

The Understory

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

February - March 2009

President's Message: Interesting Times

There's an old Chinese saying: "May you live in interesting times." I think that this time in our history would certainly qualify. Looming with long shadows, economic crisis, energy shortages, and potential environmental disaster in the form of climate change cast a pall of worry in many quarters. At the same time these very same forces provide a very real opportunity for the significant evolution of environmental awareness and action ... necessity finally forcing the issue. It is becoming clear that the economic and the environmental solutions are closely allied if we have new vision for the future. It is quite encouraging to see the attention being paid to new environmental initiatives and thrilling to be engaged in them.

Our native plant chapter has an important part to play in the overall remediation of the planet (thus our county) and our ways of living on it. We must join in the overall effort and advocate our vision. We have knowledge and experience in environmentally sound gardening, landscaping, restoration, and conservation, all important aspects of a new and saner culture. We must be available and engaged. As one way of participating in the larger changes that are taking place, I am calling on all members to consider being active members in the chapter rather than passive, whatever your level of native plant knowledge may be. By that I mean taking on some responsibility for keeping our activities moving forward. We can make our chapter stronger and more effective with greater member participation. Here are positions in the chapter that need volunteers who are willing to give some time:

Conservation Advocate:

Informs the chapter of important public issues relating to our mission. Writes position letters to public officials for the chapter.

President's Message

by Bill Bilodeau	p. 1
Meetings/Field Trips	p. 2
Plant Profile: Plums	
by Craig Huegel	p. 3
Field Trip:	
by Alexa Wilcox Huegel . . .	p. 5
Pinellas Chapter contacts	p. 6

Field Trip Coordinator:

Handles the details of carpooling, directions, waiver form, and the "what to bring" of field trips. Attends most field trips.

Literature Manager:

Arranges the reproduction and restocking of chapter literature handed out at various environmental events.

Silent Auction Manager

Sets up plants at members' meetings. Solicits plant donations.

Training will be provided. If you are interested call me at 727-488-3163 or email billbilodeau@verizon.net. If you see other possible areas that need support, please let me know.

The best antidote to worry and depression over current issues is positive and productive action. Let us do all that we can without holding back and experience the satisfaction that comes from giving to our evolving community.

-- **Bill Bilodeau**

Meetings and Field Trips

February Meeting:

Wed., Feb. 4, 6:30 - 10:00 pm, Pinellas County Cooperative Extension, 12520 Walsingham Rd., Largo. Join us as long-time Chapter member, **Craig Huegel**, presents a program on **Spring-blooming Trees and Shrubs**. February is springtime in Florida and some of our most beautiful flowering trees and shrubs are in full bloom. Craig will show us his favorites – from those that might be well familiar to you to a good many that might not be. During the past several decades, Craig has grown most of these and he will share his experiences. If you believe that using natives means giving up color – or if your neighbor doesn't believe you – come out on the 4th to see what might well change a few minds.

February Field Trip:

Saturday, Feb. 7. The program will be followed by a field trip to one of Florida's most spectacular natural areas, **Devil's Millhopper State Park and San Felasco Hammock Preserve**, where we will see many of the plants covered in Craig's talk, in bloom -- fringe tree, hawthorns, and rusty viburnum, as well as a great many others. Devil's Millhopper is a natural sinkhole with an amazing flora that has developed downslope to the bottom. We will take the easy walk down the wooden stairs to the bottom and then walk the rim trail. After lunch, we will drive the 2-3 miles to San Felasco Hammock. San Felasco is one of Florida's most famous hammock forests and harbors an extremely high diversity of plants. Bring your cameras, binoculars (for spring migrants), water, insect repellent, and a bag lunch. We will plan to meet at the main parking lot at Devil's Millhopper at 10:00 am. The drive is approximately 2½ hours from Pinellas County. If you wish to car pool, we will leave around 7am from the parking lot of Perkins restaurant; intersection of US 19 and SR 60 (Gulf to Bay). Let Alexa Wilcox know if you have questions or if you just plan to attend: (727) 251-7376.

March Meeting:

Wed., March 4, 6:30 - 10:00 pm, Pinellas County Cooperative Extension. We will have an outstanding program on the **Lake Wales Ridge and the Florida Scrub Community**. The Lake Wales Ridge is one of the most unique regions in the world and harbors a huge number of endemic plants and wildlife – species found nowhere else on earth. For this program, we have invited gifted photographer and naturalist, **Brett Miley**, who promises to share her wonderful collection of photos and personal experiences amassed over years of exploring and studying this truly outstanding part of Florida. This program is intended as a photographic journey with a personal touch. Come out, and see and hear what makes the Lake Wales Ridge such a special place.

