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Toward a Working Definition of "Florida Native Plant"

by David Pais

For most purposes, the phrase "Florida native plant" refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to best scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

What is a *native plant*? This question -which on the surface seems quite simple -reveals, upon further examination, a greater degree of complexity than first imagined. What we commonly understand as the meaning of *native* is "born or naturally occurring in a specific area". However, it is not always possible to reduce the meaning of *native plant* to a simple slogan or precise date. Some definitions of a Florida native plant have relied upon on determining a precise historical event such as Columbus' arriving in the Bahamas or De Leon's landing in 1513. These attempts to define Florida native plant with an arbitrary date are unnecessarily complicated. There are a number of species, including papaya, which were probably introduced by indigenous people for medicinal or ag-ronomic value and which would have to be included as native under these definitions. There is also the question of a number of species, particularly in the Keys, such as Geiger Tree (*Cordia sebestina*) or Pitch Apple (*Clusia rosea*), which are most probably of Caribbean origin, and their nativity will never be established beyond a doubt.

In the botanical sense, the meaning of "Florida native plant" and a precise definition is somewhat elusive. *Native* generally refers to species "occurring in a

specific geographical area or biogeographical region, which do not directly correspond to political boundaries'. What has been called the European Ecological Imperialism, marked by the drastic alteration of the indigenous flora of the peninsula, occurred several centuries before the establishment of statehood. What is significant is not a date, but an event - the radical transformation of the native species and habitats - that occurred after European contact.

In one sense, *native* refers to "occurring in a specific habitat and plant association". Even within the boundaries of Florida, species may only be native to a very small a restrictive habitat type and particular region. For example, a species such as *Amorpha crenulata* is native in the Dade pine rocklands, or *Chionanthus pygmaeus* is native to the Lake Wales Ridge scrub, or *Torreya taxifolia* is native along the Apalachicola bluffs. While the extension of the natural range of some species may have horticultural merit, many endangered or endemic native species may be inappropriate if planted outside specific habitats or communities.

The classification of *indigenous* plants, understood as those species occurring within a specific habitat or biogeographical

region prior to significant human impacts, is more precise in meaning. In one sense, *indigenous* implies origination and belonging to a particular place. It also carries the connotation of not having been introduced from elsewhere. For example, Hand Fern, *Ophioglossum palmatum*, is indigenous to Sabal Palm boots in low subtropical hammocks; it doesn't belong elsewhere. Indigenous species would include those naturally occurring and self-reproducing species dispersed by wind, water, and migratory birds in populations unaffected by human actions. Indigenous species are those species that have originated and belong in a particular place and specific habitat that can be geographically identified.

There are also the questions to consider of both naturally occurring hybrids and cultivated varieties (cultivars) of native species, those selected for specific horticultural traits and propagated asexually. It is generally accepted that these are legitimate natives, although they may or may not have been present at the time of European contact. The important factor regarding nativity is, however, the geographical origin of the genetic parent plant. For instance, Schillings Holly, *Ilex vomitoria* 'Schillings Dwarf' is generally

considered to be a native Florida species, selected and propagated for its compact growth habit from a naturally occurring dwarf Yaupon Holly. On the other hand, *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem' is a cultivar selected from a North Carolina parent plant and technically would not be a Florida native. The species may be native, although the particular cultivar may not. The question becomes even more problematic for human-induced hybrids, intergeneric or bioengineered cultivars, or those of uncertain parentage. While these may possibly be native, they would probably have to be considered non-native by most standards.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has defined *native* as "a species that occurred in Florida at the time of European contact or 1500s." Many land management decisions for the Florida State

Parks are based upon an ecological restoration of the landscape to pre-Columbian conditions. This policy has caused some controversy among some who fail to appreciate that not all native species are equal or belong everywhere.

A recently released memorandum concerning native plant conservation among seven Federal Agencies has the following defined *native plant* as the following: "A native plant species is one that occurs naturally in a particular region, state, ecosystem, and habitat without direct or indirect human actions." A broad range of policy and conservation issues will have to be resolved based upon the definitions and standards of what constitutes a native species. Different criteria may be applied according to the specific application. A residential landscape would have different criteria than a large wetland restoration. A

very restrictive sense of native is appropriate for ecological restoration programs concerned with protecting genetic diversity as well as species diversity. It is possible that more stringent criteria may be applied to certain endangered or imperiled taxon than to more widely occurring species. Our increased understanding and continued refinement of the definition and policy implications of native plants will be essential components of ongoing global biodiversity conservation efforts. Therefore, while the definition at the beginning may be simple, its application is - as you can see - complicated.

This definition and explanation is the result of the work of an FNPS subcommittee chaired by David Pais, FNPS's president at the time of initial publication.



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