

Thankful and Hopeful

Written by Laura Lee Rose

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My friend and I were already planning to leave town for the weekend. The SC Native Plant Symposium was being held in Clemson at the same time Hurricane Matthew was blasting the South Carolina coast. After getting the necessary travel preparations finished we loaded up my gold Trail Blazer and headed for higher ground. Even as we left the lowcountry and got “up the country” fall was evident in the yellows, reds, and gold on the sides of the road.

Backcountry roads are my favorites on any good day, not being a fan of interstates, we stayed on the state roads and followed our Google Map lady guide literally on the “scenic route.” The two lane highways in the Savannah River Valley are well maintained and every now and then we encountered Highway Patrol and other responders who directed us away from what turned out to be a very costly and destructive storm. Autumn bloomers like goldenrod, swamp sunflower, white rabbit tobacco and boneset colored the roadsides. Red clay, rolling green fields of soybeans, cotton, and white sandy soils paved the floor of the October landscape. Pine trees, oaks, hickories, and persimmon, sassafras, and peaches painted the walls and overhead the sky went from misty grey to blue the further inland we drove.

Our friends who live in Clemson are passionate gardeners, and their property is a well-composted Garden of Eden with red and green peppers, okra tall as an Elephant’s eye, eggplants- both fat and dark black/ purple and the long and skinny lavender ones. They grow lettuce, kale, sweet potatoes and the herbs are a buzz with bees from the hive at the bottom of the yard. My favorite part of the times spent at their house are eating from that garden, drinking homemade wine, picking banjo, and watching the birds fly in and out of the baths, feeders and fences. Drinking coffee one morning on the porch we watched a small hawk as she sat backlit by the dawn on a tall snag at the back of the lawn. Did I say Garden of Eden already?

The conference was well attended by many from across the state who love native plants and

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walking in the woods. The upstate is so rich in natural beauty and history. I went on two very interesting field trips. At table rock our guides were a geologist and an interpretive ranger... we looked at some fabulous rock formations. Table rock is impressive, to say the least, but so were the rock formations in the streams and waterfalls weathered by time and water, crushed, cracked, creviced and even folded like a rug pushed up against a wall. I already knew that the Appalachian Mountains were old and formed a longgggg time ago. What I didn't know was that what I always assumed was granite is really gneiss. (Pronounced NICE). Gneiss is a metamorphic rock containing layers of quartz, feldspar, and mica. Amphibolite, also metamorphic, is a much darker rock that may contain garnets. It is sometimes cut, polished and sold as "black granite". Next day another waterfall - located in the Clemson Experimental forest, and the trail leading around the back of the fall is used by foresters and hikers, scouts and students. We found blue lobelia, white horseweed, rabbit tobacco, goldenrod, and lots of asters along the sunny logging road.

The treasures of course were in the woods. Mountain laurel is a piedmont endemic species as are black tupelo, sourwood both turning red as were the native persimmons and some maples. Once we were in the cove forest the ground covers were partridgeberry and wild gingers. Our guides on this trip were a forestry professor and a wetland ecologist. One reads trees and the other one reads water quality. We found several salamanders in the cold stream. The guide explained they are the top predators in the streams and are indicators of healthy water systems.

It was such a treat to be able to hike, botanize and meet others who value and respect the natural world. My lesson of the weekend was metamorphic. We are layers of time, good and sometimes crazy and beautiful. I am blessed and hopeful that our world is beautiful, resilient and ever Gneiss, but we can't take it for Granite.