



Welcome to the native gardens of Sopchoppy Depot Park, gardens dedicated to exhibiting plants native to Florida and indigenous to the local area. Notice the many plant identification signs with their QR codes for the smart phone. These take you right to specific information on classification, home-garden cultivation, and ecological functions of the individual plant species. Around 115 species of Florida native plants have been installed here since fall 2018. Most can be found in the four gardens shown by color outline on the **map above** —the northwest and northeast gardens, the meadow, and the pond.

This page offers a **sampler guide** to some of the plants, using a wider perspective than the QR code links. We'll begin with a couple of species of trees planted by the great volunteer corps of the Depot Park Gardens. Whichever garden you're in, you've likely already noticed the young pines. The **longleaf pine** (*Pinus palustris*) was once the ecological anchor of 90 million acres in the Southeastern U.S. It was originally the one pine of open flatwoods and "high pine" terrain of southern Wakulla County. Those terrains had remained very open for ages by being frequently swept by fire —something the longleaf pine is uniquely adapted to. The creation of these native gardens has brought this pine species back to the very railbed over which many a board foot of its lumber was transported after passing through the sawmills of Sopchoppy, Curtis Mills, McIntyre, and Carrabelle.

Look on the two flanks of the Rose Street entrance for an iconic tree of the Deep South —the **southern magnolia** (*Magnolia grandiflora*) with its very dark green and lustrous foliage. The leaves are there all year. The species is represented in these plantings by its "Little Gem" cultivar, but elsewhere in the park by the typical form that grows much larger. The huge, cream-colored, and highly fragrant blossoms open in late spring.

The man-made pond at the Park's south end (on the south side of the meadow) features young specimens of **bald cypress** (*Taxodium distichum*). This tree that sheds all its leaves (or needles) in fall occurs naturally only in very wet places, but it can grow perfectly well in your yard. It can live to a very great age and large size.

We'll proceed by sectors shown on the map above to continue the Depot Park Gardens sampler:

Northwest Garden

The area on your right as you enter the Park from Rose Street has given a home to three native plant species especially associated with this part of Florida, indeed found only in this area. These are in the center plot (along with other plants). They are common enough in or near Sopchoppy, but unknown outside of our area. Look for the word *endemic* in the descriptions for the first three plants in the table below. An endemic species is one that occurs naturally nowhere in the world but a very small, defined area.

Use your smart phone and the QR codes on the plant signs to go further than the information in this table if you wish.

Showy season(s) for the plant: ● spring ● summer ● fall ● non-seasonal or all seasons

<p>● Scareweed (<i>Baptisia simplicifolia</i>) This summer-flowering, yellow-flowering legume is a Florida endemic with a range on the entire globe confined to Wakulla and four surrounding counties. For that reason, its continued existence is considered threatened. Locally, scareweed inhabits pine flatwoods within Sopchoppy. This and the several other <i>Baptisias</i> indigenous to Wakulla County can be called wild indigos. See one of the others, white wild indigo, elsewhere in the Gardens.</p>
<p>● Zig-zag silkgrass (<i>Pityopsis flexuosa</i>) Like many of the wildflowers in the Gardens, this plant is in the aster family —one of the largest families of Florida plants— and not a grass at all. However, this is another Florida endemic of extremely narrow global range (Wakulla and five surrounding counties); it is considered endangered. It is a plant of deep sands of the coastal plain. Its golden flowering can be enjoyed in the fall in the sandhills between Sopchoppy and Panacea and along roadways elsewhere in the County.</p>
<p>● Godfrey's blazing star (<i>Liatris provincialis</i>) Another aster, and one having an appearance similar to our other blazing stars, this species of blazing star is a Florida endemic with an extremely narrow place on earth. That place is a 50-mile-long swath of the deep coastal sands of Franklin and Wakulla Counties. Thus the attractive flowering of this plant occurs in late summer from south Medart to just west of Carrabelle, touching the outskirts of Sopchoppy.</p>
<p>● Coral honeysuckle (<i>Lonicera sempervirens</i>) The vine's pink or coral-color flowers produced during much of spring are tube-shaped. This makes them a match for the hummingbird's bill, and a great attraction for the bird. The vine, here running on the park fence, lacks the climbing mechanisms some others have, but still gets 20 feet or more into trees all over its eastern U.S. range.</p>
<p>● Giant ironweed (<i>Vernonia gigantea</i>) This ironweed and the "tall ironweed" conspicuous in fall in the northeast garden are two among dozens of species in the aster family gracing the Gardens. Giant ironweed can be 7 ft high in its very moist natural habitat. In fall the rose-lavender-to-magenta flowers of the ironweeds are magnets to nectaring butterflies.</p>
<p>●● False rosemary (<i>Conradina canescens</i>) The remarkable softness of the light-lavender flowers is one hallmark of this low shrub. The grey-green hue of the foliage is another. Appropriate to its membership in the mint family of plants, the rosemary aroma of the foliage, when crushed, is another strong distinction of this plant that occurs naturally in dry sands of the Florida Panhandle and adjacent states.</p>
<p>●● Velvetleaf milkweed (<i>Asclepias tomentosa</i>) Like four other milkweeds in the Gardens, this plant has a milk-white sap with toxic properties (a fifth milkweed here does not). The species inhabits deep, excessively drained sands, which its root penetrates to an amazing depth. Like the foliage of all of Florida's milkweeds, its leaves are critically important as food for the larva of the monarch butterfly.</p>
<p>● Cucumberleaf dune sunflower (<i>Helianthus debilis</i> subsp. <i>cucumerifolius</i>) The pure yellow flower and the foliage of bright green make this a striking plant in the Gardens in summer. True to the common name, this wildflower (of the aster family, again) occurs naturally in dry sands, mostly along the coast. Our subspecies is one of three, but the only</p>

