

The People Behind the Plants

Members: the Heart and Soul of FNPS

Part II

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. Chapters were asked to interview some of their special "oldtime" members and the response has been heartwarming, starting with ten wonderful stories in the Spring issue (Vol. 20, No. 1). The following, listed alphabetically by last name, are just a few more of our very special "people behind the plants."

Photos by interviewers except where noted.

Rosemary Fleming

Charter Member of the Coccoloba Chapter

Interview by JoAnne Trebatoski

Rosemary Fleming is a charter member of the Coccoloba Chapter. Rosemary was born in Chicago, went to college in Southern California and the University of Illinois, and after her marriage lived in New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin. When she and her husband, Walt, retired, they moved to Fort Myers. Rosemary had worked as a naturalist at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum in Madison, Wisconsin.

Shortly after the Flemings moved to Florida, the Coccoloba Chapter was formed (1981) and they became a part of the original membership of that group. Rosemary remembers that original members of the chapter included Dick Workman, Joe Tooke, Ruth Danforth, Mary Burnhardt, a native plant nursery owner named Tracy, from Cape Coral, a man from the local extension office, and several young foresters.

When I asked Rosemary what prompted her to join the Florida Native Plant Society, she told me that her mother said that from the time she was a very little girl, Rosemary was always interested in plants and birds. She remembers being captivated by the beauty of butterflyweed when her family took trips to Indiana and she saw it along the road. And she remembers playing in the open fields surrounding her childhood home – fields that were full of spiderwort,



Rosemary Fleming

brown-eyed Susans, snotweed, and big bluestem. But her early experiences in Girl Scouting really tweaked her interest in the environment. Her troop leader knew nothing about nature but armed

troop members with guidebooks to look up information about the plants and animals they encountered during hikes and camping.

Rosemary stayed involved with Girl Scouts for 70 years. She taught scout leaders and helped them feel confident in their abilities to take their troops into the countryside

to learn about the environment. She also volunteered to help develop Girl Scout Camps that preserved and planted native wildflowers and forest plants, keeping the sites as natural and undisturbed as possible.

Rosemary has also always been involved in environmental groups such as the Audubon Society and Nature Conservancy. Rosemary was interested in preserving habitats and in order to preserve habitats, she had to become knowledgeable about habitats. So it was natural for her to join the Florida Native Plant Society to both increase her knowledge and to allow her to be able to protect, preserve, and create habitats in Florida. She was active in the Coccoloba Chapter's many events and for five or six years, she edited the

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"Coccoloba Jam," the chapter's newsletter.

When asked what early activities of FNPS she was especially proud of and wished to highlight, Rosemary immediately mentioned the native plant workshop for teachers that the Coccoloba Chapter presented in 1985, and the display of sample Florida habitats that the chapter did for the Lee County Fair. "We participated in the County Fair for three years and this was a highly successful way to get the word out about the Florida Native Plant Society and to increase our membership. People who came to the fair and saw the habitats were amazed at the diversity of native plants. This was a very big project for us at the time because it had to be staffed by two people for the entire ten days of the fair."

In April, Rosemary will celebrate her 80th birthday and she is still guiding at the Six Mile Cypress Slough, is an active member of the Poinciana Garden Club, is active in her church, is a docent at the Calusa Nature Center, and is active in the Coccoloba Chapter.

Rosemary believes that FNPS has an unlimited future. "The sky's the limit. As more people become knowledgeable about the importance of using native plants and preserving native habitats, the more impact FNPS will be able to have." She also believes that recent publicity about Florida habitat restoration projects in a variety of magazines, newsletters, and newspapers has helped raise public awareness and should assist the society in meeting its mission and goals. In other words, Florida is more ready now than it was 20 years ago to hear the message of FNPS and to act on it.

What does Rosemary see for FNPS in the future? She'd like the society to continue giving awards that recognize individuals and groups for using native plants to landscape and also to restore habitats. Everyone needs encouragement. She'd also like to see the organization marketing itself more effectively and getting more publicity. Another important goal would be to get more landscape designers involved with native plants. Last but certainly not least, helping to get codes and legislation in place which encourage the use of native plants in landscaping and the preservation of habitats.

Words of wisdom from Rosemary: "Use people's interest and enthusiasm for butterfly gardening to build on and to extend their interest and knowledge into native plants and habitats in general." Rosemary is a remarkable lady and always an educator.