“Cocoloba 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 Cocoloba 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 Cocoloba 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 of native plants and habitats in general.” Rosemary is a remarkable lady and always an educator.

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**Virginia Girardin**

Longtime Member, Cocoloba 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.
Alyene Hays grew up in Fort Meade, Florida with her parents, a brother, and a sister in a longleaf pine forest dotted with live oaks near the Peace River. She spent a great deal of time with her grandparents who lived near by and attributes her great love of the outdoors and wildlife to her grandfather. They would spend every Sunday afternoon walking in the woods, for as much as eight miles, or hunting rabbits in Polk County on the Peace River. She knew when and where to expect the wildflowers to come up and was permitted to freely roam the area. Alyene’s great-grandmother was a full blood Cherokee and her grandmother was 1/4 native American; so she’s sure she came by her love of nature naturally.

Alyene was not always happy at home; in fact she took to running away at the tender age of two. This was because her mother and father both worked and Alyene was under the care of a mean, stern housekeeper who shut her up in dark closets. Alyene’s father owned several IGA stores and her mother was the bookkeeper for them. They never knew why Alyene ran away so often. When the Great Depression came, her father, who had extended credit, lost the stores. Alyene and her older brother tried to help by collecting on some bills, but received mostly goods or work in exchange. She tells of going to one very wealthy house for collection and the butler declared he could not pay them anything and before he could close the door, Alyene spoke up and said: “You could give us that rug you’re standing on, my mother would love it.” Her father became postmaster at Pembroke, a phosphorus-mining town just north of Fort Meade. Her mother made silk ties.

When Alyene’s mother became ill, Alyene was her caretaker even though she desperately wanted to go to college. She made a late application to Florida State College for Women and was accepted two days before school started. A cousin came to take care of her mother, and Alyene packed and made ready for school. She had five dresses, including one made of a feed sack; an old pair of shoes, and $5.00 packed into a refurbished trunk. Off she went to Tallahassee. She bought a new pair of shoes to perk up her wardrobe for $2.98. She found a job as secretary to the sports department and soon was able to send money home.

Alyene was the best girl athlete on the basketball, baseball, and softball teams. She was selected to play on the National Hockey Team for the 1936 Olympics, the year of Jesse Owens’ fame. Her parents did not allow Alyene to go, a decision Alyene had to respect, but she has wondered what it would have been like.

For Thanksgiving 1936, Alyene came home with her trunk full of pecans she had picked up on the campus grounds. The family and friends celebrated Thanksgiving as was their tradition, in the woods on the Peace River. The men hunted and filled the stew pot with squirrels and rabbits (rarely turkey) and that year they had pecan pies and cakes. After only one semester of college, Alyene returned home to resume the care of her mother.

Ten months after selling her grove to Edgar Hays, Alyene met him formally and was encouraged by both her parents to go on a date with him. They didn’t marry until 1937 because she was still caring for her mother. During their courtship, her mother was brought to Dr. Krist in Orlando and he instructed Alyene to massage her mother’s legs and with this care, Alyene got her mother walking again in only a few weeks. After she married Edgar, he proclaimed in front of their friends that it was a big mistake to buy