The Native Plant Gardens at Sopchoppy Depot Park

View of the entrance plaza and much of the park in summer 2022. Photo by Sandy Tedder.

David Roddenberry

The tiny Panhandle city of Sopchoppy, best known for its large and colorful Worm Gruntin' Festival in spring, now boasts a unique native plant garden. More than 120 species of Florida native plants have been installed within a 1.7-acre city park. This daring environmental project was born in 2018. Brought to reality with much aid from members of the Sarracenia Chapter of FNPS, the all-native garden of the new Sopchoppy Depot Park is a living showcase of indigenous plants. It is a rich palette of colors, a pollinator haven, a model for home landscaping with natives, and, potentially, a significant environmental education resource. Now in its fifth year, it is also a test of sustainability.

The Depot Park Gardens at 33 Rose Street, winner of the 2021 FNPS award of excellence for institutional landscapes, displays native flora of the Panhandle. The plantings represent more than 100 genera in more than 50 plant families. Roughly 2,000 individual specimens have been planted and countless seeds have been sown. The total of species for the park exceeds 150 when volunteer and residual natives are counted. Even some rare Panhandle endemics perhaps never before used in gardens are exhibited; the aster Godfrey's blazing star (*Liatris provincialis*) and the legume scareweed (*Baptisia simplicifolia*) of the lemon-yellow summer flowers are both cultivated here because their extremely small global ranges touch the town.

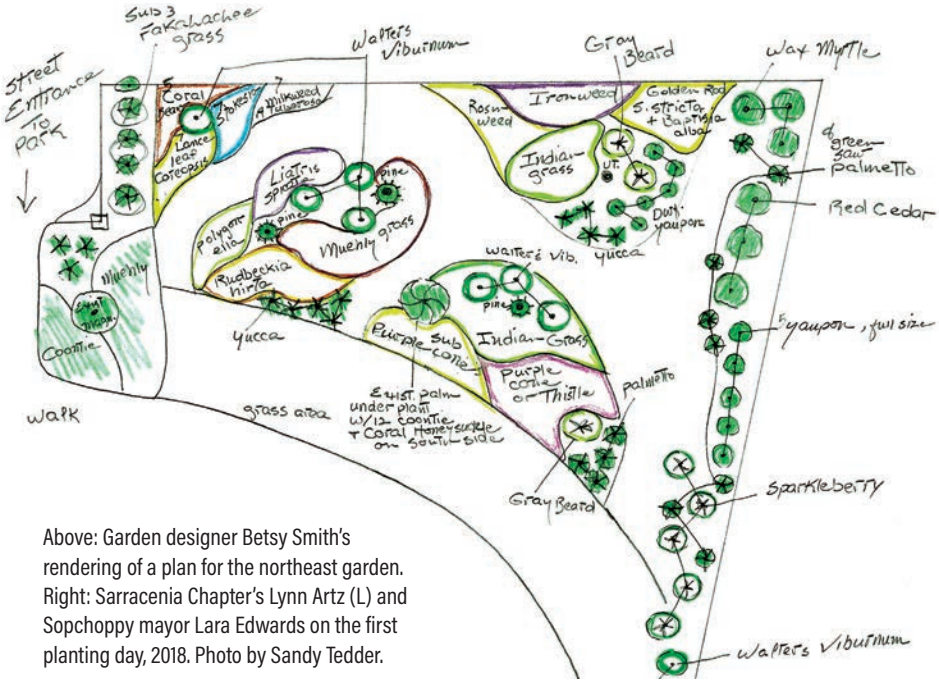
Significant of its name, Depot Park lies just across Rose Street from a historical restoration of the town's defunct rail depot, last active during WWII and now a museum. A short section of rail-bed no longer apparent lies in the Gardens. In late 2018, the Gardens project returned longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*), alive, precisely to this railbed where so many stems and board feet of the pine must have passed in transit to and from the coastal mills.

The most recent garden addition is a 2,000-square-foot wildflower meadow on a sunny slope near the park's retention pond. While the principal funding of the Gardens has come from the City of Sopchoppy, the meadow came about through a Florida Wildflower Foundation (FWF) Viva Florida Landscape Demonstration Garden grant awarded to the City in 2021. When the small army of volunteer meadow planters finished on a Saturday in October 2021, more than 800 new specimens of herbs and grasses were in the ground. These represented no fewer than 14 species, and seeds of more than a dozen other species would be sown soon after.

