

The

Understory

Newsletter of the Pinellas Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society, Inc.

April - May 2009

Pinellas Chapter

FLORIDA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

**Spring Native Plant Sale
Saturday April 4th, 2009**

**at Wilcox Nursery and Florist
12501 Indian Rocks Road, Largo**

Certificate of Nursery Registration: 47229339

- OPEN TO THE PUBLIC -

10% discount to FNPS members -- join on-site for immediate discount!

Plant Fair open 9am-4pm

Knowledgeable FNPS members on hand all day to assist customers with their questions and plant selections. Tent and native plant displays.

10:30 -- Dr. Craig Huegel

Topic "Appreciating Florida's
Beautiful Spring Flowering Trees"

11:30 -- Dr. Craig Huegel

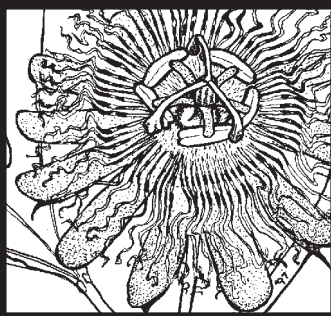
Topic "Bringing Wildlife to your
Landscape"

1:15 -- Jason Beck and Brian Pelc

Topic "Incorporating Native Plants
into your Landscape"



For more information call the
Wilcox Nursery and Florist (727) 595-2073



Chapter Calendar

April Meeting, Wed., April 1, 7:00 pm:

Speaker: Claudia Lewis, environmental educator & consultant, executive director of the Plan C Initiative.

Topic: **Ecological Landscaping: An Urban Strategy for Sustainability.** Claudia, a Pinellas Chapter member, is an environmental education and interpretation consultant whose clients include universities, and governmental and non-profit organizations. Her consulting work encompasses the development and evaluation of environmental education programs, feasibility studies of conservation programs, center planning and development, long-range planning, and exhibits and interpretive materials design. The mission of the Plan C Initiative is to empower communities to develop ecological landscapes in urban areas. Claudia's own Palm Harbor landscape was featured in our 2008 native landscape tour.

New Meeting Place! Pinellas County Extension, 12520 Ulmerton Road, Largo.

No Field trip in April

April 4: Spring Plant Sale, See page 1.

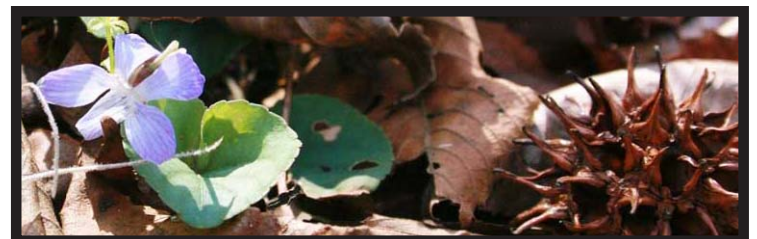
May 21: Florida Native Plant Society State Conference, West Palm Beach. Hosted by the Palm Beach & Cocoplum Chapters.

Conference Theme: "Wake Up and Plant the Natives"
Keynote Speakers: Dr. Douglas Tallamy, author of "Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens" and Dr. Daniel Austin, author of "Florida Ethnobotany"

Plenary Speaker: Dr. Harold Wanless, an expert in the dynamics and evolution of tropical shallow marine and coastal environments of south Florida and the Bahamas.

May Meeting, Wed. May 6, 7:00 pm:

Topic to be announced



All photos of plants & field trips by Craig Huegel

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President's Message:

In the cycle of the seasons, spring has again arrived. It's time to reflect on whether or not we are living with native plants in our yards to a degree that reflects a serious commitment. As members of a native plant society, we are the potential leaders in our neighborhoods in aligning private yards with the natural systems around us. Do our yards speak as loudly as our words in communicating the mission of preserving, conserving, and restoring the native plants of Florida? While the gardening weather is still relatively comfortable, let's show others by example the possibilities for enjoyment when using locally appropriate native plants with their natural beauty and high capacity for nurturing wildlife.

