Naturalist on mission for area plant life

By MATTHEW SMITH
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He shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part...Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess....

In line, the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim. Henry David Thoreau

Nature 1836.

"We got closer to God and maybe a little bit further from man," Bill Fontenot says contentedly as he surveys a backyard in the boondocks from which he's seen over 100 species of bird and housed more than 800 plants native to Louisiana.

"There's nothing like living in the woods. It makes for a healthier life," says Fontenot, an ecologist.

"Nothing's gonna get us moving again. This is the end of the line for us."

The end of the line is a gravel road perpendicular to Bayou Vermillion — a rickety piece of plywood on the roadside warns in Magic Marker, "Keep Out. No Hunting. Private Road" — with dogs jangling at your wheels and smoke rising in your rear-view mirror.

The last home before the coulee, before the road is consumed by thick vegetation, is Fontenot's, which he bought with his life's savings and which is the example of his life's work.

As weeping willows gently sag under a light wind, and hummingbirds dance across the bridge of your nose, the calm, serene feeling of getting away from it all is just a few minutes outside Lafayette as Fontenot sits on his cypress steps.

"Reality is the natural world. Man has built an artificial world," Fontenot says.

In his quest to get back to reality, Fontenot has become an outspoken advocate of plants native to Louisiana and Acadiana. Lamenting what he considers the indifference of many in the area to the indigenous vegetation, Fontenot says the neglect is decades old.

"It happened around the 1920s. It was like a status symbol to have a Japanese plant in your yard. Pretty soon people didn't care to know anything about native plants," he says.

"The public is just not aware that these plants are all around them in the little woods that are left."

Reintroducing people to their natural surroundings is the goal, Fontenot says.

"If they can get back in touch with nature through indigenous plants, we've accomplished our mission."

His mission began 10 years ago, when he moved his house onto the then-un触dahed land — no yelping dogs, no utility poles. There was no road, gravel or otherwise. For more than four years he and his wife

Bill Fontenot stands in his backyard which houses more than 800 plants and 65 species native to Louisiana.

Lydia lived in self-imposed "total solitude."

"Just to find a place and to get to know it and understand it, to the point where you're oblivious to the problems you thought were so important before," Fontenot says of his lifestyle.

His surroundings grew enormously two years ago when a colleague needed to unload hundreds of Louisiana plants. The plants could be Bill's for cheap, if he ferried them to his home. Before it was over, Fontenot hauled over 800 plants.

"It's like records. After a while you just want to collect them," Fontenot says of his garden, which now numbers 65 species.

Running his large hand over a leaf, he puts palm to face and deeply breathes the scent. The smells range from the sinus-clearing, orange-peel menthol vapors of the toothache tree to the pungent herbal aroma of the red bay leaf.

"That's a rarity," he says pointing to blue haw, which Cajuns call "pougette bleu."

"They used to have it all over, now it's pretty much gone," he said of the blue fruit used in preserves, jellies and jams.

Lafayette Parish has lost most of its basswood and papaw over the last two generations, according to Fontenot.

"They (basswood and papaw) are not in danger as a species, but they are in Lafayette Parish," he said.

His advice to the would-be green thumb is simple:

"It's so easy. Just stick them in the ground," Fontenot says of native plants. "About 90 percent of these plants require no serious care."

They grow faster in the first three months if covered with mulch, he said.

The other 10 percent of native plants require more nurturing. Azaleas and big-leaf magnolias, for instance, should be planted in raised beds because they tend to become waterlogged. They must receive mulch continually.

Fontenot differs with the opinion that exotic, or non-native, plants are prettier.

"Once you get them (native plants) in the ground, you've got every bit as lovely a plant as the exotic."

Comfortably rested on a chair, Fontenot relates a passage from a favorite film.

After committing a petty crime, a race car driver ends up in the desert. He meets a haggard, disheveled hermit who lends the race car driver some sagacious advice.

"The best way to get away from it all, to my knowledge, is to root right in," the hermit explains.

Fontenot says the hermit's logic is that a person who becomes immersed in their surroundings consequently becomes free.

"I'm not even pretending I'm important. I'm just watching the sun go up and the sun go down," he says.

Bill Fontenot is rooted right in...