

“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.

Virginia Girardin

Longtime Member, Coccoloba Chapter

Interview by JoAnne Trebatoski

Virginia Girardin is a very special, 87 year-old, quiet, soft-spoken, gentle, gracious Southern lady who is an avid native plant gardener and expert orchid grower. She has lived in Fort Myers, Florida, for 57 years, moving from Valdosta, Georgia, where she was born. Virginia came to Florida in 1942 with her husband, Dr. Louis Girardin, who was southwest Florida’s first pediatrician. He set up his practice in Fort Myers after completing his medical education.



Virginia Girardin

The Girardins chose Fort Myers to settle in because it was “such a pretty little town.”

A champion for children and a lover of nature, Virginia has a master’s degree in social work from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. She was the director for the Children’s Home Society of Florida as well as an active volunteer for all sorts of community groups, including the Coccoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society, the Orchid Society, and scout troops. She taught Sunday school for almost fifty years. She is still a member of the local foster care advisory board as well as a member of the Coccoloba Chapter.

Now you might be thinking, “well sure, that’s easy for a doctor’s wife.” But Virginia did all these things despite the fact that her husband died very young, leaving her with all the responsibilities and expenses of a single parent with three boys to put through college.

Virginia joined the Coccoloba Chapter in 1989 and has remained very active over the years. For several years, she served as secretary for the chapter. Virginia still attends meetings and field trips and until a couple of years ago, came to exotic plant removal and native planting activities as well. Every year, Virginia donated live oak, varnish leaf, dune sunflower, and porterweed “volunteers” to the Coccoloba Chapter’s native plant sale. She dug these from her yard and nurtured them along in her orchid house. She is very proud of the beautiful, huge live oak tree which she planted as a small tree 54 years ago in the side yard of her home in historic Edison Park. It has grown to specimen size and is home to resurrection ferns, bromeliads, birds, and other wildlife. This past November, Virginia injured

her neck, restricting mobility and causing her not to be able to drive any longer. So she has moved into an apartment in an assisted living facility on the Caloosahatchee River in Fort Myers.

Virginia believes it is very important to continue the primary goal of education that is espoused by the Florida Native Plant Society. She believes that people know about the exotic plants they put into their landscapes but they don't understand how important it is to plant native plants or how natives support animal and bird life. In fact, they still don't know much about native plants, nor do they know how much trouble exotics can cause if they escape into Florida's environment. She urges that in the future, the FNPS keep up all the educational activities in which it is presently involved. The need is still there.

Virginia, keep coming to the Coccoloba Chapter events. You have much to teach us about personal commitment to what one believes in.

