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Palmetto



A New Species of Native Orchid? • A Conversation With Doug Tallamy • Florida's Botanical Art



by Philip Louis Phillips

The impact of botanical art on Florida native plants, if properly applied, could be an influential component to other efforts at their preservation. Too many uninformed people think of Florida's natives as rather dull and uninteresting in comparison to the widely planted tropicals from other regions.

Florida's Botanical Art

By artfully displaying the various natives that are not visible on the denuded highways and vegetation-stripped developments, botanical art can dramatically show the average Floridian what they are missing. By simply becoming involved in the depiction of flowers, many of these people are being brought face to face with the native flora – even with the basic concept of native flora – and finding themselves fascinated. Some botanical artists are even developing a further purpose. As a technological society we are longing for not only human contact but contact with a wider and deeper reality.

In 2005 a group of botanical artists, on the verge of completing their studies, decided to start the Florida Society of Botanical Artists (FSBA), a not-for-profit organization. The purpose was to provide support and continued interaction, as well as professional development. It was also our intent to include education as part of our mandate. In 2008 the FSBA became an official chapter of the American Society of Botanical Artists, a national organization

Philip Louis Phillips
Saururus cernuus (lizard-tail)
Watercolor



As elsewhere throughout the United States and the world, Florida is enjoying a botanical art renaissance. The interest in this ancient-rooted discipline has grown in step with the renewed interest in a natural world that is dwindling all too fast. Public awareness and education about native plants is a necessary part of the conservation program.

interesting or provocative way, botanical art's foremost purpose is to provide a scientifically accurate representation of a flower, a whole plant, or a floral segment. The means of doing so may range from a simple line drawing or half-tone illustration to a full-color portrait including pollinators as well as magnifications of various plant parts – or anything in-between.

The first known illustrations of Florida plants were those of Mark Catesby. While other Europeans may have depicted landscapes in their explorations, they took no pains to show individual specimens. Catesby, however, included individual plant illustrations, as well as mammals and reptiles in his book *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*. Catesby was one of the first to depict plants and animals with ecological connections. However, he could show only plants with wide distribution (at least into neighboring Georgia, i.e. no Florida endemics), since he himself never actually penetrated Florida's borders. The plant paintings that he created however are exemplary and served as a guide to others.

Later on, John James Audubon also portrayed many plants and tied flora to the appropriate fauna, but never (unlike Catesby) concentrated on the plants themselves. Nevertheless his works show a variety of well-drawn and accurately portrayed Florida natives.

And while other botanical artists such as Martin Johnson Heade were to live and paint in Florida, much of their work pictured landscape scenes or plants seen on travels to the more tropical regions of the Caribbean or South America. Historically, even though involved early on with exploration of its natural history, Florida's indigenous flora has remained a largely untouched subject for artists.

More recently, the second half of the 20th Century saw several publications that used nicely laid out pen and ink line drawings, specifically focused on Florida plants. Of special mention are two of these: *The Native Trees of Florida*, by E. West and L. Arnold (Univ. of Florida Press, 1950) with drawings by Robert K. Turner, and *Drawings of Florida Orchids* by Blanche Ames (reprinted 1959, Cambridge Massachusetts). Both books are somewhat limited by the available print technologies of their time, but certainly not by the talents and care of the artists. Until recently, little notice was taken of the fineness of illustrations, with a few minor exceptions such as the acclaim given to Mrs. Ames by botanists in her lifetime. (Being married to the eminent Dr. Oakes Ames didn't hurt.)

As field guides proliferated in the past 20 years, building with the momentum of the environmental movement and the increase in Florida's population,

with international membership. Both locally and nationally, as artists interested in the flora of the world, it has been our ongoing mission to bring recognition to endangered and threatened plants.

In 2008, the FSBA held its first exhibition. "In Our Own Backyard: Florida Native Plants" brought together the works of more than a dozen artists, with 30+ plants portrayed. This exhibition may be seen on-line at the FSBA Web site, www.fsba.us. While we are a growing organization, still finding its way, I believe we can bring our talents and dedication to the important pursuit of conservation. Through weekly sessions of sketching at parks and conservation areas, we are also familiarizing ourselves with the abundance of Florida's offerings.