The meadow's first year, 2022, saw a riot of flowering by many planted species. Some of them were rattlesnakemaster (*Eryngium aquaticum*) of the carrot family and the blue globe flowers, blackeyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), Joe Pye weed (*Eutrochium fistulosum*), dense gayfeather (*Liatris spicata*), Elliott's aster (*Symphyotrichum elliottii*), and purple lovegrass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*). This past winter, the meadow had its first mow. We're eager to see the species diversity in 2023.

In addition to a wildflower meadow, the FWF grant funded the replacement of non-native landscaping at the park entrance with cheerful native bloomers. The funds also filled in and added new species to other native plant gardens in the park. When the grant obligations ended in 2022, the $3,000 in FWF grant funds had been matched by $3,400 in City expenditures, and volunteer hours in 2021–22 worth over $48,000!

The plantings today differ greatly from what had been originally conceptualized. After a property donation and the establishment of Depot Park in 2015, the Genesis design



Above: Garden designer Betsy Smith's rendering of a plan for the northeast garden. Right: Sarracenia Chapter's Lynn Artz (L) and Sopchoppy mayor Lara Edwards on the first planting day, 2018. Photo by Sandy Tedder.

group had created a conceptual plan. By 2018, the City had implemented the planned hardscape: an entrance plaza, an asphalt walking path encircling a central lawn and stage, and a playground, two picnic pavilions, and a retention pond. For landscaping, the conceptual plan proposed traditional southern garden plantings not further specified. A few such plants were installed at the entrance.

At the invitation of Sopchoppy mayor Lara Edwards in early 2018, a team of volunteers coordinated by the Sarracenia Chapter's Lynn Artz assembled to plan a butterfly garden. This quickly expanded to park-wide, native-plant landscaping. The City could purchase plants and install irrigation. Sarracenia could advise on plants and provide a list of candidate species, mindful of the longleaf pine and wiregrass ecosystem likely once here but now obliterated. It could recruit volunteers from its members to augment the expected turnout of local citizens to help plant. And critically, local landscape designer Betsy Smith agreed to design the native gardens.

Meetings among Smith, Sarracenia members, and the mayor yielded landscape plans. Smith drew, and specified plants. Planting beds with turfgrass paths were designed along the main-street frontage. These north garden beds would feature showy flowers, including starry rosinweed (*Silphium asteriscus*), white wild indigo (*Baptisia alba*), and

Planting *Liatris spicata, Amsonia tabernaemontana, Pinus palustris, Aristida stricta, Sericocarpus tortifolius* and others on the meadow-planting day in 2021. Photo by Sandy Tedder.

butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), and native grasses among scattered longleaf pines. Evergreen trees and shrubs were to fill the front corners and extend southward along the east and west park boundaries. Climbing vines including coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), American wisteria (*Wisteria frutescens*), Carolina jessamine (*Gelsemium sempervirens*), and purple passion-flower (*Passiflora incarnata*) were proposed for the front wrought iron fence and the pavilion columns, and as companions for selected trees.

Further south, the garden design reflected the greater tree canopy and soil moisture. Red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*), elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*), and sweet pinxter azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*) were given places in the partial shade. Wetland plants were proposed for the retention pond at the south end. A list of plants to purchase jelled in July 2018. The mayor asked the City Council for $10,000. Her request was approved and native plants for the park were swiftly ordered with a first increment of the funds.

Sarracenia volunteers and a host of other community volunteers turned out on two Saturdays in early November 2018 to plant nearly 600 specimens of native trees, shrubs, grasses, vines, and wildflowers. Bald cypresses (*Taxodium distichum*) were planted in the pond, along with the stunning scarlet rosemallow (*Hibiscus coccineus*) and swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*). Sopchoppy Depot Park Gardens now existed. They could be seen and touched. They could attract people as well as pollinators. They could begin to teach.

