

# TWO YEARS LATER: My Native Plant Garden

by Wesley G. Starr

A new season has begun in my native plant garden.

As I am writing (January, 1989), the purple coneflowers and verbena are in bloom, some of my terrestrial orchids are breaking through the ground, and everything in my yard is getting greener.

My peach and nectarine trees, planted at the entrance to my driveway, are in full bloom — a glorious pink-to-white — and bees and skipper butterflies are busily pollinating them.

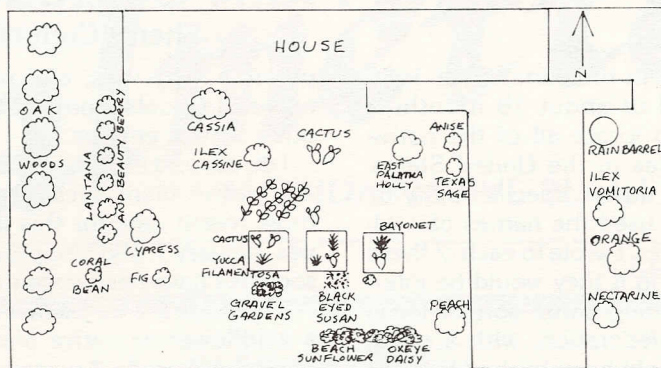
The good Florida earth that we love so much is showing life's renewal and promise.

The results of my experiments with native plants have been frustrating and rewarding and exciting.

Frustrating, when I planted too many of the wrong plants on my hot, dry soil; rewarding and exciting when I planted the right things.

The main problem, two seasons ago when I planned the wild garden, was that the south side of my house grew nothing but sandspurs, and much of the summer it burned in the sun and was devoid of other plant life. Planting beach sunflower and oxeye daisy brought astounding results. I originally set out only six plants of each, but they have spread over the hot, bare ground, and now hold the soil together in mats of green. The beach sunflower, similar in habit to the larger sunflower, is especially excellent, blooming in bright yellow profusion for about nine months of the year.

I have also planted Jerusalem artichoke, a relative of the sunflower, in the



same area, with excellent results. I grow them strictly for the edible tubers, which are delicious either cooked or raw. It is originally a western plant and is now naturalized in the east. I limit its area of growth, as it may crowd out the original natives.

My cactus is doing well, though some of the ears have been devoured by the cactus weevils. The weevil's arch-enemy, the native wasps, were not as plentiful this season to keep them under control.

A new plant added in the summer of 1988 was railroad vine. Six of them were planted in the middle of the lawn, and they rapidly took over the area with their runners clinging to the soil. They bloomed twice, but died back with the first frost. With early spring, leaves and runners are appearing again.

One of the toads in my yard greets me on my porch at night and "enjoys" my scratching the "warts" on his head. He turns his head from side to side with my scratching. He remains unnamed and untamed.

My rain barrel has proved to be inadequate to supply all the water my plants need during dry spells, so a large

metal tub has been added to double the reserve. I plan to position barrels under each eave of the house to have enough water to supply a vegetable garden in the back yard.

As one can see, a native plant garden is a "growing" project. It begins as an idea and slowly grows into a full-fledged garden. From bare, hot ground to a dune of beach sunflowers takes time. The results come slowly because the natives may bloom only once a season (or when they "feel like it", as with the yuccas!), so patience becomes the watchword of the native plant gardener. Take your time and let the native plants take theirs, and you will be pleased with the results.

Remember that all of us in the society are doing something important, even if the idea is in its embryonic stage — the idea of placing exotic plants back in pots, and restoring Florida with as many original plants as possible. It may be the most important work we can do for Florida!

*Wesley Starr is a respiratory therapist in DeLand, attending Stetson and working toward his BA degree.*