March Field Trip:

Saturday, March 21. We will travel to the Lake Wales Ridge in Polk County. In March, we should still be able to see a variety of spring-blooming plants, including the rare pink scrub lupine, pygmy fringe tree, and several scrub mints. Final details are still being worked out, but we intend to visit several scrubs during the day to see the greatest number of rare plants possible, and should start heading home about 2 pm. Bring a lunch, sun screen, and water. Directions and details will be provided at the March meeting and to those of you that request them. If interested in this field trip, please contact Alexa Wilcox – Alexa776@tampabay.rr.com or call (727) 251-7376.



Scrub, Lake Wales Ridge, photo by Craig Huegel (article, p. 6)

Plant Profile: Plums

by Craig Huegel

Plums belong to the rose family. That puts them in good company with a wide variety spring-blooming trees and shrubs. The family includes many of my other favorite native plants; hawthorns; in particular, but also the cherries, chokeberries, serviceberry, and flowering crabapple. And, in addition to the plums, it also includes some of our most important commercially grown fruits; apples, pears, strawberries, cherries, and rosehips. This is a very significant family.

In Florida, we have 4 native plums and three of them can be successfully grown in this region of Florida. The wide-ranging American plum (*Prunus americana*), is extremely common north of us and is a staple of many native plant landscapes, but its use in Florida is restricted to the Panhandle and the northern peninsula. I have never tried it this far south, but the effort hardly seems warranted when we have species well adapted to Pinellas County with equally beautiful attributes.

Scrub plum (*Prunus geniculata*). Of the three species native to the central peninsula, one is extremely rare and restricted to the central scrub and turkey oak sandhill ridges between Lake and Orange Counties to the north and Highlands County to the south. Scrub plum (*Prunus geniculata*) is an unusual species. Its scientific name is derived from the zigzag (geniculate) pattern of its branches. Everything about this plant is in miniature. The tiny white



Prunus geniculata
Scrub plum



flowers emerge in early spring, well before its ¼-inch leaves emerge. It is often a multi-branched shrub with a “weeping” aspect and rarely exceeds 4-5 feet in height. By late spring to very early summer, its ¼-inch purple plums have ripened. They are rapidly consumed by birds and other wildlife and I don’t believe I have ever found a ripe one in “the wild.” As interesting as scrub plum is, it is rarely available and requires deep well-drained sands to survive.

It’s the other two species that really are the focus of this article; Chickasaw plum and flatwoods plum. These species share a great many characteristics and are often confused, but their use in the landscape is very different and it warrants a closer look if we are to use them more effectively.

Chickasaw plum (*Prunus angustifolia*) is a small tree (sometimes a multi-trunked shrubby tree) native in Florida south to the central peninsula. It is a widely distributed plant, however, and is found from Texas to Nebraska in the west and in nearly every state east to Virginia and Maryland. Across its range, it is a plant of open disturbed areas, fencerows, and sandy uplands.

Chickasaw plum is a fast-growing, but short-lived deciduous tree. At maturity, it may reach 25 feet in height and more than 15 feet across. Mature specimens have a distinctly rounded crown on a short thick trunk, and the many branches are thorny from the numerous spur shoots that form near the leaf axils.

In spring, before the one to two-inch-long leaves appear, Chickasaw Plum is covered with small, white, fragrant flowers which make the trees quite decorative in the presence of other trees which are often still dormant. The 0.5-inch-diameter fruits which follow are red, ripening to yellowish, and are extremely popular with wildlife. They also make a delicious jelly or can be eaten fresh off the tree.

Chickasaw plum is best used in open sunny locations with well-drained soils. Give it plenty of room because of its growth form and place it in an area where it can be adequately managed. Chickasaw plum is prone to suckering and it will spread outward if the area around it is not mowed – or at least

(Plant Profile: Plums, cont.)

accessible to pruning shears. The suckering is especially pronounced if the roots are cut. For that reason, plant around it before the roots spread out from the root ball. If you add plants near it after it is established, be prepared to deal with the suckers.



Flatwoods Plum (*Prunus umbellata*) is a very different plant and native only to the Southeastern Coastal Plain. An understory sub-canopy tree of riverine and hammock forests (not flatwoods as the name implies), flatwoods plum is a round-topped, deciduous tree, reaching 20 feet in height with a 15-foot spread. Unlike Chickasaw plum, the flatwoods plum normally has a distinct single trunk and does not look “shrubby.” It is rather crooked looking, however. In late February, before the two-inch-long, finely serrate leaves appear, these small trees take on an almost cloud-like appearance when they are clothed in the profuse, small, white flower clusters. From my personal experience, flatwoods plum seems to initiate blooming just a bit earlier than the Chickasaw.

