

FLORIDA LAND STEWARD



A Quarterly Newsletter for Florida Landowners and Resource Professionals

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Congratulations Ronnie Stephenson: 2024 Florida Land Steward of the Year



Ronnie Stephenson proudly displaying his Wildlife Habitat Recognition sign from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Photo by Arlo Kane.

Ronnie Stephenson's passion for wildlife and his tenacity for hands-on habitat management goes above and beyond what would be expected of one person. Ronnie grew up in the Florida Panhandle where his family owned and managed a couple historic

hotels along Panama City Beach. He purchased his Cottondale Farm in 1996 which encompasses 159 acres with 60 acres leased to a local farmer for agricultural purposes, where a portion of the crop is left in the field each year for wildlife. While his children and grandchildren provide occasional help, Ronnie does most of the land management himself. In addition to the Cottondale Farm, Ronnie owns and manages 300 acres on the state line near Grangeburg, Alabama. He states that it's a seven day a week job, but it is a labor of love.

The farms are his passion, and he works on them daily to optimize wildlife habitat through a variety of management activities. Ronnie harvested 14 acres of mature

slash pine and reforested to longleaf pine and cleared large areas of heavy brush and hardwoods to create northern bobwhite quail habitat. He is encouraged and proud that the wondrous sounds of the bobwhite have returned to the farm.

Ronnie conducts prescribed burns annually to manage the forested areas and wildlife corridors that are adjacent to the agricultural fields. The field edge habitat on his farm is exceptional and provides forage habitat and cover for a multitude of birds and pollinators. Ronnie also has a healthy disdain for invasive species and bolsters his management by treating invasive plants with herbicide, primarily targeting Chinese tallow and cogongrass.

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An Equal Opportunity Institution.



Ronnie with his trusted bird dog enjoying quail hunting on his property. Photo by Ronnie Stephenson.



Prescribed burn. Photo by Ronnie Stephenson.

Perhaps Ronnie's most impressive management practice is the planting of more than 1,000 hard and soft mast trees around the property, solely for the use and benefit of wildlife. He has planted varieties of chestnut, pecan, pear, apple, oak, blueberry, and persimmon. As a talented grower, Ronnie propagated most of the mast trees on his property using his own cuttings and grafting techniques. Some of the Fuyu persimmon trees on the property, which are vigorous fruit producers, were grafted to native persimmon root stock to make them more suitable to the local soils and climate.

In addition to the larger scale management activities, Ronnie has created depressions for retaining water at multiple sites that are utilized as supplemental open water sources by wildlife. His property is home to several areas of

beautiful cypress dome swamp, and he maintains nine wood duck nesting boxes. He has retained many older dead trees, or snags, on the property and plants small grains and wildflowers in the field margins annually.

Ronnie seeks out the advice of foresters and wildlife biologists and is willing to share his knowledge with anyone with an interest. In 2022, Ronnie led a Forest Stewardship tour on his property to provide information and give his experience to other landowners about how they can integrate wildlife practices into their forestry operations. He explained multiple grafting and planting techniques for the mast producing trees located on his property. He also shares his expertise and enthusiasm for land stewardship on Winston Chester's Panhandle Outdoors show. These episodes can be found on

their YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/@PanhandleOutdoors>.

Ronnie enjoys running his bird dogs for bobwhite quail and hunting deer and turkey with his grandchildren. When asked why he works so hard in managing his property, he says, "I have gotten so much enjoyment throughout my life from nature, I just want to give something back." He goes further to say that the biggest payoff of all his hard work is to see his grandchildren's excitement when they are sitting in a tree stand together and a deer or turkey walks by. Ronnie's tireless contributions to wildlife and habitat management have been an example of dedication and hard work that will expand and inspire the next generation of land stewards.



(Left) Ronnie leading a Florida Land Steward Tour in April 2022. Photo by Chris Demers. (Right) Ronnie and his prize persimmon tree. Photo by Nathan Bunting.

