Permaculture and Native Plants
Part II

by Andy Karpinski

Permaculture Part I defined permaculture and discussed some of its goals and elements. Now we will see how permaculture can help with the design of our native landscapes.

Permaculture originated from the observation of how natural ecosystems manage to take care of themselves without human effort. Using native plants that are appropriate for our area seems like the easiest path to a low maintenance landscape. Many people still spend a lot of time and effort maintaining native yards. One reason for this disconnect is that we tend to choose and arrange plants based on what we think will look pretty. We often ignore how the plants fit into and interact with their natural habitat.

Permaculture provides a means to achieve our goals. So, first we need to clarify what we are trying to accomplish. Was “low maintenance” one of the goals for your yard?

A common saying in landscape design is, “the right plant in the right place.” This guideline embodies a few of the core principles of permaculture. We apply the first permaculture principle discussed in Part I, observe, to understand the conditions where a plant occurs naturally. We also observe our own yards to see how well our conditions match those where the plant naturally occurs. For example, if you have lots of shade in your yard, sunshine mimosa, which thrives in full sun, will probably struggle as a ground cover in your yard.

We also consider the second permaculture principle, connect, to understand how each plant interacts with other plants. Plants usually occur in communities with other plant types because they have traits that mutually benefit each other.

For example, many plants used as ground cover are pioneer plants, which are the first plants to move into a bare area. Pioneer plants thrive in and tend to improve poor soils. Some add nitrogen to the soil.

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President’s Message

This month’s state conference, the 33rd held by FNPS, was energizing and exhausting, all at the same time. In addition to interesting field trips and entertaining presentations, I attended the meetings for chapter presidents and for treasurers and came away further convinced that our chapter is a leader in advancing the Society’s mission and in effective chapter management.

FNPS is now poised to make some changes in the way it governs itself, with the goal of enabling growth in the areas of membership, finances, and outreach potential. FNPS board members Cindy Liberton (Hernando Chapter), Daphne Lambright (Suncoast Chapter) and I were appointed to a committee tasked with proposing a revised set of bylaws for the Society that will simplify its decision-making process and allow more participation and interaction by chapters. We will be working on this between now and the next quarterly board meeting in August. (For more about this, see the current issue of the Sabal Minor.)

Also due out in August is the Society’s 2012 Annual Report. I have seen the draft, and we should be proud that the section on chapter accomplishments recognizes our chapter twice, for the excellent work done by Candy Arnold and Kay Roberts in reviewing SWFWMD lands proposed for surplus, and for our annual landscape tour.

Candy Arnold and I attended a meeting of the FNPS Conservation Committee, during which I realized that although there are nearly three dozen state-listed plant species that have been reported to exist in Pinellas County, it’s unclear whether anyone knows if any of them are no longer present here, and for the ones that are still here, where they might be located. It would be interesting to map these, and it’s a project I’d like to pursue. If you’d like to participate in this task, or have information about listed species to provide, please contact Candy or myself.

We had a good chapter turnout at the conference despite the fact that it was nearly 250 miles away. The 2014 conference will be a lot closer, in Fort Myers, and I hope that many more of our Pinellas chapter members will be able to attend, and to come home excited and ready to advance the FNPS mission!

Jan Allyn

Field Trips

8 June 2013
Saturday

Sweet Bay Nursery
10824 Erie Road, Parrish, Florida 34219

Buying trip to Sweet Bay Nursery, specializing in native butterfly and wildlife plants, perennial wildflowers, shrubs, trees, ferns and grasses. Carpool leaves promptly at 8:30 am from the NE corner of Home Depot parking lot, 22nd Avenue North and I-275 in St. Petersburg, Fl. Or, meet the group at Sweet Bay Nursery at 9:00 am. Sweet Bay Nursery Phone (941) 776-0501. www.sweetbaynursery.com

13 July 2013
Saturday

Weeki Wachee River Paddle

Paddling trip on the Weeki Wachee River. Canoes/kayaks may be rented at the State Park. Reserve your canoe/kayak by contacting Camp Leisure at (352) 597-8484. Single kayak $30; canoe or tandem kayak $35. We will meet at the canoe outpost at 9:30 am. Car pool departs 7:30 am from Lowe’s parking lot, Clearwater Mall, Gulf to Bay Blvd at US Hwy 19 N. Visit the web site: www.paddlingadventures.com

Upcoming Programs

Most member meetings are held at 7 pm on the first Wednesday of the month at Pinellas County Extension, 12520 Ulmerton Road, Largo, Florida. These events are organized by the Pinellas Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society -- free and open to the public. Complimentary refreshments.

5 June 2013
Wednesday 7 pm
George Heinrich: Gopher Tortoises + Prescribed Fire = Biodiversity

Gopher tortoises, ancient reptiles of Florida’s uplands, play an important ecological role. They can live to be 40-60 years old in the wild, and are known for digging deep burrows which house over 350 other animal species. They live in well-drained sandy areas with sparse tree canopy and low-growing vegetation. Without natural fires in pine forests, the dense vegetation that grows there can impede the herbs and grasses that tortoises like to eat. This limits their food supply, thus fire is critical in maintaining the populations of these keystone species.

