

Daniel F. Austin—The Man behind the Name¹

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Dan Austin, long-serving book review editor for *Economic Botany*, is a name well known to most members of the Society (Fig. 1). Yet, few current members have ever met him. Dan served on the SEB council from 1993 to 1996. He participated in the 1993 (Miami) annual meeting, accepting my request to speak in the “Invading Species—Their Threat and Potential” symposium. He also attended the 1994 (Mexico City) and 1995 (Ithaca) meetings, and perhaps another one in the 1990s. In 2003, Dan hosted the Society’s 44th Annual Meeting at The Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, where he had relocated after “retiring” in 2001. He remained active after stepping away from academia, publishing eleven papers in *Economic Botany* in addition to his book review duties. Dan also published in the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, *Ethnobotany Research & Applications*, and, frequently, *The People and Plant Interactions Series of The Palmetto*, the journal of the Florida Native Plant Society. But due to finances and family obligations, he remained largely absent from SEB meetings during the past three decades.

On May 18th, 1943, Adolf Hitler secretly ordered the occupation of its Axis ally Italy. Nearly 5,000 miles away, Daniel Frank Austin was born in Paducah, Kentucky (Miller 2000). Located in the western part of the state near the confluence of the Tennessee and Ohio Rivers, Paducah was a small,

quiet town, at least until the onset of WWII. That the town took its name from a Chickasaw term would prove prophetic. Dan had a lifelong fascination with languages. For example, he frequently used alliteration in paper titles (e.g., Austin 1979a). After graduating from high school, he travelled the relatively short distance of 45 miles to Murray State College (now Murray State University), where he earned a B.A. in Biology in 1966. As an undergraduate, his interests shifted from wildlife biology to botany. A seminar he attended at the university proved to be crucial. The speaker was Walter Lewis (1990 SEB president and 2006 Distinguished Economic Botanist). Dan, who had developed an interest in Lamiaceae, spoke with Professor Lewis following the talk. An invitation to pursue his doctoral studies with Walter ensued, and Dan joined the Lewis lab at Washington University and the Missouri Botanical Garden. The lab had an august group of doctoral students. Those who overlapped with Dan included Al Gentry (Bignoniaceae), Bill D’Arcy (Solanaceae), Bruce MacBryde (Malpighiaceae), Joan Nowicke (Phytolaccaceae), and Ken Robertson (*Jacquemontia*, Convolvulaceae). At Walter’s suggestion, Dan switched his focus to Convolvulaceae, and it remained his primary research interest throughout his career. Dan completed his dissertation, “A Monograph of the American Erycibae (Convolvulaceae),” in 1970.

Perhaps a more monumental event occurred three years earlier. In 1967 he married Sandra, his wife of 47 years. Known to all as Sandy, she was his travel companion, sometimes co-author, and soulmate. After Dan completed his doctoral work in 1970, the Austins moved to Boca Raton, Florida, where Dan accepted an assistant professor position

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Fig. 1. Dan Austin collecting *Jacquemontia curtisii* (Convolvulaceae) in the Big Cypress National Preserve. Photo by Jim Snyder.

at the newly-formed Florida Atlantic University (FAU). Part of the state university system of Florida, FAU had opened six years earlier on the site of an abandoned WWII U.S. Army Air Corps base. The initial student body totaled 867. Thirty-one years later, when he left, the student enrollment had exploded to more than 23,000 students.

In some ways, FAU was the ideal place for Dan. Its location compensated for its lack of history and initial

small size, and southern Florida was virgin territory for serious botanical study. Moreover, it was on the edge of the tropics and Dan's interest in tropical plants had begun during his doctoral studies on Convolvulaceae. In Boca Raton, tropical plants grew in his own backyard. The access to a new flora expanded his interest not away from but as a complement to Convolvulaceae. His first paper on Florida botany was published shortly after his arrival in Boca Raton (Austin and Weiss 1972). Dan revitalized FAU's incipient herbarium, which grew to 30,000 specimens before its demise after he retired (specimens acquired by FTG, except Convolvulaceae which went to Arizona). Another benefit of being in a small department was that Dan could wear many botanical hats. This allowed him to delve into ecology, pollination biology, and economic botany, in addition to taxonomy. A larger institution likely would have constrained his interests.