Spring is a great time to get out and into natural areas to see what joys and surprises the season has to offer. At Boyd Hill Nature Park in south St. Petersburg this past weekend, in bloom were pawpaws, lupines, greeneyes, fleabane, toadflax, and other species showing their spring "plumage." There was also a striking community of marlberry, one of my favorite species. Very rewarding and very close to home.

Also at this time of year our chapter is quite publicly active with many opportunities for volunteering and getting the message out. Please support our new volunteer coordinator Laurie Bowen if she calls on you or contact her at 727-905-1015 or ljb Bowen@tampabay.rr.com to offer assistance.

-- *Bill Bilodeau*

Plant Profile: Native Azaleas

by Craig Huegel

Right now, outside my window, the native azaleas are bursting forth once more in a spring ritual that culminates months of winter anticipation. Each year, from leaf fall to eventual bud swelling, I watch the azaleas to gauge when winter is officially past and spring arrived. Pay no attention to the calendar on the wall. Those dates are set by folks without a heart that beats green blood. A calendar is no true measure of spring the way my azaleas mark time. This past weekend, the seasons moved from winter because my azaleas heralded it.

Most of us have a landscape of oriental azaleas - or neighbors that do. These gaudy cousins have become a southern tradition in the same way that many other plants of Chinese and/or far-eastern origin have. Camellias, gardenias, citrus, and confederate jasmine are not from here. We have come to accept them without so much as a shrug, but the seasons they mark are not our own. In Florida, that role is served by native species and there are none better to usher in spring than our own azaleas.

By definition, azaleas are deciduous and rhododendrons are not. That said, Florida is home to four species of native azaleas and one rhododendron. We tend to lump them all as azaleas, however. Taxonomists lump them all under the genus *Rhododendron*. Perhaps, azalea is just easier to say. It certainly is easier to spell...

Taxonomically, azaleas are ericaceous plants and share most of the growing characteristics of the family. Knowing this first will save a lot of gardening grief. Ericaceous plants include all of the blueberries and huckleberries, lyonias, tarflower, and the mountain laurels. All are plants that require highly acidic soils and are plants notoriously slow to establish. Plant one of these near your foundation and they will wither. If you have fill that is full of shell fragments, do not waste your time and money. But, if your soils are reasonably native and mulched by pine straw or oak leaves, you stand a chance.

Ericaceous plants have exceedingly fine root systems. While these roots are exceptionally good at pulling in the moisture the plant requires, they are excessively slow at extending themselves into the soil once planted from a potted condition. The larger your plant and the longer it's been potted, the longer you will need to water it to get it established. Most of us kill ericaceous plants by watering too little – even those species that are adapted to well-drained soils, such as rusty lyonia (*Lyonia ferruginea*) and tarflower (*Bejaria racemosa*).

With one exception, our native azaleas are very rare in nature and are resident to deciduous forested habitats. Under such conditions, they find soils that are relatively cool, moist and rich. These are not species resident to barren sands, for example. Azaleas are most often found on slope forests, near creek systems, but well above the floodplain. It is a “happy medium” between the most well-drained top-of-slope region and the permanently wet one.



Alexa Wilcox-Huegel with a flame azalea in bloom.

(Plant Profile: Native Azaleas, cont.)

Deciduous forests are very different from the live oak forests we are most familiar with here in Pinellas. Do not plant native azaleas under the canopy of a live oak forest and expect them to thrive. The difference is light. Native azaleas grow in the understory of forests that lose their leaves during the winter and regain them in mid-spring. The winter and early-spring sunlight is important to the ecology of these species. It is needed for proper leaf and flower production and it is vital for pollination. Native azaleas are very fragrant – which means they are pollinated by butterflies and other sun-loving insects. And, by hummingbirds.

