

 **Bear Right at next 2 Trail Intersections to Pond Vista**

17 - POND VISTA

Like most of Florida’s natural ponds, this one probably originated as a sinkhole when rain dissolved the underlying limestone. Now it’s a beautiful pond with white water lilies and other aquatic plants, turtles, frogs, egrets, and – in spring – a pair of Sandhill Cranes that nests on one of the small islands.




 **Bear Right at next Trail Intersection**

18 - PRICKLY PEAR

(Behind sand mound) – There are actually 2 species of this spiny native cactus in our area – the common one with the fleshy green pads that sprawl out near the ground and a larger one that grows an upright trunk and branches with grayish-green pads. Both have big, beautiful yellow flowers in April and May that attract bees, beetles, and other pollinating insects. The purplish-red “prickly pears” are edible after the outer bristly skin is peeled off.



 **Continue Straight**

19 - SOUTHERN LIVE OAK

This is the quintessential, symbolic tree of the deep south, with its massive, short trunk and immense, spreading horizontal limbs with their hanging clumps of Spanish Moss. None of our Live Oaks have yet reached these proportions, but they can live for more than 1000 years! Live Oak’s leathery leaves are larger and wider than those of Sand Live Oak (Stop 6), smoother on top, and their margins don’t curl under as much. Note that they’re paler and downy underneath. The name “Live” refers to its habit of retaining its leaves through most of the winter. Live Oak can be found from inland sand ridges to coastal marshes.



20 - SAW PALMETTO

Usually growing low and prostrate, with most of its trunk underground, this relative of palm trees may live hundreds of years and form dense, impenetrable thickets. Named for the sharp spines on its leaf stalks, Saw Palmetto is distinguished from Florida’s state-tree, Cabbage (or Sabal) Palm by its fan-shaped leaf: the long stem stops abruptly at the base of the fan rather than continuing up the middle in a crease. The spike-like clusters of small, greenish-white flowers become olive-sized fruits that turn from yellow to black and are an important food for wildlife from box turtles to black bears. They’re also valued as medicinal by some people.



21 - DAHOON HOLLY

Set back 50 feet from the trail, this wetland holly is a small, smooth-barked tree with beautiful, abundant red berries in season. Unlike Carolina Holly (Stop 2), its leaves are long, narrow, and evergreen. It is much more common in the wet areas of our North Preserve.



22 - WETLAND

Although it’s just a bit lower than the surrounding terrain, this area becomes very wet after heavy rains, and was covered by 3 feet of standing water after Hurricane Irma in Sept., 2017. Look on the ground for the tiny red rosettes of sundew – a wetland, insect-eating plant that captures small prey on its sticky leaves. Pink flowers of Sabatia, white Bog Buttons (pipewort), yellow Batchelor’s Buttons, and shrubby, golden-yellow St. Johnswort beautify this open wet area in spring and summer.



23 - WILDLIFE

Most of our larger mammals are active at night, but the footprints of deer, bobcat, coyote, raccoon, and even black bear may sometimes be seen in the sand, as well as the roofs of mole tunnels and the small holes dug by armadillos searching for food. Listen for the voices of Carolina Wrens, Eastern Towhees, Northern Cardinals, Pine Warblers, Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers, White-Eyed Vireos, and other songbirds that nest in these woods. Scan the skies for soaring Red-Tailed and Red-Shouldered Hawks, vultures, Bald Eagles, and – from March to August – the incomparably graceful Swallow-Tailed Kite. And look along the trail for lightning-fast 6-Lined Racerunner lizards, tiny Oak Toads, banded-winged grasshoppers, and a variety of beautiful dragonflies and butterflies.



24 - REINDEER “MOSS”

Not a moss at all but rather a lichen, this symbiotic union between a fungus and an alga grows from the Arctic tundra (where it’s an important food for caribou, or reindeer) to Florida. In a lichen, the invisible algal partner provides carbohydrate food via photosynthesis while the visible fungal partner absorbs water vapor and dew and gives shade. Resembling creamy-white, pillow-like mats on the ground, Reindeer Moss is spongy when wet but brittle and crunchy when dry. It is commonly used to represent shrubs and trees in model train sets and museum and architectural dioramas. Lichens grow extremely slowly and are very sensitive to air pollution.