In addition to building the plant collection, Dan also built a graduate program and developed popular undergraduate courses including Ecology of Southern Florida and Plant Taxonomy (Fig. 2). He directed 22 M.S. thesis projects (Table 1) on a variety of topics. Some of his students' research focused on plant systematics (e.g., Staples, Nauman), but most reflected his ever-increasing breadth of botanical interests. Eight of his M.S. students went on to earn doctoral degrees at other institutions.

Dan "retired" in 2001 and moved to Tucson. He held a long fascination with desert plants and soon began a new phase of his career. His Arizona productivity was not a post-retirement surge; rather it reflected his consistent and prolific scholarship. Dan left us with a remarkable 308 publications ([Electronic Supplemental Material](#)), not counting book reviews (126)



Fig. 2. Dan Austin showing his 1981 FAU Plant Taxonomy Class *Sideroxylon foetidissimum* (Sapotaceae) in the Gumbo Limbo Hammock, Boca Raton FL.

Table 1. D. F. AUSTIN FAU M.S. STUDENTS, YEAR OF COMPLETION, AND THESIS TITLE.

M.S. Student	Year	Title
B. Steinberg	1976	Vegetation analysis of the Atlantic coastal ridge of Broward County, Florida
D. R. Richardson*	1976	Habitat and successional changes of the Atlantic coastal ridge of Palm Beach County, Florida
D. M. McJunkin*	1977	Aspects of cypress domes in southeastern Florida: A study in micro-phytogeography
G. W. Staples III*	1979	Generic relationships of <i>Ipomoea</i> , <i>Merremia</i> , and <i>Operculina</i> (Convolvulaceae)
C. E. Nauman*	1979	The genus <i>Nephrolepis</i> in Florida
B. C. Bennett ^c	1982	The distribution of four tillandsioid bromeliads, <i>Guzmania monostachia</i> , <i>Catopsis berteroniana</i> , <i>C. floribunda</i> and <i>C. nutans</i> , in the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, Florida
J. L. Jones	1983	An ecological study of the Florida royal palm, <i>Roystonea elata</i> (Bartram) F. Harper
P. Krauss	1983	Old field succession in Everglades National Park
J. N. Burch*	1986	Palynology in southern Florida
A. C. Cox ^c	1988	Distribution and species composition of tree islands in Martin and Palm Beach Counties
M. C. Stewart	1991	Habitat structure and the dispersion of gopher tortoises on a nature preserve
W. J. Whitley	1991	The distribution of plant communities in Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, Florida
D. E. Wedge	1992	A study in drought physiology of four xerophytic turfgrasses
J. R. Hicklin	1994	The effects of Brazilian pepper (<i>Schinus terebinthifolius</i>) on gopher tortoise (<i>Gopherus polyphemus</i>) habitat utilization
C. S. Lockhart	1995	The effect of water level variation on the growth of melaleuca seedlings from the Lake Okeechobee littoral zone
F. J. Dehring	1998	Ecological characterization of a disturbed hardwood forest
R. Miller, Jr.	1998	A rapid assessment procedure for determining the functionality of wetlands in south Florida
J. E. Oliver	1998	Interfamilial relationships of Cactaceae within the dicot order, Caryophyllales
K. C. Pietro	1998	Phosphorus uptake rates of a <i>Ceratophyllum</i> /periphyton community in a southern Florida freshwater marsh
C. L. Miller	2000	Habitat suitability and population demographics of the seagrass, <i>Thalassia testudinum</i> , in the northeast salt ponds of Key West, Florida
R. L. Rasha	2000	The effects of fire on the demographics of <i>Neyraudia reynaudiana</i> in the pine rocklands
J. Muss*	2001	The effects of cypress dome size on epiphyte diversity in southern Florida
A. M. Edwards	2001	The effect of time-since-burn on butterflies in a pine flatwoods

