 or 1916. In 1918, she married Dr. Thomas R. Baker of Winter Park, a famous chemist, who was professor emeritus of natural science at Rollins College. Although he was then 81 years old, he was still very spry and youthful. In fact, he was mayor of Winter Park in 1917-1918. They lived on Kentucky

Avenue and Mrs. Baker had an interesting garden with a mixture of native plants and exotics. She grew many plants from seeds given to her by the Plant Introduction Services of the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

She traveled all over Florida to collect plants and to photograph them. She corresponded and exchanged specimens with many scientists who had similar interests, such as J.K. Small, D. Fairchild, W. Buswell, and B. Hart Wright. Her collection of several thousand plant specimens and over a hundred photographic plant portraits were later willed to Rollins College. During this time she was active in the Audubon Society and the Historical Society, as well as the Garden Club. She was named honorary member of the Winter Park Garden Club. Her husband encouraged her in her activities and helped in editing the first edition of *Florida Wild Flowers*.

This book was written for the serious amateur. Although the keys are simple, based primarily on flower color and leaf arrangement, the description for each species is technically accurate. It is obvious that Mrs. Baker was well acquainted with the seven hundred or so species that she treated in the first edition. Her photographs are of excellent quality. The book was enthusiastically received, and a second edition with additional descriptions and photographs came out in 1938. That this book is still in use fifty years later says much about its usefulness.

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