Tree-nesting Ducks in Florida

By Pete Diamond, Biological Scientist, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Florida's diverse wetlands provide important habitat to roughly 60 species of resident, migrant, and non-native waterfowl. Among these are wood ducks (*Aix sponsa*) and black-bellied whistling ducks (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*), two species that sometimes perch in trees. These ducks look quite different from one another but have similar habits and habitat preferences. They are also the only waterfowl in Florida that lay their eggs in tree cavities or elevated nest boxes. This adaptation to nesting in trees reduces the risk of predation faced by ground-nesting ducks.

Female wood ducks and black-bellied whistling ducks seek out abandoned woodpecker holes or naturally occurring tree hollows in which to lay their eggs. Both species readily take to artificial

nest boxes, a key factor for helping wood ducks recover from historic lows in the early 1900s. Today, wood ducks are one of the most harvested waterfowl species in the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyways. Black-bellied whistling ducks are another success story, expanding their range across the southeastern U.S. from Mexico and Central and South America over the past 70 years.

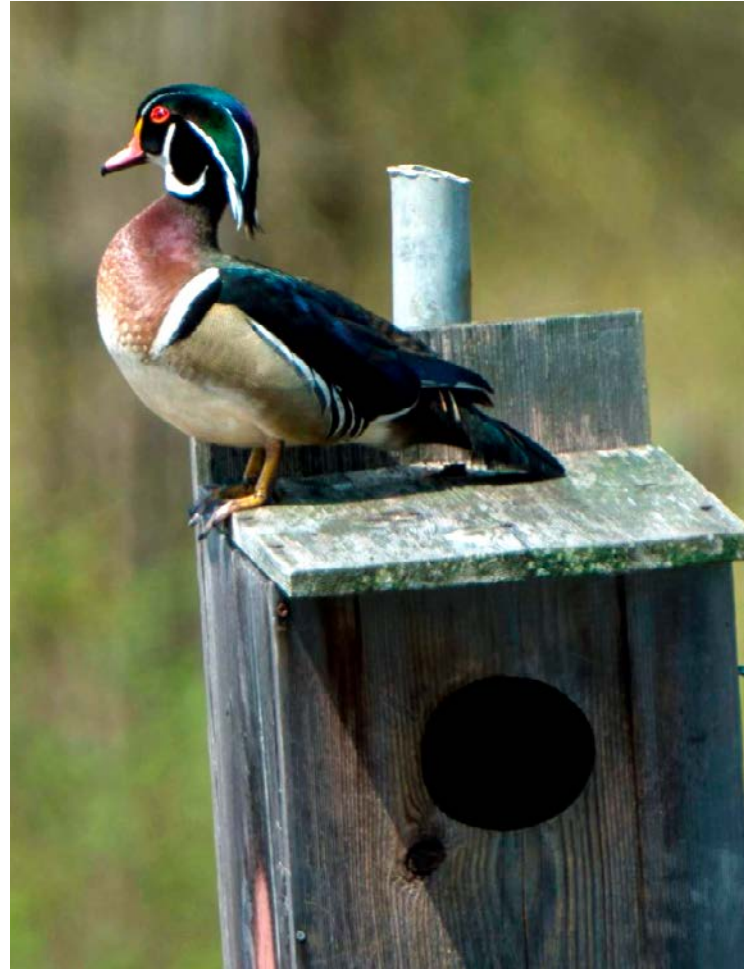
Breeding and overwintering ducks in some parts of the country are up against habitat loss and degradation from encroaching development and invasive wetland plants, as well as weather extremes and infectious diseases such as Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Appropriate management activities can support these species against such hurdles.

Nest Boxes

Landowners can help wood ducks and black-bellied whistling ducks overcome the challenge of finding suitable nesting sites by installing nest boxes in advance of the breeding season, or before the end of December in Florida. Wood ducks typically begin nesting in January, with egg-laying peaking between February and March. The nesting season may extend into June or as late as August and some hens may lay a second clutch. Nest initiation among black-bellied whistling ducks begins in April and extends through August.

