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Palmetto

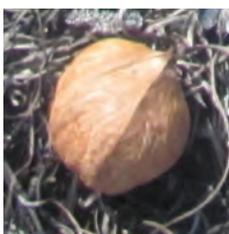


Swamp Fern Experimental Hammock ● Mockernuts ● Tarkiln Bayou ● *Carex*



“...we rely on your justice and humanity; we hope you will not send us south, to a country where neither the hickory nut, the acorn, nor the persimmon grows...” – Neamathla, Mikasuki hard-liner, 1824, during negotiations for the Treaty of Moultrie Creek

MOCKERNUT HICKORY: A Hard Nut to Crack Francis E. “Jack” Putz



Mockernut (*Carya tomentosa*) is one of six hickory species native to Florida. It ranges from Lake Erie down to just south of Ocala. Pignut hickory (*C. glabra*) shares that geography but its nuts were apparently not as important to pre-Columbian Floridians. Mockernut can be distinguished from pignut by its fuzzy (tomentose) leaves, thick twigs, and brilliant ochre autumn coloration. In 1539 near what is now Gainesville, Hernando de Soto’s ill-fated expeditionary force encountered a large grove of what they called walnut but was more likely mockernut. Sadly, mockernut trees are now scarce, victims of over-logging and fire suppression in the woodlands in which they once abounded.

Mockernut’s geography was relevant to the Seminoles and to their Timucuan predecessors because its nuts were an important food and source of vegetable oil. As a member of the Juglandaceae, the family that features both pecans and walnuts, the exquisite taste of mockernuts is perhaps no surprise. What surprised me is how hard it is to eat a mockernut – a very hard nut to crack and then, once cracked, the deeply divided seed is hard to extract.

After several commercial nutcrackers proved incapable of mockernut cracking I resorted to a hammer but only managed to make a mess. Then, inspired by my predecessors, I rolled out the live oak mortar-and-pestle I lovingly crafted and presented to my wife. I mention that device with some chagrin because, for reasons that elude me, she has never used it and reacts in a peculiar fashion when I suggest that she do so. Be that as it may, when I took the matter into my own hands, I only managed to make mockernut butter with a liberal mixture of chipped shells.

William Bartram described how the Seminoles he visited in the 1770s made hickory soup: “They pound them to pieces, and then cast them into boiling water, which, after passing through fine strainers, preserves the most oily part of the liquid; this they call by a name with signifies Hiccorry

Left: Mockernut trees become obvious in the autumn but are otherwise distinguishable from pignuts by the abundant hairs on the undersurfaces of their large compound leaves.

milk; it is sweet and rich as fresh cream, and is an ingredient in most of their cookery, especially homony and corn cakes.” The same basic processing instructions can be found in numerous books about eating-off-the-land, but I wonder whether the authors ever tested Bartram’s method. I do know that when I followed these instructions and every imaginable variation on the theme, the results resembled neither hickory nut soup nor hickory oil. Instead, I ended up with bitter and grey-black masses laced with shell fragments with no indication of oil separation. Perhaps the common name of “mockernut” was coined to capture just this sort of frustration. In any case, I can pose three explanations for my failure:

1. The Seminole men who told Bartram how to make hickory nut soup did not know the finer points of a process in which they had never personally participated, leaving that task to their wives, sisters, and mothers.

2. To maintain their intellectual property rights, Bartram’s informants withheld some critical steps in the process.

3. I am culinarily challenged.

In my house at least, the mystery of making mockernuts into food will remain unsolved for at least another year because all the nuts I collected and cracked were empty – full sized but seedless, perhaps due to too much rain during the filling season or the depredations of some pathogen.

Prior to Amerindian removal followed by plowing, fencing, and fire suppression, an ecosystem dominated by longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*), southern red oak (*Quercus falcata*), and mockernut was reportedly once widespread in the South. Few people are now aware of this ecosystem type because it was among the first to be cleared by colonizing farmers – they too appreciated its relatively nutrient-rich soils.

Scattered southern red oaks on our land on the outskirts of Gainesville, even scarcer mockernuts, the occasional longleaf pine, and some subsoil clay suggest that the area once supported this now-rare ecosystem. Turpentine tapping, logging, rooting by hogs, cattle grazing, and decades of fire suppression easily account for the scarcity of longleaf pines, and the large southern red oaks are dying at an alarming rate for unknown reasons, but the cause of our mockernut deficit was not initially apparent. Then, while he was searching through land records at the Alachua County Courthouse, my neighbor Robert “Hutch” Hutchinson found a record from the 1950s of a sale of hickory timber by a former owner of our property. Presumably the hickory in question was mockernut, the wood of which was crafted into golf club shafts and handles for hammers and tennis rackets – some of it certainly smoked hams. Now we are left mostly with stump sprouts and wolf trees of a species that was presumably once more common.

Former prominence of mockernuts in our landscape is also suggested by archaeological evidence from a nearby 1000-year-old village site. The excavation revealed the usual

assortment of fish bones, alligator scutes, and pottery shards, but also several large subterranean food storage bins. Based on the abundance of broken nuts, archaeologists concluded that the bins were used for mockernuts. This revelation caused me to revise my vision of pre-Columbian landscapes and to alter my restoration goals while it otherwise wreaked havoc on my concept of “natural” Florida.

