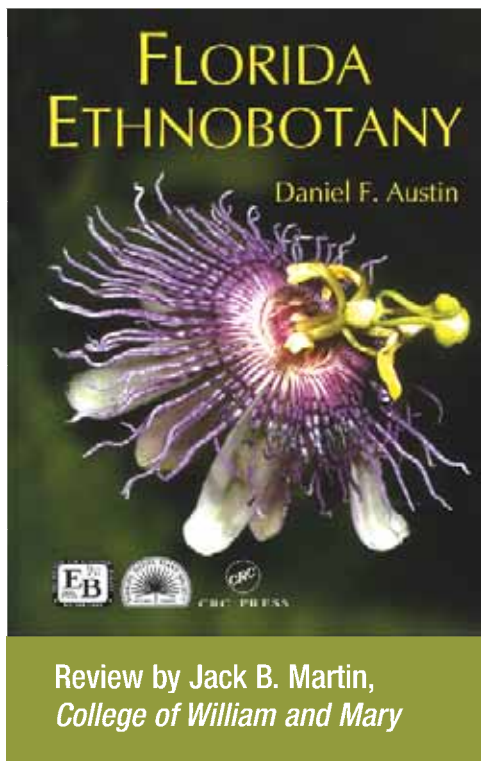


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Palmetto





Florida Ethnobotany

by Daniel F. Austin, CRC Press

It may seem strange for a linguist to review a book on botany, but those who leaf through the pages of this volume will soon discover that *Florida Ethnobotany* is part dictionary, part thesaurus, and part encyclopedia. They will also find that its author, Daniel Austin, is someone who loves word histories as much as plants.

Florida Ethnobotany is a 909-page book with a hard, glossy cover listing some 900 plant species native to Florida. It has line drawings on almost every page and 64 color plates to assist in identification. The first 50 pages ("People and Plants") treat the conventions used, the history of various peoples in Florida, and several extensive tables. The main portion – some 700 pages – is an alphabetical listing of genera (from *Abutilon* to *Zornia*). The work concludes with a list of references and an unusually extensive index to genera and common names in English and other languages.

A typical entry in the main section consists of: a) the genus name and its meaning; b) an alphabetical list of common names and their etymologies in English, the native languages of the South, and scattered other European and indigenous languages; and, c) an essay on the history of the genus's classification and uses. These draw in part on con-

tributions Austin has previously made to *The Palmetto*. The information has been compiled from the journals of early explorers, dictionaries, and works by anthropologists, linguists, botanists, and others. Wherever possible, the author has sought to match common and older terms with their modern botanical equivalents. This is, in fact, the main contribution of the work: to sort through previous studies, identify probable referents in the plant world, and then to compile these by their currently accepted botanical names. He has also done quite a bit of sleuthing to determine what names mean in a broad range of languages, since names can provide clues as to uses.

The term ethnobotany means different things to different people. For some, the term refers to the study of how people use plants. For others, it includes the study of how people view and categorize the world around them. Because of its organization by genus, this study answers questions of the first type. Those who wish to understand how the practices of a specific group (such as the Seminoles) fit within a larger belief system should consult work by anthropologists (see for example, Sturtevant 1955, Snow and Stans 2001).

Some of the etymologies in this book would benefit from further study. It is also a disappointment that sources are rarely given for words in indigenous languages. Every visitor to the American South has used a different spelling for transcribing plant names in native languages: unless the source of a word is identified, it is impossible to judge the accuracy of the transcription or even the proper pronunciation. It is also difficult to separate mistakes on the part of the original source from mistakes introduced in the current volume.

Florida Ethnobotany will be a useful reference for those interested in deepening their knowledge of Florida's native plants and their appreciation of the ingenuity shown by local inhabitants in making use of all the resources around them.

About the reviewer: Jack B. Martin is Robert F. and Sarah M. Boyd Associate Professor of English at the College of William and Mary and a linguist specializing in the native languages of the South.

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