But, don't put your native azaleas in full sun. The winter and early-spring sun is a very different beast from the one of summer and early fall. The deciduous forest closes in and protects plants such as our native azaleas before the summer sun arrives to scorch them. If you don't have a deciduous forest to work with, you might get away with planting them where they will get only early morning sun. Don't expose them to any more if you want them to thrive.

Native azaleas are not showy foliage plants. They tend to grow a bit lanky and the leaves are mostly concentrated at the ends of the thin branches. They also tend to grow taller than their Asian cousins. Without pruning, they will reach 8-9 feet tall – eventually. If you have to prune them (I don't recommend it), do so right after flowering so as not to eliminate next year's flower buds.

Enough of the cautionary and on to the positives... Despite their rarity and their limited natural geographic range, native azaleas can be successfully grown in the landscape – even here in Pinellas County. As always, the secret is finding or creating the microclimate conditions they need to prosper. Without them, however, you should not waste your time – and their lives.

Our most common native azalea is our least showy. Of course.... **Swamp azalea** (*R. viscosum*) is the only species native to the central peninsula and occurs as far south as Highlands County. This is a

plant of wet to moist hammock and pine-dominated forests, but it will adapt to somewhat drier soils once established. Swamp azalea is not a spring-blooming species either. Its flowers open several months after the leaves develop. Because of this and because they are a simple white color, swamp azalea does not put the same kind of floral show together that the others do. It is fragrant, however, and pretty in its own understated way.

The other four species have colorful blooms that open by early to mid-March. Three of them, being deciduous, bloom in exciting floral clusters before the leaves develop. The other, being evergreen (and more technically a rhododendron) has buds at all the branch tips – well above the foliage and right there for the world to see. I will describe each briefly.

Flame azalea (*R. austrinum*)

typically produces clouds of bright orange flowers, but yellow and pinkish flowered forms are also available in the trade. Alexa and I saw whole hillsides ablaze with this species in parts of Torreya State Park, but the plant's commonness there belies its true rarity in nature. In Florida, it is restricted to 12 counties, mostly in the western panhandle and it is a state-listed Endangered species. Because of its great beauty and ease of propagation, however, it is fairly widely available in the trade.

Flame azalea



(Plant Profile: Native Azaleas, cont.)

Pink, Pinxster or Piedmont azalea (*R. canescens*) typically produces numerous clusters of pure pink blossoms, but some forms are very pale (almost white) while others are salmon or deep red. Like the flame azalea, this species is commonly propagated and widely available. The flowers also are tubular, but it differs by its greater range and distribution. Pink azalea is found throughout the panhandle and occurs well into the northern part of the peninsula. Its growing requirements are similar to the other, rarer species.



Pink azalea

Alabama azalea (*R. alabamense*) is the least available of our native species from Florida native plant sources, and seemingly the poorest known to our gardening public. It is a state-listed Endangered species and limited to only one or two counties in the state. But, it is easily propagated and widely available from nurseries specializing in native azaleas. Alabama azalea has spreading (not tubular) flowers that are white with a conspicuous lemon-yellow blotch in the center. They also are fragrant.

Alabama azalea



(Plant Profile: Native Azaleas, cont.)

Chapman's rhododendron (*R. minus* var. *chapmanii*) is regarded as a distinct endemic variety of a more widespread species. When not in flower, Chapman's rhododendron looks much like a lyonia, with wide leathery leaves that slightly curl under at the margins. But, it has squat fat flower buds at the end of each stem and these burst forth in the spring with spreading pink petals with darker spots on the upper petal. It is a state and federally listed Endangered species, but is grown by a number of commercial nurseries and relatively easy to find.

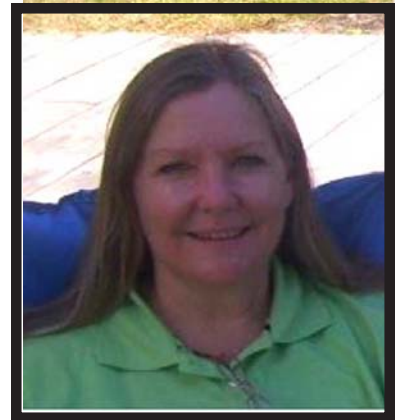


Chapman's rhododendron

Native azaleas are not for the novice gardener in this part of the state, but they warrant much more attention than they get here by those of us a bit more seasoned. If you don't have the conditions they need, forget them – or start now to create them for the future. I treasure my native species and I suspect you will too.