10 July 2013
Wednesday 7 pm (delayed 1 week due to Independence Day!)
Jeanne Murphy: Florida Master Naturalist Program

The lead naturalist for the UF/IFAS Master Naturalist program in Pinellas County will give a presentation about the program: its goals, benefits, and the topics covered. Students of the FMNP promote this goal by sharing their knowledge with family, friends, and through both formal and informal environmental education programs as employees or volunteers at parks, nature centers, eco-tour operations, and other organizations.
Florida Native Plant Society 33rd Annual Conference: Beauty, Inspiration, Education, and Fun

by Tonya Clayton

Beauty, inspiration, education, and fun—these were the main ingredients for the Florida Native Plant Society’s 33rd Annual Conference, held May 16–19 at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. Hundreds of enthusiasts gathered from across the state to botanize and share support for Florida’s native plants and associated communities.

Pinellas was well represented, with members serving as speakers, vendors, authors, field guides, award winners, and participants. The chapter generously provided two member “scholarships” and conference sponsorship support. St. Petersburg’s Beaupre-Heitzman residence won an FNPS Landscape Award of Excellence.

On Thursday and Sunday, field trip attendees scattered across the region to paddle, motor, and stroll through dozens of natural areas from the Okefenokee Swamp to Etoniah Creek. On Friday and Saturday, expert presentations ran concurrently in three tracks: Native Plants in the Landscape, Conservation/Ecology and Current Issues, and Research.

Workshops covered tree planting, home landscape design, palmetto baskets, and nature journaling. There were also exhibits, business meetings, and a native plant ID contest. Vendors offered a great variety of items, from gardening books to bee houses and native plants. Each day was capped by an evening get-together with local food, environmental expertise, and entertainment.

Little Talbot Island State Park, where members explored how native plants shape the coastal landscape. Photos courtesy of Tonya Clayton.

Jim Draper’s keynote presentation, “Pascua de Florida and Planting in Harmony,” evoked appreciative murmurs with his vivid paintings of subjects ranging from South Florida tree snails to North Florida blackwater rivers. Roger Hammer’s keynote “La Florida” gave a photographic tour of the state’s endemic plants (with tales of colorful Floridians, too). Tom Hoctor’s plenary talk, “Florida Wildlife Corridors,” included the message that contrary to popular perception, it’s not too late to achieve an Everglades-to-Panhandle habitat corridor: “We can still do this.”

Positive, practical action was a pervasive theme throughout the weekend. Several speakers discussed, for example, the importance of sustaining native pollinators and introducing youngsters to wild Florida. The state’s many different landscapes, from formal preserves to agricultural lands and suburban back yards, provide opportunities to nurture native plants with benefits extending to wildlife and humans.

The final minutes of the conference brought big news from the local FNPS grapevine: a stand of the rare, highly sought Bartram’s ixia (*Calydorea caelestina*) was bursting into brief, brilliant blue bloom by a nearby roadway. It was a fitting farewell from a special conference.

Mark your calendars for 2014: next year’s conference will be held May 15–18 in Fort Myers, Florida.
Welcome New Members

Amanda Albertson
Linda Andrews
Paul Bahmiller
John Binfield
Shirley Campbell
Terry Conway
Jan Edenfield
Art Finn
Adam Flanery
Julianna Hovanyecz
Jerome Karp

Sally McConnell
Charleen McGrath
Michele McHugh
Cathy O’Gara
Jim Rhyne
Tony Russo
Kathryn Smith
Mary Twohey
Jennifer Tyson
Elaine Whisler
Bev White

“Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you.”  Frank Lloyd Wright
Some pioneer plants have deep roots to extract nutrients from deep within the soil towards the surface. Some attract pollinators and other beneficial critters. Others protect the soil from intense sun or wind.

Rarely does a single plant type perform all the functions necessary for a healthy ecosystem. That is why natural landscapes support a mix of different plant types, each one playing a role in a self-sustaining mosaic. If “weeds” keep appearing in your sunshine mimosa patch, examine what function these “weeds” perform in nature. Then replace these “weeds” with more desirable plants that perform the same function. Observing (that first permaculture principle again) what plants occur with sunshine mimosa naturally will give us an idea of what we need to have a healthy, and hopefully less weed-prone, landscape.

A big problem with many yards, native or conventional, is that they ignore the ninth principle: Collaborate with and encourage succession. In nature, landscapes develop in stages. First, pioneer plants move into an area with poor, bare soil. Then some hardy shrubs will move in as the soil improves. Then trees start growing. As the soil and other conditions change, the original pioneer plants will be replaced by other plants better suited for the new conditions. This is succession.

