

Florida offers more than sandy beaches and tropical palms
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Many folks seem to think of the Sunshine State as miles and miles of sandy beaches with tropical palm trees waving in the sea breeze while the sun sets and paints the sky in an array of colors. While this is an accurate description of some areas, Florida has so much more to offer.

Many diverse plant communities can be found here besides the coastal areas, such as hardwood hammocks, pine flatwoods, wetlands, and scrub. Those who have never examined these inland Edens are missing out on a fantastic natural experience!

Hardwood hammocks are among the most lush and green of Florida's plant communities. Walking into such a forest is like stepping into a time tunnel. Majestic in its beauty, it is difficult for the visitor not to be consumed completely.

A canopy of branches covers the sky and the coolness of the air envelopes you. Humidity and darkness give the air a primitive feel and it's almost as if you are the only human ever to have walked there. Mighty oaks hover above you, with their long, reaching branches creating shade. Sweetgums wave in the breeze, sending their starlike leaves floating down to meet the forest floor. Pignut hickories shed their little round fruits for the squirrels and other forest creatures to nibble on. And rising up among those hardwoods, is the proud Sabal palm, craning above the green crowns of its neighbors, poking through the dome to reach the sunlight.

In contrast, when one steps into the pine flatwoods, the musical sound of the trees blowing with the wind and the piney smell take the traveler into another place. These flatwoods are the most common plant community in Florida, covering about 50% of the natural land. With an overstory of bright green pines, these low-lying forests were formed by changes in the sea level during glacial times. As the sea level increased, these areas were flooded and thick layers of sand were deposited on these sites. Once the sea levels receded, hardy flora, such as pines were able to begin their lives in the sandy soil.

Although the pine forests don't offer nearly the amount of shade as the hardwood hammock, they have a magical beauty of their own. They house a large variety of wildlife and are characterized by wiregrass, gallberry, saw palmetto and fetterbush. The communities are fire dependent and must have occasional fire to survive and stay healthy. The plants that reside within these forests have adaptations to protect them from the flames or even if completely consumed, have a strong enough root system to resprout once the fire is gone.

Journey into an eerie, mysterious area to discover one of Florida's most valuable plant communities. As with the hammock, one may feel transported back in time when entering the wetlands. It could be a cypress swamp, with the huge buttressed trunks protruding out of the tea colored water and cypress knees popping up every where. Perhaps a primitive looking alligator will splash into the nearby water or a great blue heron will search for fish. Or maybe a marsh, where one can see for long distances because there are so few trees, but plenty of wet soil and moisture loving plants.

Wetlands are among the most crucial plant communities and serve as filters for the environment. They also serve as important flood control areas. These ecosystems include swamps, marshes, bogs and other areas that have soil which is saturated with moisture most of the time. Wetlands are considered the most biologically diverse of all plant communities. The plants and animals that live in these communities include mangroves, lilies, sedges, cypress trees, various amphibians, reptiles, birds, insects and mammals.

Unlike the humid, damp area of the wetlands, desert like conditions such as searing heat and endless sand will greet the visitor that enters the Florida scrub. This is perhaps the most unique and most unappreciated plant community of all. Sculpted by centuries of rising and falling of the ocean, the scrub communities are unique and endangered. The highest area in Florida, the Lake Wales Ridge, comprised of scrub, towers above the lower lying ground at 300 feet above sea level. This is home to thousands of plants and animals that live nowhere else in the entire world, which is ironic since this is one of the most difficult plant communities to survive in.

Plants and animals that thrive in the scrub must be adapted to the harsh environment. The flora that resides in these desert-like conditions will mostly have a shallow root system. When the rains do come, the sandy soil soaks it up so fast that the plant roots need to be near the surface to get the much needed moisture. Other plants sport thorns and volatile oils to protect them from being eaten by predators. Perhaps the most well known animal that resides in this area is the Florida scrub jay. This beautiful blue colored bird is known for its friendly, tame attitude. These birds will eat right out of human hands. They are endemic to Florida and can live nowhere else but this harsh environment.

So you see Florida is indeed much more than palm trees and sandy beaches. There is much diversity to enjoy here and we as Floridians are fortunate to live in such a diverse and beautiful state. Now get out there and enjoy nature!