 **End of Loop - Continue Straight to Trail Kiosk**

CONCLUSION

Walking these trails brings a different experience with each season: the sky-blue flowers of Wild Lupine in March; the songs of breeding birds in spring; the calls of 8 or 9 different frogs emanating from ponds and wetlands on warm nights in the rainy season; the gorgeous pink flowers of Blazing Star, Paint Brush, and Garberia in late autumn; the evening hoots of Great Horned Owls in November; and even a bit of fall color on the Red Maples, Turkey Oaks, and Shining Sumacs in early winter. The trails in the southern half of this South Preserve, as well as those in the North Preserve (across Victoria Gardens Drive) also contain diverse natural habitats offering wonderful opportunities to experience more of the “wild Florida” preserved by Victoria Park. And join Victoria Gardens’ Resident Naturalists on their monthly guided walks into these preserves on Saturday mornings from September through May.

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**A SELF-GUIDING
BOOKLET TO
VICTORIA GARDENS
South Preserve**



Text and Photos by
John Serrao
January 2019

TRAIL MAP



Map Legend

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 Myrtle Oak | 13 Gopher Tortoise |
| 2 Carolina Holly | 14 Shiny Blueberry |
| 3 Water Oak | 15 Scrub Holly |
| 4 Longleaf Pine | 16 Lyonia |
| 5 Laurel Oak | 17 Pond Vista |
| 6 Sand Live Oak | 18 Prickly Pear |
| 7 Turkey Oak | 19 Southern Live Oak |
| 8 Chapman Oak | 20 Saw Palmetto |
| 9 Sand Pine | 21 Dahoon Holly |
| 10 Pawpaw | 22 Wetland |
| 11 Silk Bay | 23 Wildlife |
| 12 Gopher Apple | 24 Reindeer Moss |

INTRODUCTION

Our community is very fortunate to have large conservation areas permanently protected from development and managed scientifically to benefit wildlife such as the rare Florida Scrub Jay and Gopher Tortoise. These areas have several miles of trails to walk and experience nature’s peacefulness and beauty, and the diversity of plants and animals that characterize natural Florida.

This Self-Guiding Trail starts at the Trail Kiosk and is a loop of about 1 mile, covering the northern half of the Victoria Gardens South Preserve. There are 24 numbered Stops along the trail describing our native plants and wildlife. Most of the habitat is categorized as dry, sandy upland – “Scrub-High Pine”, “Sandhill”, or “Pine Flatwoods” – but some wetlands will also be crossed.

Enjoy nature’s serenity and become acquainted with some of central Florida’s native flora and fauna that have been preserved here in Victoria Gardens.

Turn Right at Kiosk

1 - MYRTLE OAK

7 kinds of oaks grow along this trail, and most of them don’t have the typical lobed, cut-leaf foliage that makes oaks so easy to differentiate in the northern states. At first glance, their leaves may all look similar, but each species has unique identification traits. Myrtle Oak is the most common oak along this trail, forming very dense, shrubby thickets and rarely reaching tree-size (the ones above the Kiosk are unusually large). Its oblong or oval leaves are the smallest of our 7 oaks, and (like those of the cultivated Myrtle) they are evergreen, leathery, and shiny, especially on the upper surfaces. Some leaves may also have slightly rolled-under margins. All oaks – and only oaks – produce acorns that are very important food sources for birds and mammals.



2 - CAROLINA HOLLY

Unlike American Holly, this smaller species is not evergreen – its small, oval leaves fall off in autumn. It also prefers drier habitats (American Holly prefers moist woods and floodplains). Note its smooth, gray bark and small, round berries that turn from green to red – inedible to humans but eaten by many kinds of birds.



3 - WATER OAK

Very uncommon here, this non-evergreen oak prefers wetter habitats. Note the spatulate-shaped leaves that are much wider at the top (sometimes appearing 3-lobed), and turn one over to see the tufts of orange fuzz where the veins intersect.



Bear Right at Trail Intersection

4 - LONGLEAF PINE

Once the dominant tree across much of the southeastern U.S., less than 10% of this original forest remains. These old-growth trees were cut for lumber and replaced with faster-growing Slash Pine plantations. Today, however, our public forests are being replanted with this valuable tree to benefit

the plants and wildlife that depended on it and its savannah-like habitat. Its needles are extremely long (12 inches or more) and usually grow in bundles of 3, and its huge cones are 6 to 8 inches long. In spring the new growth shoots out from the tips of the thick branches like silvery candles. Longleaf Pine’s most unique feature is its young “grass stage” that resembles a big clump of drooping grass and may last for several years before the first trunk bolts up a few feet in one season. Longleaf Pine is very resistant to fire, especially its “grass stage” and saplings above 5 feet tall.



5 - LAUREL OAK

Also called Darlington Oak, this common Florida tree often grows very large. Compared to Southern Live Oak (Stop 19), Laurel Oak’s bark is smoother, and its leaves are narrower, thinner, smooth on both sides (like those of Mountain Laurel), and have a distinct yellow mid-rib. On new growth, some leaves may be divided into pointed lobes.