one with a range reaching into the Panhandle. Its natural occurrence in Wakulla County is very limited.

● **Leavenworth's tickseed (*Coreopsis leavenworthii*)** Florida's various *Coreopsis* species collectively are the official state wildflower. The resemblance of the seeds to small ticks would explain the common name that attends all our *Coreopsis*s. They are in the aster family. This *Coreopsis* has compound leaves and is an annual, but an annual that reseeds itself prolifically.

Northeast Garden

The area on your left as you enter from Rose Street exhibits the one non-native tree featured in the Park—the large palm. This pindo palm or jelly palm (*Butia capitata*) is a native of South America that has long had a place in street and residential landscapes in Florida; it can be seen elsewhere in Sopchoppy. From seeds in the large, fleshy fruits you'll see on the ground, it sometimes gets naturalized in wooded places peripheral to homesteads.

The table gives a sampler of some other plants in the northeast garden, including another wild indigo that can be seen in the northeast extremity here.

Showy season(s) for the plant: ● spring ● summer ● fall ● non-seasonal or all seasons

● White wild indigo (<i>Baptisia alba</i>) In contrast to the wild indigo called scareweed in the northwest garden, this one flowers white, flowers in early spring, and has compound leaves—three blades or leaflets making up one leaf. The foliage and stems of the wild indigos turn black when they die back in fall.
●● Stokes aster (<i>Stokesia laevis</i>) The large, light-lavender flowers of this aster edging the grass paths are conspicuous in late spring and early summer. Generally not very common in the wild, this native does flower abundantly on the shoulders and in the swales of Hwy 375 a few miles west of Sopchoppy.
● Blackeyed Susan (<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>) This very common member of the asters has large golden flowers and a long flowering period. The “black eye” is the large central disk that is cylindrical, projecting above the petals. Great numbers of tiny seeds form in the disk and help this plant to propagate itself in the wild in dense, showy patches in many sunny, well drained places.
● Butterflyweed (<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>) This knee-high plant with brilliant orange flowers in summer claims its place as a milkweed without producing the milky sap characteristic of the group. Growing in dry places open to the sun, this milkweed is host to the larvae of the monarch butterfly just as the other milkweeds.
● Starry rosinweed (<i>Silphium asteriscus</i>) The last word of the scientific name gives this tall wildflower away as another member of the asters. The large yellow flowers and the height make this one of the showier flowers in the Park.
● Cherokee bean (<i>Erythrina herbacea</i>) The startling red brilliance of this legume's flower spikes in spring makes it one of the spectacles of the Gardens. The seeds are poisonous. Though the very prickly stems are somewhat woody, the plant dies back to the ground in winter.
● Tall ironweed (<i>Vernonia angustifolia</i>) The magenta flowers of this ironweed are lovely in fall along the north fence here. Tall ironweed grows naturally in dry land such as the sandhills between Sopchoppy and Panacea, and can be cultivated easily in well drained parts of home landscapes. It is not actually tall in comparison to the “giant ironweed” seen in fall in the northwest garden.
● Seaside goldenrod (<i>Solidago sempervirens</i>) One of ten goldenrod species inhabiting Wakulla County, this husky and aggressive native is generally associated with the coast. It may grow to 8 feet high, though it dies back to the ground each winter. In these gardens and the home garden, this plant propagates itself readily on moist ground, and requires control.
● Eastern purple coneflower (<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>) A Florida native by virtue of its natural occurrence in a single Florida county along the state's north line, this handsome wildflower is not indigenous in Wakulla County. It is considered rare and endangered in Florida, though it is readily available as seed-grown plants. The large rose-lavender flowers have made it popular in gardens for decades.

● **Eastern gamagrass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*)** Husky, 3-foot-wide clumps of this grass stand just inside the fence along the entryway. Here and over a large territory extending from the southern end of Florida through the southern plains in Kansas and beyond, this grass sends up attractive culms, or flower- and seed-stalks, to wave in the breezes in summer.