Nesting boxes for ducks and other cavity-nesting birds are best constructed

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(Left) Cavity in a pond cypress tree. Photo by Peter Diamond. (Right) Wood duck drake on a nest box. Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

from natural, rough-cut cedar or cypress that is not treated with any type of paint, stain, or sealer. Galvanized screws and hardware are recommended for tighter gripping and to avoid rusting. Ensure that side walls have holes for ventilation and the floor has four to five holes for draining rainwater. A hinged side door or roof will help with annual maintenance and cleaning. Avoid using metal or recycled poly lumber for birdhouse walls as these materials retain excessive, and potentially lethal, heat.

As with any bird box, the size of the entry hole determines what birds – and potential predators such as raccoons, hawks, and owls – can or cannot access the box. An oval entry hole 4.5 inches wide and 3.25 inches tall is sufficient for wood ducks. A slightly larger opening five to six inches in diameter and four inches tall is better for black-bellied whistling ducks. The top of the hole should be about 19 inches above the floor. On the interior wall below the entrance hole, cut shallow horizontal grooves or install quarter-inch hardware cloth to help ducklings climb out of the box. Pile four to six inches of fresh wood shavings in the box for nesting material. Sawdust is not advisable as it can suffocate ducklings and traps undesirable moisture within the box.

Location & Habitat

The adaptation of wood ducks and black-bellied whistling ducks to nesting in trees reduces the risk of predation faced by ground-nesting ducks who lay their eggs close to, or surrounded by, water. In seasonally dry habitats such as river floodplains and forested bottomlands, some wood ducks may end up nesting a half-mile or more from water. For newly hatched ducklings, a long journey to the water's edge can be dangerous. Good quality habitat includes a mix of upland shrubs and grasses and emergent wetland plants that offer valuable protective cover for a hen and her ducklings. Nest trees and nest boxes closer to water generally have higher duckling survival rates than those that are farther away.

Locate duck boxes in a shaded or lightly shaded area where it is easy to perform annual maintenance and orient the entry hole towards water, so hens have an unobstructed flight path to and from the box. Secure duck boxes five to 10 feet above the high-water mark on metal poles, and place tree-mounted boxes 10 to 30 feet or more above the ground. Installing metal predator guards or baffles below nest boxes will help deter raccoons, snakes, and other potential nest raiders during the 25- to 30-day incubation period.

Ducklings face many challenges during the eight-week period before they fledge or are fully able to fly, including predators, parasites and diseases, adverse weather, and a lack of food. Higher quality wetland habitats offer ducklings a greater chance of survival by providing a mix of emergent vegetation and open water, good escape cover, and an abundance and diversity of protein-rich insects and aquatic plants.

Maintenance

Annual maintenance in autumn, or at least before New Year's Day, is essential to ensure nest boxes remain in good condition and attractive to ducks. Remove old nesting materials, eggshells, other organic debris, and non-target inhabitants, such as squirrels, wasps, bees, and ants.

Replace rotted or damaged wood and add a fresh four- to six-inch layer of wood shavings. Adjust mounting poles and nest boxes to ensure they are secure and are vertical or leaning slightly forward. This will make it easier for ducklings to climb up and out of the nest box. Prune overhanging branches to discourage predators from accessing nest boxes and check that predator guards are functioning properly.

Installing nest boxes and maintaining quality wetland habitats are important for ensuring a healthy and productive future for Florida's colorful cavity-nesting wood ducks and black-bellied whistling ducks.

Consult these online resources for constructing or purchasing nest boxes and predator guards:

Ducks Unlimited:

Build a Wood Duck Box

(<https://www.ducks.org/conservation/waterfowl-research-science/build-a-wood-duck-box>)

Build a Duck Box Predator Guard

(<https://www.ducks.org/conservation/waterfowl-research-science/build-a-duck-box-predator-guard>)

Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission:

Wood duck box

(<https://myfwc.com/media/3187/wood-duck-box.pdf>)

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service:

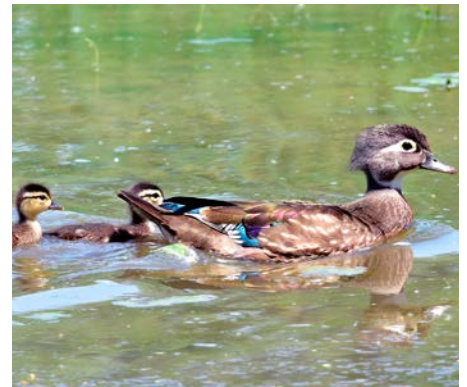
Nest & Den Box Specifications for Upland and Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management

(https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/api/CPSFile/6050/649_FL_OTH_Structures_for_Wildlife-Nest_Den_Boxes_Specifications_2002)

National Audubon Society:

How to Build a Wood Duck Nest Box

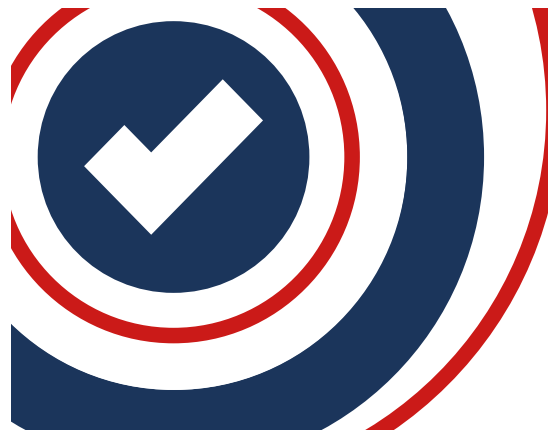
(<https://www.audubon.org/news/how-build-wood-duck-nest-box>)



(Top) Mama wood duck with chicks. Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. (Bottom) Nest box at Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area. Photo by Peter Diamond.

Tax Tips for Forest Landowners: 2023 Tax Year

As a private forest landowner, you may start to think about timber-related Federal income taxes only after having a timber sale. However, each forest activity you conduct can have tax implications. Generally, all income received is taxable unless excluded by tax law, and nothing is deductible unless a provision allows it. Understanding the forest-related provisions and integrating tax planning into your forest management can help lower your taxes. The annual tax tips publication, produced by the U.S. Forest Service and academic partners from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and The University of Georgia's Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, is intended to be an informational and educational resource for you and your tax advisor, but is not intended as financial,



tax, or legal advice. Please consult with your tax advisor concerning your particular tax situation. Access the 2023 Tax Tips publication at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/features/timber-tax-tips>.



Questions about the tax implications of your management activities can be directed to Dr. Tamara Cushing, Forest Business Extension Specialist, UF/IFAS School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences, <https://ffgs.ifas.ufl.edu/faculty/cushing-tamara>

2024 New Year 30% Enrollment Discount for the Online Forest Landowner Academy

Get the promotion code and enroll by February 29, 2024.

We're kicking off another year of the online Forest Landowner Academy course with a 30% discount. **Promotion code is good through February 29, 2024.** The 7 course modules cover a variety of topics on understanding your forest resources, developing your management plan, timber management,

marketing forest products, other forest enterprises such as pine straw and hunting leases, wildlife management, and planning for the future. Each module includes recorded video from the field or virtual classroom, links to references, and an assessment where you can apply what you've learned to your land or situation. Those completing the course will earn a University of Florida Certificate of Completion.

Direct link to enroll in the Forest Landowner Academy:
<https://ifas-sfrc-for.catalog.instructure.com/courses/for-fla>
Use promotion code: SWDXWF

For more information, contact:

Chris Demers at cdemers@ufl.edu, (352) 846-2375 or Dr. Michael Andreu, mandreu@ufl.edu

Don't miss out on news and events!

A LOT happens between quarterly issues of this newsletter!

Sign up for the regular Florida Land Steward email updates so you don't miss out on assistance and educational opportunities. Send an email to cdemers@ufl.edu to be added to the listserv. Email updates are sent once a week or every other week and include the latest calendar of workshops, tours, webinars, and other events; a link to the current issue of this quarterly newsletter; updates on cost-share and other assistance programs, opportunities, and resources; and other stewardship related news and information.

All the latest news and events are online at the new UF/IFAS Florida Land Steward Program web site: <https://programs.ifas.ufl.edu/florida-land-steward/>.