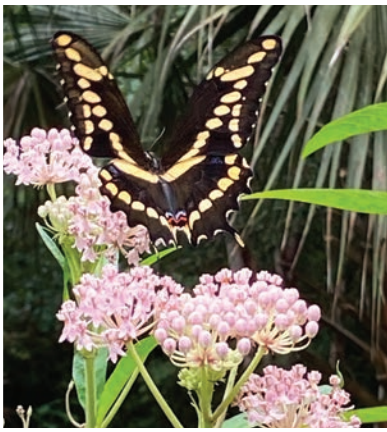
Initially, however, the plants in our native gardens were small and sparse, the flowers few. We counseled patience and reassured the mayor, who faced criticism from the public and other City officials. We learned of the public's dislike for pines. Fortunately, the 200-foot wrought iron fence along Rose Street was soon covered with verdant masses of foliage and orange-red flowers of coral honeysuckle we had planted. We worked valiantly to increase blooms. We planted only species indigenous to Sopchoppy's county (Wakulla) or a neighboring county, making an exception for the showy purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), a Florida native by virtue of its occurrence in a single county that does not touch Wakulla.

Each year, the originally installed plants grew larger and more attractive – while volunteers installed even more. The City continued to purchase needed replacements and additions. Increasingly, volunteers grew plants from seeds and cuttings. Many plants were donated. The Monarch-Milkweed Initiative then in St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge contributed seedlings of milkweeds (*Asclepias* species) and the milkvine *Gonolobus suberosus*, species unavailable otherwise. Sarracenia Chapter members provided seedlings of the rare Panhandle endemics mentioned above and other species such as the mint scarlet calamint (*Calamintha coccinea*).

The team (most of us Sarracenia members) has gradually stocked the pond at the south end of the garden with more native wetland plants. One is water cowbane (*Tiedemannia filiformis*) of the carrot family. Others include Mohr's coneflower (*Rudbeckia mohrii*) and the endemic Florida tickseed (*Coreopsis floridana*). All three of those were from gifts of homegrown, seed-grown specimens.

The incorporation of this small pond in the project suggests the potential for ecological enhancement as well as beautification of retention ponds everywhere, which would have a vast aggregate acreage. Pollinators, amphibians, and other wildlife might find habitat there – as the black swallowtail and monarch butterflies have in this pond, as evidenced by their colorful larvae feeding on the leaves of the water cowbane and the swamp milkweed, respectively.

The opportunity in 2020 to purchase pitcherplants from a nursery quitting business inspired the addition of a small bog garden. This was executed in the Gardens in 2020 only after consultation with experts to vet the purchased plants for typical (non-hybrid) forms. Three native *Sarracenia* species now live cheerfully in the bog, two having flowered there. Soon after that installation, a large private collection



Left to right: Coral honeysuckle *(Lonicera sempervirens)* beautifies the fence along Rose Street. At Depot Park's pond, a barking tree frog rests on a scarlet hibiscus *(Hibiscus coccineus)* flower, and a giant swallowtail butterfly is attracted to a flowering swamp milkweed *(Asclepias incarnata)*.

Top row, from left: The bog garden displays three native species of *Sarracenia*. Hooded pitcherplants *(Sarracenia minor)* in bloom. Photos by Sandy Tedder.

Bottom row, from left: One of the many plant identification signs with QR codes. The "seed depot" is stocked with native wildflower seeds visitors can take home. Created by a volunteer, it is a miniature replica of the old depot which overlooks the park. Photos by Sandy Tedder.

of wetland plants needed relocation. We acquired dozens of plants in several species for the pond, among them string-lily (*Crinum americanum*).

The FWF grant in 2021 propelled Depot Park Gardens into a higher orbit. The funds came with a required emphasis on education. Plant identification signs were soon placed, each with a QR code linked to the online plant information pages at fnps.org. The City of Sopchoppy website [https://www.sopchoppy.org/sopchoppy-depot-park.html] and the Sarracenia Chapter website [https://sarracenia.fnpschapters.org/resources/] both now have information on Depot Park, its native plant gardens, and the importance of native plants. A local landscape architect is producing an interactive map of the gardens, with layered content, for the websites.