But often we want our yards to be static. We expect them to look the same from year to year. This is like trying to keep a cat perpetually in the kitten stage. The cat is going to grow up. Ideally, so will your yard.

Permaculture supports the tendency for our yards to “grow up.” Plan for a mature state by selecting plants that are present in a mature landscape or on the natural path towards that mature state. Try to guide the changes that occur in nature to occur in your yard. Expect and welcome change in your yard.

Here’s an example of succession in my yard. Photo 1 shows the yard dominated by a ground cover of sunshine mimosa. Photo 2 shows that three and a half years later the mimosa is giving way to the maturing palms, pines, coontie, and beautyberry.

Despite the loss of the large maple tree (center Photo 1), destroyed by a direct lightning strike, the yard still looks much fuller in the second photo. This is because many functions were served by multiple elements (5), which allowed me to turn problems into solutions (11). Most of the plants that remained, such as beautyberry, coontie, rouge, saw palmetto, sabal palms, and slash pines, are compatible with the sand live oak that was planted in place of the destroyed maple.

The third principle, conservation of resources, and the fourth, multiple functions from a single element, guide us to make the most of existing conditions and elements, and minimize the need for intervention. The most desirable low maintenance mature landscape may be what the area supported before houses were built. Putting a bog where pine flatwoods once grew is probably not a good idea. On the other hand, changes during urban expansion, such as fill dirt or surface water flow, may prevent you from recreating the original landscape. However, with a little creativity (13) and recognition of problems (11), a low maintenance oasis is still possible.

Many Pinellas County parks, such as Brooker Creek, Howard, John Chestnut, Veterans, and Ft. DeSoto have good examples of what is native for our area. Explore the natural plant communities in your area and the plants typically found in those communities here: http://www.plantrealflorida.org

In permaculture, we want our yards to serve many of our needs. In the last article, Part III, of this series we will discuss how native plants fit into a food-producing landscape. See the April-May 2013 issue of the Understory for Permaculture Part I with a full list of the core principles: http://pinellas.fnpschapters.org/index.php?id=newsletters

Photo 1. Residential landscape in early phase with the ground cover, sunshine mimosa, dominating.

Photo 2. Several years later the palms, pines, coontie, and beautyberry are overtaking the ground cover. The large maple tree is missing (lightning strike), but the landscape is fuller than before and changing in subtle ways.
Spring Native Plant Festival a Roaring Success

We had one of our best plant festivals ever on Saturday, April 13, which produced about $1,000 in income for the Chapter after expenses and benefited long-time business member Wilcox Nursery & Landscape.

The wildflowers were blooming and beautiful, and we had some great talks about pollination, garden maintenance, shade gardening, and year-round color. A special treat was seeing the live beehive brought by Tom and Beth Stephan from Bee Branch Creek Apiaries in Palm Harbor. We’re already looking forward to our fall plant festival and thinking about what topics might be appropriate for talks or workshops. Ideas offered are “gardening with bunch grasses” and “landscape plants from the sandhill community.” If you have suggestions, we’d love to hear them!

We’re going to try something different and hold the event on a Sunday, so that it does not coincide with any of several other great events in October. Save the date—Sunday, October 13—and we hope to see you there!

"As wilderness shrinks and backyard acreage increases, the ecological impact of home gardeners grows ever greater." —Janet Marinelli
Community and volunteer support

“Those who dwell among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life.” - Rachel Carson

Committee Chairs and Coordinators

- Advocacy/Conservation: Candace Arnold
- Artist: Cathy Vogelsong
- Events/Displays: Andy Karpinski
- Hospitality: Andy Karpinski and Mary Ann Beekman
- Membership: Ellen Clayton
- Newsletter: Ellen Raabe
- Programs/Field Trips: Open - volunteers needed!
- Publicity: Cindy Smith
- Sales/Merchandise: Jane Williams and Jan Allyn
- Scholarships: Cindy Peacock
- Social Media: Jan Allyn
- Volunteer Coordinator: Mary Ann Beekman
- Web Master: Jan Allyn

Interim Committees:
- Budget Committee: Cindy Smith
- Plants Sales: Tiffany Custer and Bruce Turley
- Landscape Tour: Monica Pinnell and Jan Allyn

Chapter Directory

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John Pinnell, corsa65@msn.com
Katy Roberts, kroberts@ij.net

Volunteer Support

THANK YOU to the volunteers who helped plan field trips, worked the Spring Plant Festival, and conducted general behind-the-scenes efforts for the Pinellas Chapter of FNPS, including contributions to this newsletter!
FLORIDA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

The mission of the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) is to promote the preservation, conservation, and restoration of the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

Join us at monthly meetings for inspirational speakers, on field trips to see natural habitats, at plant sales, or visit local plant nurseries specializing in native plants. Visit us online.

Pinellas Chapter web address: http://pinellas.fnpschapters.org/
FNPS Blog: http://fnpsblog.blogspot.org/
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Pinellas Chapter FNPS

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