These half-inch blooms are followed by 0.5-inch-diameter, edible, purple fruits which vary in flavor from very tart to sweet. My experience has been that the fruits are slightly more rounded than the Chickasaw and the color differs somewhat. Like the Chickasaw, however, the plums are very attractive to many types of wildlife and are great for jellies.

Flatwoods plum is not readily prone to suckering. It is best used as a specimen tree in moderately good soil or in a woodland planting where it will receive sun for at least half the day. It is slightly less drought and salt tolerant than the Chickasaw, but it is much more adaptable to areas that stay moist during the summer months. Flatwoods plum is not as readily available from most native nurseries, but it should be much more widely used.



Prunus angustifolia
Chickasaw plum with fruit



Prunus umbellata
Flatwoods plum and flowers



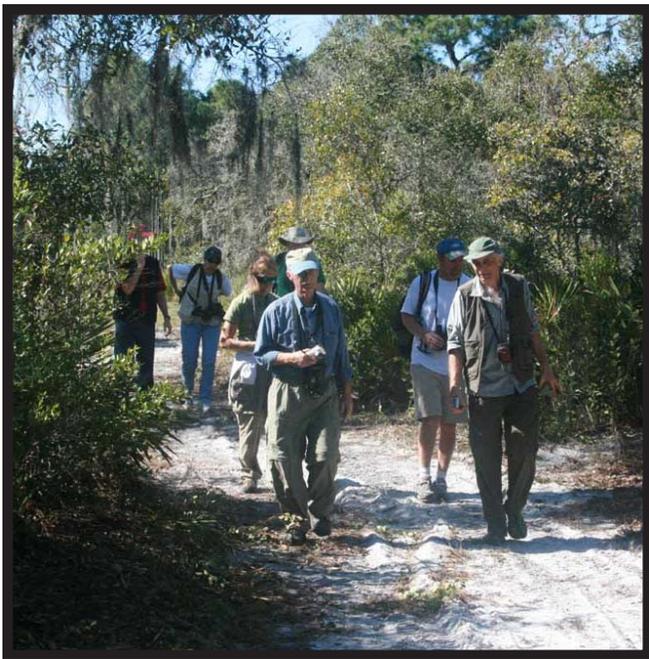
Field Trip, Sat. Jan. 10 -- Old Miakka Scrub Preserve . . . Wish you were there.

by Alexa Wicox-Huegel

Once again we were blessed with a beautiful day for our trip. It almost felt like spring, even though we were in the middle of winter. Either because of the weather or because of the site, we had a good turnout; including a member of the Suncoast Chapter. And our day got off to a great start when we were greeted by numerous sandhill cranes along Fruitville Road, just before we crossed over to the dusty entrance road into the Preserve.

Though this Sarasota County Park is small, it has a great diversity of habitats represented. This is one of the things that makes this place so memorable and unique. Our two mile hike took us through a turkey oak sandhill, a pine flatwoods, a small wetland forest fed by a seasonal stream, and of course, the unique “scrub” from which the park gets its name.

We walked the main loop trail within the park, approximately two miles in length, with a few short detours



to see interesting areas. Our leader, Craig Huegel, pointed out the differences between longleaf and slash pines, and the differences between the two became much more apparent. The sand pines were the easiest to pick out, not only because of the white sand they are usually found in, but because of their short distinctive needles and small numerous cones. Craig also showed us certain types of

plants that tend to be ‘sentinel’ plants of the scrub, and help to distinguish this habitat from others, such as Chapman, myrtle and sand live oak, as well as rusty lyonia (though they are also found in other xeric habitats).

The loop trail took us through some very interesting scrub before dipping slightly in elevation and entering the flatwoods. From here we eventually headed downward another couple of feet before encountering a small ephemeral stream and its riverine hammock forest. Here, we found all kinds of interesting plants that were not seen elsewhere on our hike -- dwarf palm (*Sabal minor*), Walter’s viburnum, swamp dogwood, bumelia (*Sideroxylon reclinata*) and a number of ferns – to name just a few. After a side trip to explore this area a bit more off trail, we continued on through more flatwoods and scrub. Although very few plants were in bloom, we found a great many things to see and our two-mile trip took all of the morning.

One of the things I always love about our field trips too is getting to know new people on a more personal level. Since we often don’t have time to talk in depth at our monthly meetings, the field trips give us the opportunity to get to know other members better, and over the years I’ve made some wonderful friends and have learned that people who love nature and plants are some of the world’s nicest people! Learning more about nature and this beautiful state we are blessed with, is always a worthwhile endeavor.

If you didn’t get to join us on this trip, I hope that you will be able to in the future. There are lots of fun trips coming up.



Pennyroyal in bloom

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Appalachicola rosemary
Conradina glabra

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