With seeds produced in abundance in the Gardens, the idea of giving away seeds seemed a way to encourage visitors to add native wildflowers to their yards. A volunteer with joinery skills took inspiration from the old depot overlooking the park and constructed a miniature replica to hold small packets of free seeds. The “seed depot” now stands in the Gardens, where it is kept stocked with QR-coded packets of wildflower seeds from the park.

Volunteers help to maintain the gardens at monthly gardening days. Increasingly, teenagers are volunteering to earn Florida Bright Futures Scholarship hours at the park. Our first teen volunteers were a brother and sister pair in summer 2022. In addition to weeding, watering, and mulching, they started writing a short, illustrated “Flower of the Week” article for a local weekly. This they did for 18 weeks, choosing as the first flower the lovely Stokes’ aster (*Stokesia laevis*) found in the north gardens. Other volunteers have continued the series, 54 installments (species) through mid-May. The articles are archived online in the Sarracenia Chapter website offering a Gardens “scroll.”

With the diversity of native plants there is a diversity of gardening outcomes. The establishment of cucumberleaf dune sunflower (*Helianthus debilis* subsp. *cucumerifolius* – the dune sunflower of the Panhandle) from a few seed-grown specimens was wildly successful. On the other hand, another aster, the self-seeding Leavenworth’s tickseed (*Coreopsis*

Above, top to bottom: *Rudbeckia hirta* and *Lonicera sempervirens* at the front fence, with the Sopchoppy Depot Museum in background; the meadow at south end of the garden in its first flowering season, with *Eutrochium fistulosum, Coreopsis leavenworthii, Rudbeckia hirta*, and, in far background, *Hibiscus coccineus* in the pond. Photos by Sandy Tedder. View along a wooded swale in the south end, with *Rhododendron canescens, Phlox divaricata*, and *Sambucus nigra.* Photo by David Roddenberry.

leavenworthii), has required annual planting. Selected to provide summer flowers with minimal re-stocking, its reseeding is defeated by the pinestraw mulch that aids in weed control.

Another potentially problematic outcome affects the meadow established in 2021. The FWF grant's prescription for site preparation – solarization of the soil under large plastic sheets through summer – was not the weed and grass killer it was supposed to be. In 2023 as we observe the plant diversity in the meadow's second year, we're anxious to see how much derives from plants we attempted to solarize.

Ongoing maintenance of Sopchoppy Depot Park Gardens has been challenging and the challenges continue. Long-term coping with aggressive native plants and with several non-native invasives, whether in the new meadow or elsewhere, is one challenge. The mint Florida betony (*Stachys floridana*), for instance, is a prolific native that does not rest in its bid to disrupt the Gardens plan. Though we have a dedicated group of hard-working volunteers, the sustainability of the gardens may depend on weeding requirements abating over time. The need to recruit and retain a corps of volunteer gardeners is also constant.

Volunteering with us has benefited not just the Gardens. It has given newcomers a fine opportunity to learn about our native species and assimilate in the community. In her *Sabal minor* article on the Gardens last January, Sarracenia's Betsy Rudden gave testimony to this. She recounted her experience as a newcomer to FNPS and to Sopchoppy (from Connecticut), where she made connections to her community and her chapter in the Gardens. Many volunteers who have walked up and joined in have been relative newcomers.

For me, it is only a two-block walk to the sights and the fragrances of Depot Park Gardens. It is by dint of much thought and labor from Sarracenia members that the native plant diversity there is so large. Although I am drawn to the park most often to work, the company of the bees, butterflies, and birds, the seasonal unfoldings everywhere, and the camaraderie among the volunteers make the work rewarding. Add the compliments from visitors about our "labor of love" and I feel great pride in what we have achieved.

References

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Sarracenia Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society. "Native Plant Species in Depot Park Gardens" (sarracenia.fnpschapters.org/resources >Sopchoppy Depot Park Gardens >The Plant Species List)

About the Author

David Roddenberry is a native and resident of Sopchoppy. In addition to his gardening participation in the Depot Park Gardens, he serves as the project's consultant on native plants. Retired from the Florida Division of Recreation and Parks, David currently serves as president of the Sarracenia Chapter of FNPS. He also volunteers in two state parks and a state forest, where he often helps to conduct and compile plant surveys.