



BROWSE



## Starting from Seed

Andrew Furman

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

## Starting from Seed

*Andrew Furman (bio)*

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Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed,—a, to me, equally mysterious origin for it. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.

IT WAS MOSTLY a pecuniary matter at first, propagating native plants by seed.

Shortly after we moved into our new home, I spent a fair bit of money (or, according to my wife, an exorbitant amount of money) on handsome shrubs and small trees indigenous to South Florida. The previous owners of our house had maintained the half-acre yard after a fashion; specifically, they had crowded the live and laurel oak understory with a tangle of exotic and invasive plants—philodendron, bougainvillea, schefflera, croton, oyster—which they must have liked. I set about making, at least to my mind, improvements inspired by a rival aesthetic to privilege native flora and its associated birds, butterflies, tree snails, and what not.

There was a lot of work to do.

Executive Order 11987, Section 1(d), at the federal level, defines *native species* as “all species of plants and animals naturally occurring, either presently or historically, in any ecosystem of the United States.” Florida statute 5B-40.001 further defines a native plant as “[a] plant species that is presumed to have been present in Florida before European contact.” The Florida Native Plant Society provides a somewhat more nuanced definition: “Plants include those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.”

Much of my leisure time over the first two years at the new house was taken up by grubbing out the “exotic species” (defined by Executive Order 11987), those meddlesome and unwelcome interlopers, some of which offered terrific resistance against my efforts with a subpar shovel. I deposited various native shrubs and trees in place of the exotics I uprooted and babied those new plantings with copious [End Page 224] doses of water and fertilizer. Within a matter of weeks I was on a first-

name basis with Carl and Donna, owners of the nearby native plant nursery, which probably reinforces my wife's impression of my extravagant cash outlay.

In any case, the yard was looking up after those first couple years. My little patch of Florida was finally picking up its former tune, expressing itself in tender new shoots of fiddlewood and wild coffee and marlberry and firebush and necklace pod and beautyberry and Jamaican caper and seven-year apple and cinnamon bark and strongbark and bloodberry and coontie. But there was still a lot of work to do. I was about to head to the native plant nursery to lay some coin on Carl and Donna when it hit me, probably because I was watering the caper and coffee out front and it was early fall and several of the plants of both species were just starting to advertise their fruit—on the caper, brown string bean-shaped pods that had burst open to reveal bright orange insides, from which sticky berry bracelets dangled; and on the coffee, drooping clusters of oval, bloodred berries. There were some smaller, bright orange berries on my strongbark shrub too, I noticed. I had worked pretty hard to see those first-generation plants through to the point where they had established their roots, put out new growth, and were now hoping to broadcast their genes about via the digestive tracts of our resident blue jays, mockingbirds, catbirds, squirrels, and raccoons. Why was I still planning to pay for new plants when I could now just plant them myself from seed?

So, as I've said, it was mostly a pecuniary matter at first, propagating native plants by seed.

You may detect a malodorous whiff of xenophobia and racism in all this native plant business. If so, you're not the only one. Michael Pollan and others have noted these troubling resonances in the language of doctrinaire advocates for native gardening (see Pollan's "Against Nativism" in...

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ANDREW FURMAN

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—HENRY DAVID THOREAU, from "The Succession of Forest Trees" (1860)

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