TIMBER PRICE UPDATE

The timber price information below is useful for observing trends over time, but does not reflect current conditions at a particular location. Landowners considering a timber sale are advised to solicit the services of a consulting forester to obtain current local market conditions.

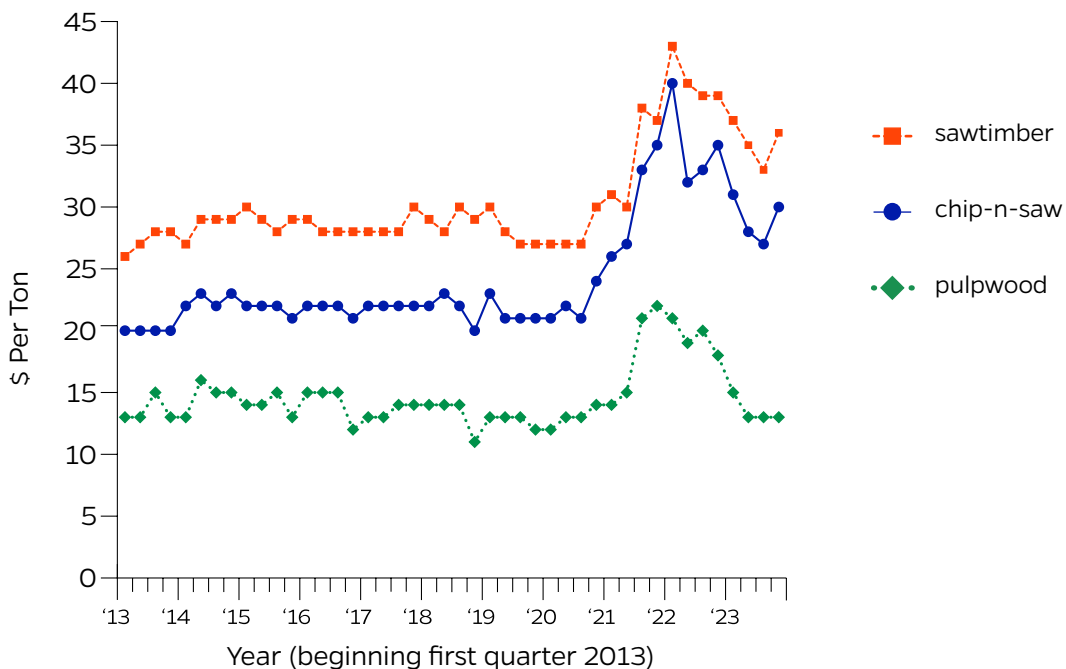
Average stumpage prices for the three major products in Florida, as reported in the **4th Quarter 2023** Timber Mart-South report were:

Florida Stumpage Prices	
Pine pulpwood:	\$13/ton, same as 3 rd Qtr. 2023
Pine C-N-S:	\$30/ton, ↑
Pine sawtimber:	\$36/ton, ↑

Trend Report

Average stumpage prices for most major timber products increased in the last quarter of 2023 in Florida and across much of the region. In Florida this was likely attributable to persistent wet weather, especially around the Big Bend region of the state where, as of this report, many areas continue to be flooded. Despite the positive trends in stumpage prices, market indicators for pulp, paper, and solid wood products are all down slightly compared to this period in 2022. In industry news, and according to the fall 2023 F&W Forestry Services' Forestry Report, the U.S.-based WestRock paper and packaging company has agreed to a merger with Europe's largest packaging producer, Smurfit Kappa. The combined company, Smurfit WestRock, will have 100,000 employees operating facilities in 42 countries. This deal is expected to close in the second quarter of 2024.

Average Pine Stumpage Prices for Florida (\$/Ton)
1st Qtr 2013 through 4th Qtr 2023



Timber Mart-South is compiled and produced at the Center for Forest Business, Warnell School of Forest Resources, University of Georgia, under contract with the Frank W. Norris Foundation, a non-profit corporation serving the forest products industry. See <http://www.tmart-south.com/> for information on subscriptions.

