

# ENDANGERED SPECIES **Scrub Blazing Star**

By Libby Hopkins



Scrub Blazing Star or *Liatris tenuifolia*, which is its scientific name, is a perennial flowering plant in the Aster family that produces a striking blaze of flowers. The inflorescence is a spike of rayless rose/ purple-colored flowers that typically bloom from the top, down.

It reaches a height of three to four feet and grows in well-drained soils in the Southeastern United States, typical of scrub and Flatwoods communities.

In early spring it produces leaves similar to pine needles and then in summer it begins growing a stalk that will produce the showy, purple flowers. Its showy flower display makes it ideal for attracting pollinators. *Liatris* species are an important food source for the larvae of butterflies and moths and the flowers have special value to native bees.

Scrub blazing star is restricted to sand pine scrub, a central Florida plant community that encompasses 40 or more endemic plant species. The richest collection of endemics is found along the sandy, well-drained Lake Wales Ridge that extends in a north and south direction through Polk and Highlands Counties. Scrub vegetation is dominated by large evergreen shrubs, sand pine, and scrub oaks. Sandy clearings scattered among the oaks and pines support smaller shrubs, numerous herbs and a few hardy grasses.

Because of its brilliant flowers, scrub blazing star has been included in many botanical collections. The plant's geographic range extends from near Auburndale and east of Lake Wales (Polk County) south along the Lake Wales Ridge through Sebring to the Archbold Biological Station (Highlands County). An extensive survey of scrub habitat conducted in 1988 documented 22 localities for scrub blazing star in Polk County and 71 localities in Highlands County. Most of these sites support very limited numbers of plants and most are found on private property, although several do occur on state and federal lands. Land acquisition efforts by government and private organizations are increasing tracts of protected habitat.

Sites at the Archbold Biological Station, in Arbuckle State Park, and in the Arbuckle State Forest are protected. Two other sites, at Saddle Blanket Lakes and adjacent to Highlands Hammock State Park, are being acquired by the state.

Sand pine scrub in central Florida is disappearing at a rapid rate. Almost every day new tracts of land are cleared to support citrus groves or new residential subdivisions. Recent frost and freeze patterns have caused large-scale citrus growers to move south along the Lake Wales Ridge. The urban populations of ridge communities, such as Haines City, Winter Haven, Lake Wales, Avon Park, and Sebring, have experienced dramatic growth in recent years and continue to expand. The remaining habitat is becoming increasingly more fragmented. Because of its beautiful flower, the scrub blazing star has been popular with collectors, further endangering its lasting survival. It was one of four Florida plants added to the federal list as a group in July 1989.

State acquisition of a large tract of scrub at Saddle Blanket Lakes and smaller tracts purchased by the Nature Conservancy provide protection for several populations of scrub blazing star. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) altered previous draft recovery plans, which covered first nine and then 11 previously listed plants to include blazing star, the ziziphus and other endangered and threatened scrub taxa. The latest revised draft recovery plan was announced by the FWS in 1995, outlines basic efforts deemed necessary to restore the scrub blazing star and other endangered plants, including habitat protection through land purchase and other means (including the Habitat Conservation Plan process for threatened animals in the Florida scrub habitat); the management of protected habitats; and the assessment of progress and plan post-recovery monitoring.

