How The Garden Began

Promoting the preservation, conservation, and restoration of the native plants and native plant communities of Florida is the mission of our Society. One of the primary ways we work towards this mission is through outreach to the citizens of Florida. However, it is often difficult to find both creative and fun ways to introduce the general public to the subtle joys of native gardening.

With this in mind, the Palm Beach Chapter recently requested and received a FNPS grant to design, install, and maintain a native plant display garden at the Clayton Hutcheson Building located in Mounts Botanical Garden. This public botanic garden and UF/IFAS extension facility in Palm Beach County attracts over 50,000 visitors each year. The Clayton Hutcheson Building itself hosts over 2,300 meetings annually. In short, it is quite possibly the perfect location for our chapter to showcase the wonders of native plant gardening.

While the experience of developing a display garden has been quite a challenge, the creation of a local native plant garden is highly recommended for all chapters seeking to share the joys of native plant gardening with their fellow Floridians!
The Joys of Native Plant Gardening

Garden Planning and Design

With over 753 species of native plants occurring in Palm Beach County, our local flora provides an exciting palette for any garden. When the opportunity to design the garden finally arrived, deciding on which of these hundreds of plants to use in the relatively small garden area became a real dilemma. In addition, how do you create a garden that captures the imagination of both typical homeowners and the sophisticated plant connoisseur?

After some deliberation, it was decided to showcase Florida’s native plants in a “more formal” design in order to capture the broadest possible audience. However, within this basic framework, an effort was made to celebrate the full spectrum of native plant possibilities. Below are some of the often contrasting concepts reflected in the continuing evolution of our chapter’s demonstration garden.

**Formal vs. Informal** While many native plants lend themselves to stately formal gardens, others are more at home in the carefree garden. With the garden successfully installed, several species are now carefully pruned to provide a more formal atmosphere. These include hedges of sweetly-scented white indigoberry (Randia aculeata) and beds of finely-textured dwarf yaupon holly (Ilex vomitoria). In direct contrast, other plants are allowed to informally grow and express their natural shapes. These include the indestructible, mounding beach creeper (Ernoda littoralis) fringing the garden path and the fountains of pink flowering muhly grass (Muhlenbergia capillaris) clustered within the garden’s center. Despite this informality, the perfect circular form of garden’s center planting bed with its tidy native rock edging adds a subtle order to even this randomly planted area.

**Flowering vs. Non-Flowering** Most South Florida gardeners love big, dramatic displays of tropical color. Native firebush, planted as dense hedges along the front and back of the garden, is an excellent choice for a virtually ever-flowering native shrub. The lovely plants featured in the display garden (Hamelia patens ‘Comer’) are a floriferous compact clone introduced by Meadow Beauty Nursery. The enthusiastic golden flowers of dune sunflower (Helianthus debilis) at the garden’s perimeter as well as the brilliant sky-blue flowered cluster vine (Jacquemontia pentanthos)
The joys of native plant gardening

covering the garden’s entrance Arbor also add dramatic, long-lasting splashes of color to the landscape. Wildflowers are clustered in the garden’s center bed, concentrating their color in a central location for closer viewing. However, the native plant demonstration garden offers more than just colorful flowers. The gossyp leaves and dusky clusters of fruit belonging to Fiddleneck (Citharexylum spinosum) and the bright berries and silky peeling bark of Simpson’s stopper (Myrsine frangans) provide equally appealing, if more subtle, additions to the landscape.

Common vs. Rare

In general, the demonstration garden’s perimeter contains more commonplace plants while rarer natives are concentrated in the center of the design. Cocoplum (Chrysobalanus icaco), included as part of the mixed hedge bordering the garden on two sides, is perhaps one of the most familiar native plants in South Florida landscapes. It is tolerant of shade or full sun, moist or dry soils, and there are horizontal, green leaf or even red tip forms available. By contrast, several of the delicate wildflowers hidden at the garden’s center are seldom observed even in South Florida’s pristine natural areas. Once established, these wildflowers will intermingle to create an ever-changing colorful display at the heart of the garden. This broad range of planting material will provide plants of interest to every garden visitor, from the average homeowner to the experienced Florida naturalist.

