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## Native plants draw a crowd to Morningside

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Published: Saturday, March 31, 2012 at 7:55 p.m.

Shaded by longleaf pines and an overcast sky, Gainesville locals descended upon Morningside Nature Center on Saturday, browsing through some 450 varieties of native plants at the 2012 Spring Native Plant Sale.

Usually, the biannual sale can only accommodate 14 vendors due to the limited amount of space, but organizers on Saturday allowed 16 local vendors to participate, said Penny Weber, chair of the event.

Most are wholesalers who don't regularly sell plants to the public, so she said it is a big treat for locals to speak to the experts and buy from their nurseries.

Vendors were organized among a checkerboard of white and blue tents at Morningside. Their unified goal: to promote the simplicity of care and the resiliency of native plants, Weber said.

On Saturday, even though intermittent rain poured down on customers, Weber said the 200 or so people who came to the sale seemed eager to learn and purchase products.

All the vendors donated 25 percent of their proceeds to Friends of Nature Parks, a local organization in which Weber serves as president.

The event is the Friends of Nature Park's main fundraiser as well as one of the largest native plant sales in Florida, she said. Money raised also goes toward scholarships for children who wish to go to summer camp and toward scholarships of up to \$500 for local elementary and middle schools to go on environmental field trips.

The next fundraiser, the fall native plant sale, will occur Oct. 6.

Howard Jelks, who has been deemed the "plant police" of the Paynes Prairie chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society, said he wants to inform the public that native plants require minimal effort, use less water and in turn give a family more time to take a trip and go fishing.

The standard lawn is the leading use of water in the state, Jelks explained, so it is important for locals to try native plants to help curb this statistic.

There is a misconception among Floridians, he said, that native plants aren't as colorful or attractive. However, Jelks pointed out that the first Spanish settlers named the land Florida because of all the beautiful natural flowers.

As "plant police," Jelks said he inspects a specimen to see if it is native rather than



Samantha Franco/ Correspondent  
At Saturday's Spring Native Plant Sale at Morningside Nature Center, some 450 varieties of native plants were on display.

an imported breed. Jelks admires the intricate network of plants in Gainesville and how closely in tune the local wildlife is to these plants' fruiting and blooming. He said when people move to Florida and bring in other plants, the ecosystem tends to become even more imbalanced from its original design. Native plants attract and feed native animals more effectively than non-native plants do, Jelks said.

“So by keeping Florida as Florida, we help all those animals we love to see thrive,” he said.

Chairman of the Florida Wildflower Foundation, Terry Zinn was the only vendor Saturday who sold seeds as opposed to live plants. He said there are two types of people: a person who likes the instant gratification of buying grown plants and a person who likes nurturing the plants as they grow. He believes the plant sale has a market for both.

At his 40-acre research farm, Zinn said he works to develop how-to manuals for newly cultivated native species.

His specialty is the advancement of wildflowers, he said. To most people traveling on a highway, wildflowers may look like a blur of color on the side of the road, but there have been studies that show these flowers slow drivers down and even have a correlated calming effect, Zinn said.

The native wildflower not only adds a beautiful aesthetic, he said, but it also doesn't need the help of insecticides and fertilization to grow, like other plants native to Gainesville. Adaptable and naturally engineered for the Florida environment, most of the 13 species of wildflowers are frost-tolerant. Zinn's purpose for attending Saturday's sale was mainly to educate the public on the efficiency of indigenous plants in comparison to exotic plants.

Jared Taber, 31, said he knew native plants required less irrigation prior to his arrival at the sale. Mainly interested in the azaleas, he believes anyone can pick up a shovel and become a self-proclaimed gardener.

“I think in this area of Gainesville, there are a lot of the people who are more eco-conscious,” he said. “I know places like this and the farmers market normally draw a large crowd.”

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