Meet our new Volunteer Coordinator

Hi, my name is Laurie Bowen and I am the new volunteer coordinator for our FNPS chapter. It is my goal this year to help members have some fun and get to know each other better through our volunteer activities. Many people come to our meetings not only to learn more about native plants but also to be part of a community of like-minded individuals. Unfortunately, some people don't experience this because they don't get the chance to further their knowledge through application or get to know other members. Our Boyd Hill Tree Giveaway in March gave me the opportunity to meet and get to know other members while adding to my knowledge base about six native trees.



You can volunteer on an event-by-event basis or become part of our volunteer team of regulars who love volunteering at our annual events such as the plant sale. Upcoming opportunities include our bi-annual Native Plant Sale at Wilcox Nursery, Saturday April 4th. I still need 20 volunteers at various times throughout the day from 8 am – 5 pm. April 18th is the Earth Day Celebration at the Extension Office from 8:30 am – 1 pm and I need 6 volunteers. We also need 200 volunteer hours through the Extension Office to continue using the wonderful room where we are currently meeting. There are two opportunities for this also on April 18th. We will be involved March 2nd & 3rd at the Pinellas Living Green Expo. To contact me you can call 709-1015 or email me at ljbowen@tampabay.rr.com. I look forward to volunteering with you.

What Would Happen If You Stopped Weeding, Watering, And Fertilizing?

By Jane Williams

What awful thing would happen if you just stopped caring for your lawn? Would lightning strike? Would the lawn police come after you? (If you live in a deed restricted neighborhood, then yes, probably so....) I've found that you can give up working FOR your lawn (watering, weeding, fertilizing, etc.) and survive just fine, as long as you mow it occasionally to keep the neighbors happy and to keep from being cited by the county or the city for neglect of your property. The wildflowers that move in are going to have to be low-growing since they will need to grow, flower, and go to seed before the first mowing of the year. Or, they will have to stay low to the ground so they can bloom without getting their heads chopped off.

My neighborhood is an old one, first incorporated in 1924, and we have two types of lawn growers. First, are the beautiful sweep-of-green types with immaculate lawns that are sodded, watered, fertilized, and treated with various herbicides. Yep, their lawns are lovely and you can find one just like it in any suburb in America.

Then there are the don't-care-about-the-lawn bunch. They never water, never fertilize, and probably don't even look. Their lawns can be a delight, especially in the spring, when various wildflowers (or call them weeds) bloom. Bahiagrass is remarkably hardy and if you quit watering and fertilizing, it will linger. But gradually, the grass will thin out a little and that is the time for the flowering natives and non-invasive non-natives to start moving in. It usually takes two or three years for neglect to become obvious. The first thing to go is the dollar weed because it likes a moisturized soil. Good riddance to dollarweed. But some other low-growers or early bloomers may move in to take up the vacant space.

Florida Betony (*Stachys floridana*) – this sweet Florida native has been growing in my yard, in the shady spots, for years and I never noticed it until it bloomed this year. It is a small member of the mint family with lance-shaped leaves and trumpet-shaped flowers that grow in a spiral at the tip of the stem....like a toothbrush. They are a light-lilac in my yard, but the literature says they can be white or pink. They are hard to remove since they grow

attached to underground tubers that are hard to pull out. *Editor's note: Be sure you like this little flower before you let it get too well established as it is, indeed "hard to remove." The white tubers, however, are edible and taste somewhat like a radish.*

Blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium atlanticum*) – you need a swale or a moist low spot in your yard for this little gem to bloom. It looks like grass, but it blooms profusely for about a month in the spring, like a small iris with 6-petaled flowers and yellow centers. It is perennial, so you can mow it once it blooms (just not too close to the ground) and it will come back next year to bloom again.

