



Why Should Florida Scrub be Burned?

In order for us to protect Florida scrub, we must allow it to be burned. This statement may seem contradictory, but Florida is truly a community shaped by fire. Florida scrub exists as many small islands of low-growing oaks, occasional sand pines, and occasional herbaceous plants on the Lake Wales ridge in south central Florida. Natural fires have occurred in this community for thousands of years; these fires were probably intense and infrequent, with most areas burning about every 7 to 60 years. Many fires were probably started by lightning strikes (Florida has more lightning strikes per year than any other place in the world!), but native Americans may have started some fires to improve conditions for game.

Florida scrub is home to over 20 federally listed species of plants that occur nowhere else in the world, and fire is important to almost all of these species. Most of these rare species are herbaceous plants that are inconspicuous or absent in areas that are long-unburned, but that flower and produce seeds and new plants in the first few years after a fire.

Excellent examples are the namesakes of this chapter of the Native Plant Society -- species in the genus *Dicerandra*. Of the four described species of *Dicerandra* in Florida scrub, the most intensively studied species is *Dicerandra frutescens*, known from only a few locations on the Lake Wales Ridge. Eric Menges at Archbold Biological Station has found that plants in this species are usually absent from scrub areas that are long-unburned. Some plants can occasionally hang on in openings in areas that haven't been burned, though. If an area like this burns, the adult plants are killed, but seedlings germinate from seeds stored for years in the soil, and the plant population is replenished.

Fire performs many beneficial functions for *Dicerandra* species and other rare plant species in Florida scrub, such as improving conditions for seedling establishment and reducing competition from larger plants for light, water and soil nutrients. Occasional controlled burning of Florida scrub areas is essential for these rare plant species, and should be supported in order to preserve Florida scrub as we know it.

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