But what makes something "botanical" rather than simply "floral" or "fine" art? Simply put – it's the intent plus the methods employed which differ and define. While all art in some way attempts to present its wares in a pleasing,

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Florida's Botanical Art

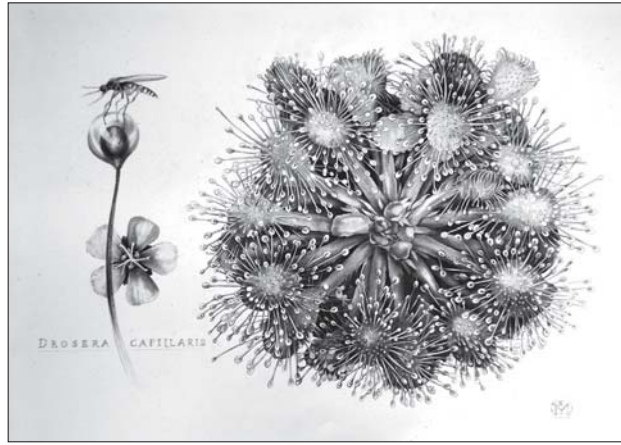
there also came a reliance on photography rather than drawing and painting as the means of illustration – with mixed results.

It's understandable that with the advent of cheaper and easier photography, handwork and specialized printing became more costly, contributing to this trend. But in the process, some of the qualities of the fine drawings were lost. The ability to compare one plant against another in separate photos became difficult as no measuring devices were commonly used. Field photos, especially close-ups, could leave one wondering about two flowers' relative sizes. In effect, some of the information lost could have been included, but some of the care and precision that is possible in drawing could not be replaced.

Some recent guides, such as Gil Nelson's *Shrubs and Woody Vines of Florida*, are using a combination of photography and drawing effectively. This welcome change is making the use of field guides easier, at least in the sense of being able to see defining traits of species. More work needs to be done in this area however. In any effort to distinguish plants in the field, it's always helpful to have visual diagnostic aids.

But pen and ink drawing, which is at the heart of many field guides, is only one method of botanical art. And while it reaches many people with an interest in our native flora, it is to some degree preaching to the choir. After all, anyone picking up a field guide to wildflowers or native trees is already somewhat aware of the "real" Florida.

Traditionally the main techniques of botanical art are drawing, pen and ink, and watercolor. In general oil has been little used in scientific illustration



Marjorie Shropshire
Drosera capillaris (pink sundew)
Graphite

– primarily due to the trouble involved in reproduction. Watercolors were more easily copied by engravers and then hand-colored after printing. Pen and ink (or drawing to a lesser degree) could be also copied for engraving or block printing purposes. Drawing was generally not considered final artwork, but was used for learning, sketching in the field or setting up for further pen and ink work. Drawing as an art form in and of itself is a modern idea.

While these are by and large the methods still used, there are new materials as well. One of the most common and rising quickly in use is colored pencil. No longer a children's coloring tool, the newer brands are light fast and have similar pigments to fine art paints. Color pencils also reproduce well; in fact too well if you're overly "scribbly" while blocking in a color. All those separate stroke lines can show up in print! Modern materials such as acrylic are also being explored, but to a lesser extent.

In general more work needs to be done in color, and with more accuracy than has been done in the last 30 or 40 years. The great floral portraits that helped define the very best of botanical art in the past – created by artists such as Pierre-Joseph Redouté, Francis Bauer, and William Hooker – are being emulated today. The techniques and materials are being rediscovered and added to, and in some cases surpassed. But the vast majority of Florida native plants remain untouched as subjects for art. Time,

effort, and of course, money need to be put into action.

For work to be of the highest level, botanical accuracy needs to be maintained – not simply glossed over, but executed with enough detail that the plant depicted can be identified as to species, in some cases to subspecies where appropriate.

In field guides especially, but in paintings as well, diagnostic characters need to be clear and "readable". Because botanical art is meant to be scientific, it is meant to inform, as well as to delight the eye.

Botanists, nature historians, and ecologists working with botanical artists for their illustrations should ask for this accuracy, but should also be able to help achieve it. After all, most botanical artists are not botanists, and they may not have a scientific background other than what they have learned in botanical art classes. Like the interweaving that we associate with ecological systems, one individual or one species can't exist without the others around working in harmony.

Bringing the beauties and intrigues of the natural world, and of Florida's native greenery to the public is an important task. Any one group or method can't do it alone. The FSBA is one more voice that can reach people.

There are several centers of botanical art activity in Florida, with varying degrees of involvement with native plants. The education of other artists and the general public is part of each center's agenda. As more students emerge with the knowledge and abilities to produce scientifically accurate artwork, the FSBA hopes to bring together these various artists from around the state and encourage the study and depiction of our native flora.



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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.

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Editorial Content

We welcome articles on native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for guidelines, deadlines and other information.

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