

ECOQUEST

September 2020

Florida's Fantastic 15!



Cabbage Palm (Sabal palmetto), the state tree of Florida, is found in habitats ranging from swamps and marshes to hammocks and forests.

Sarasota-Manatee EcoFlora's September 2020 EcoQuest challenge is Florida's Fantastic 15, featuring some of our most iconic native plants. Listed below are the Fantastic Fifteen, all integral plants to our state's ecosystems, from mangroves on the coast to sand live oak and Spanish bayonet in our scrublands. Can you find all 15?

WHAT IS AN ECOQUEST?

EcoQuests, part of the [Sarasota-Manatee EcoFlora Project](#), challenge Floridians to become engaged citizens in the observation, study, appreciation, and conservation of the native flora and fauna of Florida, and understand the impacts to it by exotic species.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

1. Download the easy-to-use [iNaturalist](#) app on your mobile device, or visit [iNaturalist.org](#) on your computer.
2. Set up a user account or sign in to join projects and submit observations.
3. Visit the [Sarasota-Manatee EcoFlora Florida's Fantastic 15](#) page and click "join" on the upper right.
4. Photograph plants anywhere in Sarasota and Manatee Counties. Take multiple photos to show important features for identification (overall plant, leaves, flowers, fruit, stem).
5. Post your observations to [iNaturalist](#).
6. Check out [your ranking](#) on this month's challenge online!

WHAT IS THE GOAL?

Help us document as many Florida's Fantastic 15 plants in the wild as possible by September 30. Remember that any observation still contributes to the Sarasota-Manatee EcoFlora Project, even if it's not featured in our monthly challenge.

WHERE SHOULD I LOOK?

Explore our many natural areas for these common natives. Selby Gardens' Downtown Sarasota and Historic Spanish Point campuses are both fantastic places to look! We are particularly interested in documenting where our native plants exist in the wild this month. *Note: If you have planted some of these Fantastic 15 natives at your home, just be sure to mark them as "cultivated" when making your observation.*



BALD CYPRESS

Taxodium distichum

Bald cypress is a flood-tolerant tree most commonly found in freshwater swamps. It is capable of reaching more than 150 feet in height and living for hundreds – even thousands – of years. Many of the oldest and largest cypress trees in Florida were cut in the early twentieth century, when their wood became prized as timber. Cypress swamps are home to many animals, including a number of endangered species. The swamps absorb runoff from storms and slow or prevent flooding during heavy rains.



BUTTONWOOD

Conocarpus erectus

Buttonwood gets its name from its reddish-brown fruit, which looks like old leather buttons. A cousin of the white mangrove, this salt-tolerant tree is most commonly found growing along the coast, where it helps to stabilize dunes. Buttonwood provides a habitat for Anolis lizards, which reduce damage to the tree from insects. Its rough bark makes it well suited to support the attachment of epiphytes (plants that grow on trees), such as bromeliads and orchids.



CABBAGE PALM

Sabal palmetto

The cabbage palm gets its name from its terminal bud, or “heart,” which is edible and has a cabbage-like flavor. The state tree of Florida, it is found in habitats ranging from swamps and marshes to hammocks and forests. Its trunk can be completely covered in a crisscrossing pattern of leaf bases, known as “boots,” which are the remnants of fallen leaves. These boots are an ideal environment for epiphytes (plants that grow on trees), particularly ferns.



COCOPLUM

Chrysobalanus icaco

Cocoplum is a small, salt-tolerant tree or shrub that thrives in full sun or partial shade. It grows in a variety of habitats, including hammocks, coastal beaches, and dunes, as well as the edges of freshwater swamps. Cocoplum gets its name from its edible, plum-like fruit, which is used to make jam and jelly. The seeds of the fruit can be roasted and eaten, and have an almond-like flavor.



COONTIE

Zamia pumila

Often mistaken for a fern or palm, the coontie is a type of cycad, an ancient group of plants dating back to the age of the dinosaurs. It has feather-shaped foliage that emerges from a large, underground stem called a caudex, which can be used to produce a starch. The coontie was once common in hammocks and pinelands. Due to intensive collection for starch production, it is now uncommon in its natural habitats and illegal to collect from the wild.



DWARF PALMETTO

Sabal minor

The dwarf palmetto is a hardy, drought-tolerant palm that thrives in full sun and partial shade. It is distinguished by a short, subterranean trunk and large, fan-shaped leaves, which give it a tropical appearance. It is found in swamps and floodplains, as well as along the banks of rivers and streams.



GIANT LEATHER FERN

Acrostichum danaeifolium

The giant leather fern is the largest fern in Florida, with fronds that grow up to 12 feet in length. It can be found in coastal hammocks and mangrove swamps, as well as further inland along the edges of ponds. Its fibrous roots help to stabilize soil and prevent erosion. The giant leather fern has no flowers or seeds, but instead reproduces through spores, shot out from the underside of its fronds. These spores form a continuous mat that gives fertile fronds a reddish-brown appearance.



