

Native Plantsman Profile

— Charles E. Salter —

by Fritz Wettstein

In addition to the color and diversity of the plant life, the Tallahassee Red Hills and Apalachicola River Basin area is blessed with an assortment of colorful people. Here is a profile of one of them, native plant nurseryman Chuck Salter, written after a conversation with him at a Magnolia Chapter meeting.

Chuck Salter is not much into "clubbing" these days: "You can club just so long. I've got all I can do just to keep my plants wet and seeds planted." But he keeps a discriminating eye on what's going on in the chapter, evidenced by his showing up for Guy Anglin's two-slide-tray program of every plant of the Apalachicola National Forest that is endangered, rare, or otherwise significant.

Chuck is an older man with a broad face, physique, and grip; and a gray, stubbly haircut. He recalls both the 1970s and the 1930s as if they were yesterday. Chuck recalls his first experience with forestry. When he was 12 years old he won a prize for an essay he wrote on "Why We Need Trees". He traces the first efforts on the conservation front in Florida to the Depression years of the 1930s. At that time, the pine flatwoods and sandhills were cut over from one side of the state to the other. From Tallahassee to Medart, nothing broke the horizon line except some scrub oaks. During the Depression many cutover land tracts with delinquent taxes were bought under presumption laws by giant timbering interests like DuPont and St. Regis, and later reforested. "It's easy to be critical, but if you ever saw what they started with..."

Mr. Salter describes his early career as a "talkin' forester". When they thought he was out putting up Smokey Bear signs, he was spending his time finding out what was growing in the woods. He came upon Chapman's rhododendron as an odd plant on the Liberty County line, looked it up, went back into the woods and dug one to plant by Chapman's grave. Through a friend he secured protection for the plant from landowner Ed Ball ("He was a pirate . . . flew the Jolly Roger."), who in learning of the rare plant was rumored to have said, "You mean the same as in Scotland?"

and decided to protect the plants. This was thirty years prior to the Endangered Species Act. Chuck estimates that between 2500 and 3000 plants remain in the flatwoods between Hosford and Port St. Joe.

Magnolia Chapter has yet to get Chuck to lead a field trip to one of the patches of Chapman's rhododendrons that he keeps a watchful eye on, but he teaches every young forester about the plant and its conservation. "I'll do that 'til I die," he says, talking about how to keep them from "buggerin' it up" until the land isn't good for much of anything else but little pine trees. Still, he notes with a twinkle, that one colony has been through forestry regeneration practices twice, having been plowed, piled in to piles, and burned. Now with the saw palmetto suppression practices of burning, tilling, and spraying, the endangered colony requires protection by a fence.

Chuck Salter was in the vanguard of the native plant preservation movement, not only as a charter member of the Florida Native Plant Society, but also prior to that as a co-founder of what became kiddingly known as the Upsy Daisy Plant Uplift Society. In the 1970s, he, Paul Wills, and Malcolm Johnson, the newspaperman, had long admired the prettiest, sweetest smelling wild azaleas in the Tallahassee area. As it turned out, the best locale of these jewels was the planned Interstate 10 corridor north of town. Chuck credits Malcolm with the idea of seeing if people would be interested in a plant dig and convincing the DOT lawyers that their bureaucratic reaction to the idea would make good press.

The first public plant dig was held on a wet, cold, February day that, according to Chuck, "would make the dogs go back into the doghouse." Before noon over 5000 people had

shown up and "there was no end to the amusing things that went on." Chuck recalls the proverbial "little old lady in tennis shoes" digging a 7-foot azalea out of the mud, then dragging it into her Volkswagen; and another time when some boys having a hunt ran a deer through the digging party. When all was said and done, the Upsy Daisy Plant Uplift Society had 14 plant digs, with an estimated 60,000 participants and 200,000 rescued plants and national television coverage by Charles Kurault.

Chuck Salter is proud of the accomplishments of FNPS and native plant growers such as Joyce and Don Gann. "In fifteen years we have made inroads in the plant business." Chuck points to several factors as important to this success. One is that the native plants in the southeastern United States are as good a group of ornamental species as will be found in the world. Another is that propagation, production, and sale of native plants is good plant conservation. Chuck Salter was among the first to recognize the importance of the profit motive. For many native plants such as *Franklinia* and perhaps *Torreya*, persistence cannot be guaranteed unless the plants' survival is carried on through the plant trade.

Still thinking out loud about the *torreya* tree and his traverses of north Florida and south Georgia's steephead ravines, with a wink of his eye, Chuck declares, "There may be more of them out there than we know about." It is the mission of the Florida Native Plant Society to find these stands and preserve their habitats for future generations — of trees and humans.

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