CONGRATULATIONS CERTIFIED LANDOWNERS

More information about certification in these programs is available at:

<https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/For-Landowners/Programs-for-Landowners/Forest-Stewardship-Program>

<https://www.treefarmssystem.org/florida>

<https://myfwc.com/lap>

These landowners have achieved certification in the Tree Farm, Forest Stewardship, and/or Wildlife Habitat Recognition Programs and demonstrate excellent stewardship of their land resources.



Christina and Robert Larson with Ariel Sewell (left), Walton County



Katie and Mark (not pictured) Onady, Escambia County



Kyle Fabbro representing Lykes Brothers, with Richard Larson (left), Glades County

Upcoming Events

Date	Event, Location, Contact
Feb 21	<p>North Central Florida CISMA Event: Feral Hog Workshop. 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. ET at UF/IFAS Extension Columbia County Office, 437 NW Hall of Fame Dr, Lake City, FL 32055. This workshop will provide an opportunity to learn about feral hog management from presentations by researchers and land managers, interact with local feral hog contractors/trappers, and network with private landowners. Attendees will also have a chance to speak with resource professionals about challenges they are facing with hog management. <i>RSVP to Lanie.Carter@MyFWC.com or call (386) 234-1030 by February 18th. Lunch will be provided to those who RSVP. Visit the North Central Florida CISMA Website to learn more: https://www.floridainvasives.org/northcentral.</i></p>
April 5	<p>Outstanding Tree Farmer of the Year tour at Property of Terry Putnal, Madison County. 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. ET. Provided by Florida Tree Farm and Florida Land Steward Programs. Join us to meet this exemplary land steward, network with fellow landowners, and explore a diversified timber and pine straw operation. Topics include timber management, pine straw management, longleaf pine, wildlife habitat management, and conservation. Free event. <i>Details and registration at https://florida-land-steward.eventcube.io/events/54096/florida-tree-farmer-of-the-year-tour-at-putnal-tree-farm. Contact Chris Demers, cdemers@ufl.edu, (352) 846-2375 for more information.</i></p>
April 16-17	<p>2024 FL SAF/UF SFFGS Spring Symposium: "From the Ground Up." University Stern Learning Center at the Austin Cary Forest Campus. Provided by the Florida Division of the Society of American Foresters and the UF/IFAS School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences. Join us to explore reforestation and restoration techniques for various land management objectives. Foresters, 7.5 Cat. 1 SAF Continuing Forestry Education Credits are approved. <i>Details and registration are at https://2024-flsaf-sffgs-spring-symposium.eventbrite.com.</i></p>
May 2	<p>2024 Florida Land Steward of the Year Tour at Ronne Stephenson Property, Jackson County. 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. CT. Join us to meet Ronnie Stephenson, our 2024 Land Steward of the Year; and network with landowners, foresters, and natural resource professionals. Topics will include wildlife habitat management, controlling invasive species, upland pine management, and more. <i>Details will be posted on the Florida Land Steward events calendar https://programs.ifas.ufl.edu/florida-land-steward/ and email updates. Contact Chris Demers, cdemers@ufl.edu, (352) 846-2375 for more information.</i></p>

More events, webinars, webinar recordings, news, and information can be found at programs.ifas.ufl.edu/florida-land-steward

The Florida Land Steward Newsletter is joint project of the UF/IFAS Extension, Florida Forest Service, Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Florida Tree Farm Program:

Chris Demers (editor)
 UF/IFAS School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences
 (352) 846-2375 • cdemers@ufl.edu

Chad Allison (co-editor)
 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 (352) 749-2447 • chad_allison@fws.gov

Dr. Michael Andreu (co-editor)
 UF/IFAS School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences
 (352) 846-0355 • mandreu@ufl.edu

Tony Grossman (co-editor)
 Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission
 (850) 410-5268 • Anthony.Grossman@myfwc.com

Will Liner (co-editor)
 Florida Forest Service
 (850) 545-6194 • William.Liner@FDACS.gov

John Nash (co-editor)
 Florida Tree Farmer
osceolapines@gmail.com