MANGROVES

Florida is home to three species of mangroves: the red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*), black mangrove (*Avicennia germinans*), and white mangrove (*Laguncularia racemosa*). Mangroves are tropical trees or shrubs that grow in intertidal areas along the coast. They filter pollutants and prevent erosion by stabilizing shorelines with their specialized roots. Mangrove forests serve as nursery, feeding, and refuge areas for a wide variety of wildlife, including fish, reptiles, mammals, and birds.

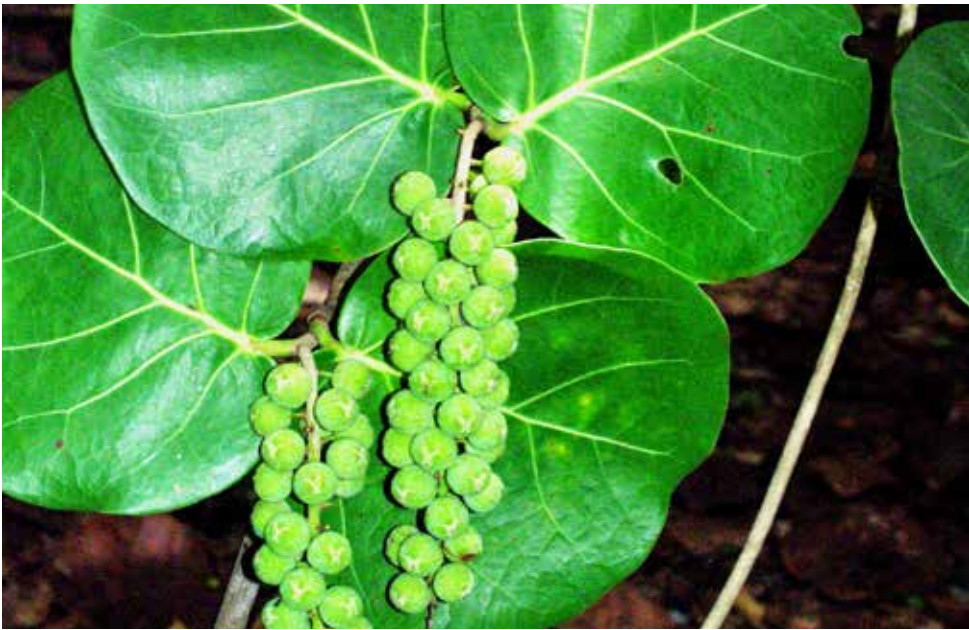


SAND LIVE OAK

Quercus geminata

The sand live oak is a tough, evergreen tree, well adapted to drought and highly resistant to wind and salt. Smaller than its cousin, the live oak (*Quercus virginiana*), it grows in sandy, scrub-like habitats. Its acorns provide a source of food for many species of wildlife, such as the Florida scrub jay.





SEAGRAPE

Coccoloba uvifera

Seagrape is a salt-tolerant tree or shrub that grows along the coast. By trapping sand with its leaves and branches, it helps to construct and stabilize dunes, which provide protection further inland from the effects of coastal storms. Seagrape gets its name from its fruit, which grow on female plants only. The fruiting structure consists of clusters of green grapes that ripen to a deep purple in late summer. Ripe grapes can be eaten straight off the plant or used to make jam, jelly, or wine.



SPANISH BAYONET

Yucca aloifolia

Spanish bayonet is a tough, evergreen shrub with stiff, dagger-like leaves ending in sharp, needle-like spines. Prior to cultivation, it was most commonly found growing with other spiny plants in an area known as the “prickly zone,” directly inland of the beach. Spanish bayonet produces a mass of white, bell-shaped flowers, pollinated exclusively by the yucca moth. The flowers are edible and said to be tasty raw or fried.



WILD CINNAMON

Canella winterana

Wild cinnamon (also known as cinnamon bark) is a small tree once relatively common in coastal hammocks along Florida’s south coast. It is now rare and considered an endangered species. The leaves, flowers, and fruit of wild cinnamon produce a spicy fragrance when crushed. In the 1700s, the inner bark was exported to Europe as a substitute for cinnamon, a spice produced from a number of plants of the genus *Cinnamomum* native to the Orient.



WILD COFFEE

Psychotria nervosa

Wild coffee is an evergreen shrub that grows in swamps and hammocks. It gets its name from its small red fruit and leaves with wavy margins, which resemble the true coffee plant. The small white flowers of wild coffee provide a source of nectar for butterflies. The fruit serve as food for birds, including the northern mockingbird, the state bird of Florida.



WILD COTTON

Gossypium hirsutum

Wild cotton is a large shrub native to Florida, the Caribbean, and Central America. Derived from this species are most of the commercially cultivated cotton plants from which the world's most widely used natural fiber is produced. Wild cotton was quite plentiful in Florida until the 1930s, when action was taken to eradicate it from the state in an effort to prevent the spread of the pink boll weevil. It is now illegal to grow wild cotton in Florida, where it is listed as an endangered species.



YAUPON HOLLY

Ilex vomitoria

Yaupon holly is a small tree or shrub that grows in hammocks, wetlands, and coastal dunes. Female plants produce bright red berries that provide a source of food for wildlife. Yaupon holly leaves contain caffeine. They have been used to make a substitute for tea, as well as a beverage known as the "black drink," which induced vomiting when consumed in large quantities.