Designed vs. Restored Landscape

Many designers use rhythm and repetition in their choice of plant materials to create outdoor rooms rich with organic architecture. Planted to add balance and symmetry to the design, the garden’s four elegant pigeon plums trees (Coccoloba diversifolia) are examples of this technique. Eight silver palms (Coccolithus argentata), generously provided by Mounts Botanical Garden staff, are also planted around the circular gravel path. Eventually, the narrow trunks of these slow growing palms will evolve into delicate columns crowned by refined silver fronds. However, other portions of the garden reflect a more natural approach to landscape design. Informal hedgerows are located on two sides of the garden, containing a random mix of eight very different native shrub species to provide habitat for local wildlife. The small center garden, with its diverse and expanding collection of wildflower species, is also envisioned as a subtle restoration of the of the pine flatwoods community that once covered much of Palm Beach County. With any luck, the chapter will receive future permission to burn this area in order to emphasize the important role fire plays in Florida’s native plant communities.

Installation and Maintenance

The demonstration garden was successfully installed by both chapter volunteers and botanic garden staff in March 2006. However, it is regular maintenance that is often the most problematic for many community gardens.

Monthly maintenance at the Palm Beach Chapter demonstration garden is conducted by a growing and enthusiastic group of local volunteers. Since the garden is located on the same campus as our monthly native plant society chapter meeting, it is readily accessible for maintenance events. During warmer months, the volunteer group meets one hour before the regular chapter meeting to garden. During cooler months, with the hours of daylight shortening and garden chores slowing down, weekend ‘weeding parties’ are planned the Saturday before the regular chapter meeting. This

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predictable schedule minimizes the need for publicity and allows volunteers to just drop by as time allows.

The maintenance efforts of the volunteers are overseen and directed by a member of the newly established landscape committee. Questions about design are discussed and spare seedlings/cuttings offered to all during these informal events. When there are not enough weeds to go around, the group just socializes.

A manual outlining the maintenance goals of the demonstration garden has also been provided to the botanic garden staff. In addition to providing daily oversight, the botanic garden staff has generously contributed both resources and considerable labor to the continuing success of the demonstration garden.

The Future

The native plant demonstration garden was officially dedicated to the citizens of Palm Beach County on May 16, 2006. This ceremony was held in the garden itself during an evening event auspiciously named ‘A Night with the Natives’. While providing an educational opportunity to botanize and debate landscape design, it also provided a forum for the local chapter members to network with the event’s special guests: fellow conservation group members and botanic garden staff. Always on the lookout for a party, the local chapter has decided to make ‘A Night with the Natives’ an annual event celebrating both Florida’s botanical heritage and the preservation efforts of Palm Beach County’s citizens.

The garden, with its lovely bronze dedication plaque featuring the FNPS logo, also provides a very visible forum for numerous self-sustaining outreach activities. It is a popular destination for attendees of weekend plant sales, local plant society members, and Master Gardener classes. Novices and homeowner associations are directed to the display garden to experience firsthand the color and wildlife that native plant gardens generate. The chapter has also been contacted by local newspapers researching potential feature articles. With this in mind, installation of additional educational signage and the compilation of a garden brochure are proposed as the next phase of garden development.

Finally, the successful implementation of the demonstration garden has provided momentum for the installation of a much more comprehensive, habitat-based planting plan for all five buildings comprising the botanical garden’s administrative complex.

The Palm Beach Chapter hopes this fledgling native plant garden will inspire your own statewide demonstration garden adventures!

Mounts Botanical Garden is located at 531 North Military Trail in West Palm Beach, Florida. Telephone 561-233-1757. www.mounts.org
To see additional photos of the demonstration garden, visit the Palm Beach Chapter’s Web site at http://palmbeach.fnpschapters.org/
The purpose of the Florida Native Plant Society is to conserve, preserve, and restore the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

Official definition of native plant:
For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available 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.