Blue Toadflax (*Linaria canadensis*) – temporary color in early spring before the grass has begun to grow. Looks like a small lavender to violet single snapdragon on a long stem. Mowing will help distribute the plant once the seed head has formed. Once the seed heads are gone, this plant just fades away into the background not to be noticed again until early spring next year.

Linaria canadensis

Blue toadflax



Cudweed (*Gnaphalium* spp.) – this has got to be the ugliest wildflower around. However, it is the larval food plant for the American Lady butterfly. It is an annual, dies back after it flowers, and re-seeds itself easily. The leaves are a fuzzy silvery-green and the flowers (a stretch to call them flowers) are a non-descript brownish white. It stands out in the lawn since it is so ugly and flaunts its unattractiveness by being tenacious. But, grow some if you would like to encourage American ladies.

Editor's note: *You may want to confine this plant to defined areas of your yard to be sure it doesn't take up more space than necessary for its possible use by the American lady butterfly.*

Wild Petunia (*Ruellia caroliniana*) - this charming native plant will show up in your lawn if there are some plants next door to disperse the seeds. *Ruellia* is dormant all winter, but re-sprouts in the spring. By late spring to early summer, it produces its distinctive purple, petunia-shaped blooms. Blooming begins while it is still low to the ground. As it grows taller, its blooms will be cut off by the mower and it will disappear into the general greenness around. But, if you do not mow too frequently, it will bloom once more from the previously mowed portion.

Spanish Needles (*Bidens alba*) – shows up everywhere that neglect or disturbance is present. This plant is best known for its white daisy-like blooms that butterflies and other pollinating insects love. It is also known for the abundant seed it produces which spreads rapidly by hitchhiking on fabric and hair; attached by its little sharp hooked prongs. A large area can be a lovely sight, especially if kept mowed to a common height of about 8 inches. However, once in your lawn it is always in your lawn and it can become very invasive.

Editor's note: *Although Spanish needles attracts butterflies as a nectar source and lends some color to the landscape, I do not recommend it in the home landscape because of its invasive character and the nuisance it causes by having its seeds caught in clothing and pet hair. If you wish to allow this plant a spot in your landscape, keep it contained to areas of low foot traffic.*

Frog Fruit or Matchhead (*Phyla nodiflora*) – it's probably out there in your lawn now with a low spreading growth pattern and little white flowers with black centers (like a white match head) on a stem. Some people (including me) plant this as a ground cover to replace their lawn. It cannot compete with a well-watered lawn, but stop the water and fertilizer and watch it start to move in. Frog fruit blooms during the warm months and then slows down in winter to start growing again in April. Frog fruit is a good nectar plant and is also the larval plant for the white peacock butterfly. Every lawn should have some.

Editor's note: *Although white peacock butterflies reportedly use this plant for their larvae, they greatly prefer *Bacopa*.*

Poor man's pepper (*Lepidium virginicum*) – not much to recommend this diminutive annual native weed with small whitish-yellow seed-like cases in a raceme along the length of the stem. But, the seeds taste like pepper and can be used to season a salad. This plant also is the larval food plant of the checkered white butterfly. As it is an annual, it will disappear after going to seed and reappear again next spring.



Lepidium virginicum
Peppergrass



***Gnaphalium* spp.**
Cudweed

Tread-Softly/Stinging Nettle (*Cnidocolus stimulosus*) – is a perennial that gets its name from the stinging hairs that cover its leaves and stems. If left unmowed, it grows to about 12 inches and produces white flowers that are rather attractive. The foliage is deeply lobed and sometimes speckled with white. Good to keep the dog out of the flower-patch.