Meadow

With a grant from the Florida Wildflower Foundation, a naturalistic meadow has been created in the southwest corner of the Park. View the meadow either from its east end or from across the retention pond. Some of the plants here were mentioned above for the northeast or northwest gardens, like blackeyed Susan, but there are many others that are not seen in those north gardens. Here's a sampler for the meadow, to augment the plant signs and QR codes you'll find here:

Showy season(s) for the plant: ● spring ● summer ● fall ● non-seasonal or all seasons

<p>● Joe Pye weed (<i>Eutrochium fistulosum</i>) This tall member of the asters, with its wide, pink flower cluster at the top in summer, forms a back wall of the meadow. The plant's common name goes far back in history, and remains somewhat mysterious. The species is allied with the dog fennels so common in this area.</p>
<p>● Purple lovegrass (<i>Eragrostis spectabilis</i>) Grasses, too, have flowers. When this grass species flowers in dense patches in fall, it lifts a lovely, delicate-looking pink-purple top 18 inches above the ground. Patches are sometimes seen in moist places on road shoulders. See it toward the east end of the meadow and interspersed in other places.</p>
<p>● Rattlesnakemaster (<i>Eryngium aquaticum</i>) Blue flowers are in the minority in our suite of native wildflowers. However, this wetland plant in the carrot family produces globular flowers of striking shades of blue. Masses of the plant occur in wet road swales, presenting an impressive blue scene in late summer. This and the other members of the carrot family are the host plants for the larvae of the black swallowtail butterfly.</p>
<p>● Dense blazing star (<i>Liatris spicata</i>) Another blazing star and another aster, this plant with a tall flower spike in early fall adds color to our roadsides and attracts many butterflies with its nectar. In nature it's a "wetfoot" plant (unlike our other blazing stars), but in cultivation it can thrive in medium moisture. Dense blazing star is one of 8 blazing stars indigenous in Wakulla County</p>
<p>● Pinkscale blazing star (<i>Liatris elegans</i>) Still another aster and blazing star, this one merits the compliment seen in the last word of its scientific name. It is our one local blazing star with flower parts expanded to petal-like form that does set it apart. Elegant it is, and the pollinating insects find its flowers swiftly.</p>

Pond

The Gardens project turned one utility into a habitat —something that could be done with many utilities, parts of road rights-of-way as well as this retention pond required to catch runoff from the paved parking lot. Stocking of this intermittent (often dry) pond, not with fish but with Florida native plants, began early in the Gardens project. It has now produced a wetland garden as interesting and important as any other garden in the project

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<p>● Swamp milkweed (<i>Asclepias incarnata</i>) One of five milkweed species in the Gardens (and tallest by far), this is a wetfoot plant in nature, but one that will do well in moist, sunny parts of home landscapes. While its leaves nourish the larva of the monarch butterfly, its lovely pink flowers offer nectar to various butterflies and many other pollinators. Its abundant seeds germinate readily in the greenhouse.</p>

● **Blackgum (*Nyssa biflora*)** The tree can also be called a tupelo, and is closely related to the native ogeechee tupelo whose nectar produces tupelo honey. Though the individual here on the north slope of the pond is a young sapling, the species grows fairly large. Blackgum is one of the first trees to take on fall color each year. Watch this one for the change to dark red foliage.

● **Rose mallow (*Hibiscus coccineus*)** Perhaps the most spectacular flower in the Gardens, though an ephemeral one, the gigantic rose-colored blossom of this plant is like a flag over the pond. The plant is one of four native hibiscuses occurring in Wakulla County.

● ● **Water cowbane (*Tiedemannia filiformis*)** The broad “inflorescence” of small white flowers seen in summer and fall on this tall wildflower is in a form called an umbel. This plant, like the blue-flowering “rattlesnakemaster” in the meadow just above, is in the carrot family. Like all the family, it plays host to the colorful caterpillar of the black swallowtail butterfly.

● ● **Mohr’s coneflower (*Rudbeckia mohrii*)** Another member of the aster family and close kin to the blackeyed Susan, this wetland plant exhibits lovely golden flowers through much of late summer and fall. It is abundant in wet road swales in parts of Wakulla County. Notice the very slender, limber character of the stalk. The water sucked up into this stem is under enough pressure to “pump” the plant upright —like a hydraulic mechanism.

● **Savannah aster (*Symphotrichum chapmanii*)** This very slender aster of lovely lavender flowers is represented by only a pair of 30-inch-tall specimens on the south edge of the pond. The flowers stand atop a bright green stalk with candelabra branching toward the top. The flowers appear in October, and are seen in the wild in some open, sunny depressions and bogs throughout our area.



Sarracenia Chapter
Fla. Native Plant Soc.
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