I believe that Seminoles, Timucuan, and earlier inhabitants managed substantial portions of the landscape as mockernut orchards. To facilitate harvesting, they burned the understory in their orchards just before nut drop in October. I recognize that October does not fall in Florida’s “natural” fire season, but it is hard to find fallen mockernuts unless you first burn off the underbrush. Based on numerous failed nut-planting efforts that benefited only bush-tailed tree rats (i.e., gray squirrels – note that I advocate for fox squirrels), I also propose that our predecessors ate a lot of Brunswick stew. Further support for this conclusion is that a good place to collect mockernuts is near the house of a pot-hunting neighbor with a grey squirrel vendetta.

In the absence of sufficient grey squirrel control in the area I am trying to restore to mockernut prominence, I resorted

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Above: Collecting mockernuts is greatly facilitated by burning just prior to nut drop – the nuts stand out against the charred litter.

Mockernut Hickory (continued from page 9)

to out-planting seedlings raised for a year in tall pots. After 6 years in the ground, many of the seedlings were alive but only knee-high. Even the ones that I inadvertently chopped or burned off had resprouted and grown to about the same height. Some shovel work revealed that, like long leaf pines, mockernuts invest heavily below-ground – my knee-high seedlings were supported by taproots deeper than I was willing to dig. Apparently they spend many years preparing themselves to rapidly bolt through the stages during which they are fire-susceptible. Those that do pass the gauntlet of early life may live to be 500 years old.

These rather iconoclastic suggestions about our land's history caused me to radically rethink our management practices and restoration goals. Instead of being pristine, virgin, unsullied, or otherwise “natural” until being despoiled by Europeans, I now believe that for at least a few thousand years, portions of our landscapes were humanized, domesticated, and otherwise managed. Certainly north central Florida was not one big mockernut orchard, but it also was no wilderness area where the hand of man never set foot.

Postscript

To the list of three explanations for my failure to make mockernuts into food I now need to add a fourth, inadequate scholarship, and perhaps a fifth, sloth. My oversight of an important article on the making of hickory nut soup was corrected by an archaeological colleague as this article went to press. In their 2001 article entitled “Ethnobotany of *ku-nu-che*: Cherokee hickory nut soup” (Journal of Ethnobiology volume 21 pages 1-27) authors G.J. Fritz, V. Drywater Whitekiller, and J. W. McIntosh

clarify that I stopped my nut processing too soon. The traditional approach, which is still employed, involves pounding the nuts and then forming the mixture of shell fragments and nutmeat into softball size and shape masses. The balls can be stored frozen for months and when it's soup time, dissolved in boiling water, strained to remove the shell fragments, sweetened or salted, and eaten with rice or hominy. *Ku-nu-che* soup reportedly remains a much-relished holiday treat in Cherokee communities. The authors also point out that the caloric and protein contents of hickory nuts are far higher than other nuts, which reinforces the argument that they were a critical food source. Even more intriguing is their suggestion that mockernut orchards were prime sites for domestication of sumpweed (*Iva annua*) and goosefoot (*Chenopodium berlandieri*), both highly nutritious seed crops that deserve more attention from modern farmers. 🌱

Further Reading

Austin, D.F. 2004. Florida Ethnobotany. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL.

Bartram, W. [1791] 1958. Facsimile in Harper, F., Ed. The Travels of William Bartram, Naturalist's Edition. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

About the Author

Francis E. “Jack” Putz is a professor of conservation biology at the University of Florida where he teaches courses on the ecology and management of local and tropical ecosystems. His research spans topics from fire ecology and silviculture to experimental archaeology and ethnobotany. He tries to practice some of what he preaches about ecosystem restoration on land outside of Gainesville.

2014 FNPS Conference Speakers Address Unique Topics

There are a few things you can always count on finding at an FNPS Annual Conference, and foremost among them is the slate of interesting speakers who teach, stimulate, and inspire. This year, we are honored to have Dr. James Cahill and Dr. Jim Wohlpart among those who will encourage us to think about Florida's native plants and ecosystems in new ways.

What Do Plants Talk About?

Dr. James (J.C.) Cahill is a professor of ecology at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, where his research group focuses on topics that include plant foraging behavior, mountain pine beetle impacts on soil ecology, climate change effects on rangeland sustainability, and pollination biology.

Dr. Cahill says, “Though plants do not feel, think, nor understand...can they behave? If so, how does this alter our perception of nature? In this talk I will discuss general issues in this new field, as well as provide some specific work conducted by my lab. I will suggest we are undergoing a paradigm shift in our understanding of plants, with potentially important implications and opportunities. Further, though plants and animals differ greatly in many ways, their behavior appears to be more similar than imagined.”

Remembering Sacred Reason: Global Warming, Sense of Place, and Native Species

Dr. Jim Wohlpart is Professor of Environmental Literature at Florida Gulf

Coast University, and a Senior Scholar with the Center for Environmental and Sustainability Education. He works to broaden the understanding of sustainability to include questions of the spirit. Dr. Wohlpart has coedited two volumes: *A Voice for Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter* and *Unspoiled: Writers Speak for Florida's Coast*. His latest book is entitled *Walking in the Land of Many Gods: Remembering Sacred Reason in Contemporary Environmental Literature*. Dr. Wohlpart says that his philosophy of teaching centers around educating the whole person, not just the head or hands, but also the heart. He sees education as a lifelong journey that brings us to new states of knowledge and awareness.

For more conference information, visit www.fnps.org