Editor's note: *Although this plant is attractive, it is not recommended if you entertain or walk through your landscape – especially if children or pets are present - as the sting from this plant is painful.*

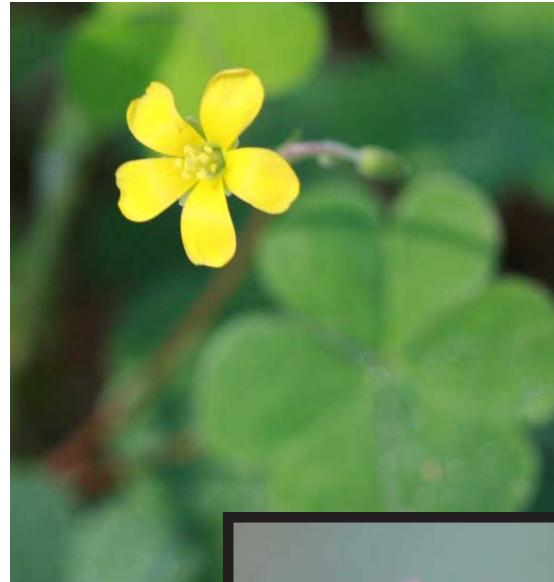
Tassel flower (*Emilia fosbergii*) – a small annual with red disk florets like a miniature shaving brush carried on upright stems from a cluster of low leaves. In a group, this flower looks like a bunch of little red buttons. It re-seeds readily.

Yellow wood sorrel (*Oxalis stricta*) – persistent crawling plant with clover shaped leaves and a yellow flower with 5 petals and a darker yellow center. Unlike the non-native violet wood sorrel (*Oxalis corymbosa*), this weedy plant is a native and is worth keeping in the garden for its yellow blooms in the warm months.

Daisy fleabane (*Erigeron* spp.) – the way to distinguish southern fleabane (*E. quercifolius*) from daisy fleabane (*E. strigosus*) is to count the petals. Daisy fleabane has 50-100 and southern fleabane has over 100. Who wants to do that? If fleabane shows up in your leftover lawn, be happy since this is a delightful little white-rayed flower with a button like yellow center. It blooms in the spring on 1-2 foot stems and then quietly goes away until next year.

Blanketflower (*Gaillardia pulchella*). It is the lucky lawn-ignorner who gets this plant to enter their neglected lawn. Usually, this plant grows too high before flowering and thus gets mowed down before the seed heads form. But, sometimes one waits just long enough before the first mowing of the year...right before the lawn police are about to pounce...and this flower will bloom and go to seed to bloom again next year. One of my neighbors has some and I look forward to it every year. The owner doesn't mow until he has to.

This approach of “landscaping by neglect” may not be for everyone, but it has worked well for some of my neighbors. They may never see what has happened to their grass, but I do and I like it.



Oxalis stricta
Yellow wood sorrel



Emilia fosbergii
Tassel flower

Welcome New Members!

**Janie Bridges, Vinod D'Souza,
Anne Lippincott, Enid Mirkin, John
& Ellen Vondruska**

Field Trip: Devil's Millhopper and San Felasco Hammock

Craig Huegel

Despite the several-hour drive time and the cool morning temperature, nearly a dozen folks turned up at the gate to Devil's Millhopper Geological State Park in Gainesville to begin the February Chapter field trip. Devil's Millhopper is one of Florida's real treasures and includes a 120-foot-deep sink hole that is nationally recognized as a National Natural Landmark. A wooden staircase takes visitors down to the bottom of the sinkhole from the sandy upland hammock above. Small streams trickle down slope and then disappear into the limestone foundation beneath and unique collections of plants that line the walls. Because we ventured to this unique site in late winter (February 7, to be exact), many of the plants were only beginning to leaf out and/or flower. Violets, jack-in-the-pulpits, and ferns of many species greeted us as we descended the staircase, but most were only recently awakened from their winter dormancy. In the canopy, only the redbuds (*Cercis canadensis*) were beginning to flower. Nevertheless, it was a beautiful morning and we found several treasures along the walk.