6 - SAND LIVE OAK

Smaller than the famous Southern Live Oak (Stop 19), this tree is most common on dry, sandy ridges and coastal dunes. Note the rough, furrowed bark and the distinct rolled-under edges of the evergreen, leathery, elongated leaves – like upside-down boats. The leaves have a shiny, rough, deeply-veined texture on top and a gray, downy lower surface.



7 - TURKEY OAK

Here’s an oak with leaves that a northerner can recognize – deeply cut with pointed, bristly tips, and deciduous (falling off in autumn). Some leaves have 3 conspicuous lobes, like the long pointed toes of a turkey. The dark, blocky bark resembles alligator skin. Turkey Oak commonly grows with Longleaf Pine on Florida’s well-drained sandy uplands.



8 - CHAPMAN OAK

This small oak of Florida’s sandy scrub habitats has different bark than our other 6: pale gray and flaking off easily when rubbed. The oval leaves – at least twice the size of Myrtle Oak’s – are very glossy on top and pale and downy beneath. Note that many have wavy rather than flat surfaces, and some may have small lobes. Chapman Oak is considered “semi-evergreen” – the leaves gradually fall off through winter.



9 - SAND PINE

A common, medium-sized tree on central Florida’s inland sandy ridges, Sand Pine has short needles and small cones that may remain on the branches for years. Some cones stay tightly closed and don’t open to release seeds until heated by fire. (A third common Florida pine – Slash Pine – occurs in our conservation areas but not along this section of trail.)



Bear Right at this and next Trail Intersections

10 - PAWPAW

Several species of Pawpaw grow in Victoria Park, none getting much larger than a shrub. Most have long, narrow, blunt leaves and either creamy white or maroon flowers in spring. The edible fruits are green, bulbous, and appear much too large for such a small plant. Pawpaw leaves are the sole food of the beautiful Zebra Swallowtail butterfly’s caterpillar.



11 - SILK BAY

Found nowhere else in the world but the sandy scrub of central Florida, this small evergreen tree gets its name from the leaf’s soft, silky-smooth, brownish undersurface. Like its close relatives (Red Bay and Swamp Bay) its leaves are very fragrant. Unfortunately, all members of this family, including avocado, are being attacked by an alien ambrosia beetle that wilts and eventually kills the leaves.



12 - GOPHER APPLE

The long, leathery, shiny leaves of this low ground cover are very common in dry pinelands and scrub habitats. In late spring, tiny whitish flowers appear in upright spikes, and these develop in autumn into big, oval, fleshy fruits – white with a reddish or purplish tinge – that are very tasty to both humans and gopher tortoises.



Trail turns sharp Left ahead

13 - GOPHER TORTOISE

One of our most recognizable creatures, this totally terrestrial turtle (it can’t swim) is often seen grazing on these trails and along Victoria Gardens Drive. It is protected by law and listed as “Threatened” in Florida because so much of its habitat has been destroyed by development. The tortoise’s underground burrows (as much as 10 feet deep and 25 feet long) are important shelters to many other animals, from rare Gopher Frogs and Indigo Snakes to hundreds of insects, spiders, lizards, and even mammals. A strict herbivore, the Gopher Tortoise also gets almost all of its water from the plants that it eats.



Continue past Spur Trail on right that goes to Victoria Gardens Drive, and then sharp Left at next Trail Intersection

14 - SHINY BLUEBERRY

This low species of blueberry has tiny, glossy leaves, white or pink bell-like flowers, and small, edible berries that turn from green to red to black in late spring and summer.



15 - SCRUB HOLLY

The thick evergreen, spiny-edged leaves of this small tree are instantly recognizable as those of holly. It’s a special variety of American Holly called Scrub Holly, which grows only in the dry, sandy, scrub of central Florida. Like all hollies, it has separate male and female trees, the latter of which bear red berries in winter.



Bear Right at next Trail Intersection

16 - LYONIA

4 different species of Lyonia grow along this trail. Related to azaleas and rhododendrons, these shrubs have small, late spring flowers that resemble white or pink “urns”, or hanging bells (like another relative, blueberry). Rusty-Lyonia may reach the size of a small tree and its leaves are the easiest to recognize: the margins are curled under and the undersides are distinctly fuzzy and rust-colored. Coastal Staggerbush also has leaves with rusty undersides but the edges don’t roll under. Fetterbush has small pink or red flowers, not white like the other 3 species. Staggerbush has the largest leaves and flowers – white, hanging clusters. (Another close relative – Tarflower – blooms along this section with big, showy, 7-petaled white flowers in June.)

