

Digging – Ruminations of a Florida Native Plant Society volunteer

*By Laura Bennett-Kimble*

We stood together, our dirty clothes sticking to our skin from the sweat, and ate watermelon in the partial shade provided by a bright-red SUV that gleamed in the merciless sunshine.

Exhausted in the humid 90-plus degree weather, the five of us had spent about three hours digging and potting up native plants and then carrying them to our cars.

The sandhill ecosystem on the northern end of Florida's Lake Wales Ridge was soon to be destroyed for a housing development, and everything from the skittish snakes to the butterflies, bobcats and gopher tortoises would be displaced or killed by the heavy equipment. We were rescuing as much as we could, then taking the plants to a nearby state park and local nature preserves.

We had trekked deep into the property, burdened with our jugs of water, our empty pots, our shovels. We wore sunscreen, broad-brimmed hats and long-sleeved shirts, some with long pants and socks tucked into our shoes to protect us from chiggers and ants. And we hauled out pots and pots of plants, weighted with the sandy soil we had moistened to aid the plants in their journey to a new home.

Coordinated through the Florida Native Plant Society, our volunteer group varies in size each week, with upwards to a couple dozen people helping one session, and sometimes just two the next time. We are gardening enthusiasts, nature lovers, retired science professionals, educators and environmentalists.

Week after week, month after month, our crew had been digging holes in the site's soil, choosing which individual plants to rescue, which DNA we hoped to preserve. Leaders stressed seeking out the rare and endemic species – those only found in this part of the country. But ultimately, if a native plant was not of a species that easily propagates and not often seen along roadsides and other ruderal areas, it was fair game.

On this hot summer day, the cold, sticky-sweet watermelon had perked us up a bit. Rather than pile into our separate vehicles and crank up the air conditioning as we drove off, which we usually did, we stood for a while and talked as the sounds of nearby construction – the “beep, beep, beep” of equipment backing up, the rat-a-tat of roofing nail guns, the roar of engines – punctuated our words.

When done with the watermelon, we looked at each other and shrugged. Each rind went sailing into the sandy acreage along the road, previously bulldozed and full of sprouting native and invasive plants fighting back against their doom. What did it matter, in the end? If a watermelon sprung from a seed in this once intact native habitat, it, too, would be bulldozed with the other plants, both the rare and endemic species and the invaders from afar.

We want to believe what we are doing matters, that the plants we uproot from their generational homes and mycorrhizal relationships will survive living in pots for a while and then eventually thrive in different soils, with similar yet ultimately different habitats. We want to save these species, and their unique genetic makeup, for the future.

Rescuing plants can be such hard work – physically and emotionally. Some people get disheartened, and they can't do it anymore.

Ultimately, for me, I can't not do this. When I visit the rescued plants in their new homes in area parks and preserves months or even years later and see blossoms and seedpods, I feel like it matters. When I see a native solitary bee on a blossom of a native plant I put there, I believe it matters. It matters for this plant, for this pollinator.

I can't control the big picture, and the future honestly scares the heck out of me. But I can do something in my own little bubble now. I can save a native plant that should be allowed to live, and I can let it serve its purpose in the ecosystem now.

According to entomologist and author Douglas Tallamy, "Humans cannot live as the only species on this planet, because it is other species that create the ecosystem services essential to us. Every time we force a species to extinction, we are encouraging our own demise."

It's hard for me to admit to something as grandiose as trying to slow species extinction, but that is exactly what I'm doing, one pot of plants at a time.

Because, in the end, it matters.