From here, we took the rim trail and ventured through the upland hammock atop the sinkhole. The forest here is diverse and we observed a great many species of canopy and sub-canopy trees including; spruce pine (*Pinus glabra*), American holly (*Ilex opaca*), Florida sugar maple (*Acer saccharum* var. *floridanum*), pignut hickory (*Carya glabra*), blue beech (*Carpinus caroliniana*), hop hornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*), and Hearts-a-bustin' (*Euonymus americanus*). The walk took us until lunch time to complete, so we gathered around the picnic tables, took a break and ate. The picnic area also afforded us a few real botany finds that we had not noticed previously, including sparkleberry (*Vaccinium arboreum*) and perhaps a state-record-sized gum bumelia (*Sideroxylon lanuginosum*).



From Devil's Millhopper, it is only a 5-minute drive to the entrance to San Felasco Hammock Preserve State Park. While the Park boasts having 18 unique habitat types within its borders, we looked at only a few of them as we took a 1.5-mile long loop trail from the main parking area. But, that was plenty. The parking area rests atop a well-drained sandhill and the trail winds its way through this habitat, then down slope to a small creek system before circling back uphill. Because it was early in the season, many of the spring-blooming trees and shrubs were just beginning to leaf out. We were too early for the fringe trees (*Chionanthus virginicus*), southern dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) and rusty viburnum (*Viburnum rufidulum*), but we did manage to see the horse sugar (*Symplocos tinctoria*) in full flower. Not quite as showy, but interesting none the same. While the sandhill is interesting with its turkey oaks (*Quercus laevis*), sparkleberry, and chinkapin (*Castanea pumila*), it was the rich mesic and hydric

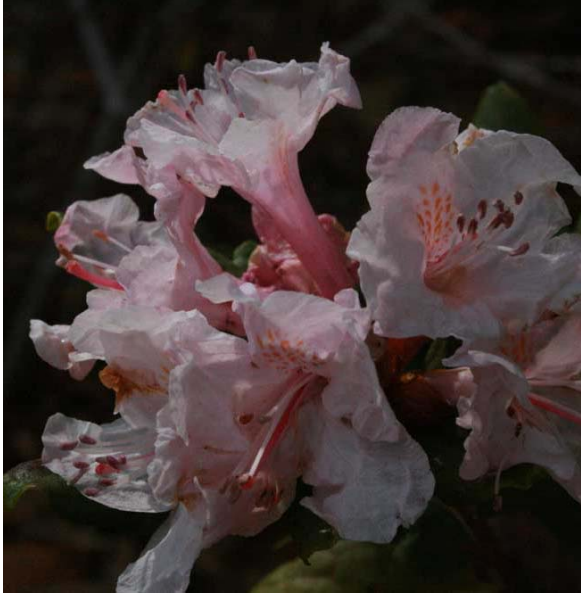
hammock forests that contained the most intrigue. Under a canopy that included pignut hickory, swamp chestnut oak (*Quercus michauxii*), southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), sugarberry (*Celtis laevigata*), and spruce pine, we found many interesting sub-canopy species as well – especially parsley, green, and mayhaw (*Crataegus marshallii*, *C. viridis*, and *C. aestivalis*, respectively), devil's walking stick (*Aralia*

spinosa), dwarf palmetto (*Sabal minor*), and needle palm (*Rhaphidophyllum hystrix*). In the understory, we found lots of ebony spleenwort fern (*Asplenium platyneuron*) and blooming Walter's violet (*Viola walteri*).

We finished up about 2 PM and headed to our cars – a bit tired, but excited from the wonderful day. Both of these beautiful parks should be visited at different times throughout the year to catch the great diversity they contain. If you are in the area, stop by for a visit. They are worth your time.

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dchayet@verizon.net
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Chapman's rhododendron, p. 6

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Danie Cutler, Cathy Quindiagan, Bruce Turley

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Volunteer Coordinator: Laurie Bowen 709-1015
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(727) 544-7341

Pinellas Chapter web address:
<http://pinellas.fnpschapters.org>

FNPS Bulletin Board
<http://fnps.org/phpBB>



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