*Earned a Ph.D. after leaving FAU.

and technical reports. The publications include 158 journal articles in 58 journals. More than one-third of his articles appeared in three journals: Economic Botany (22), Florida Scientist (18), and Taxon (16). That distribution reflects his three primary research foci: Convolvulaceae (especially *Ipomoea*) systematics, the vegetation and flora of southern Florida, and economic botany. His interest in morning glory taxonomy naturally led to the other two emphases. Dan once told me that Convolvulaceae was the perfect family to study. It was largely tropical and its taxonomy had not been confounded by hobbyists and horticulturalists, as had been done in Cactaceae and Orchidaceae. Moreover, it had one very important economic species—*Ipomoea batatas*, the sweet potato. The latter species justified research on the family from the perspective of funding

agencies. Twenty-six of his 150+ publications on Convolvulaceae dealt with *I. batatas* or related species, as did four of his six papers which were cited more than 25 times (Table 2).

Dan's traditional taxonomic work on the *Ipomoea batatas* complex (e.g., Austin 1978a, 1988a, b; Bohac et al. 1993; Rajapakse et al. 2004) has provided the foundation for the next generation of molecular research on the origin of sweet potato. His papers are cited in recent work on sweet potato domestication (e.g., Gao et al. 2011; Roullier et al. 2011, 2013a, b; Srisuwan et al. 2006). Based on morphology, Austin (1988b) proposed that the ancestors of sweet potato arose through natural hybridization between *I. trifida* and *I. triloba*, somewhere between the Yucatan Peninsula and the Orinoco Basin. While the role

Table 2. D. F. AUSTIN PAPERS CITED MORE THAN 25 TIMES IN WEB OF SCIENCE.

Publication	Citations
Austin, D. F. and Z. Huaman. 1996. A synopsis of <i>Ipomoea</i> (Convolvulaceae) in the Americas. <i>Taxon</i> 45:3–38.	84
Austin, D. F. 1978b. Exotic plants and their effects in southeastern Florida. <i>Environmental Conservation</i> 5:25–34.	51
Stefanović, S., D. F. Austin, and R. Olmstead 2003. Classification of Convolvulaceae: A phylogenetic approach. <i>Syst. Bot.</i> 28:791–806.	43
Austin, D. F. 1978a. The <i>Ipomoea batatas</i> Complex—I. Taxonomy. <i>Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club</i> 105:114–129.	32
McDonald, J. A. and D. F. Austin. 1990. Changes and additions in <i>Ipomoea</i> section <i>batatas</i> (Convolvulaceae). <i>Brittonia</i> 42:116–120.	26
Austin, D. F. 2006. Fox-tail millets (<i>Setaria</i> : Poaceae)—Abandoned food in two hemispheres. <i>Economic Botany</i> 60:143–158.	26

of *I. triloba* is questionable, Roullier et al. (2013b) support an autopolyploid origin of sweet potato from the ancestor it shares with *I. trifida*. Gao et al. (2011) suggest an autopolyploid origin with *I. trifida* as one of the diploid progenitors of *I. littoralis*. Hybridization of the latter with *I. tenuissima* produced sweet potato. Their data could not dismiss genetic contributions from *I. tabascana*, a species described by McDonald and Austin (1990), nor multiple origins of sweet potato.

Dan would delight in the confusion that molecular systematics creates. The Gao et al. hypothesis has a serious flaw. *Ipomoea littoralis* is the only species in section *Batatas* that is endemic to the Old World (Austin 1991). Sweet potato is clearly a New World domesticate. The “*I. littoralis*” accessions used by Gao et al. (2011) probably represent wild *I. batatas* (Roullier et al. 2013b). The best tools of modern systematics are useless without basic taxonomy. Dan’s work confirms Al Radford’s (1986) proclamation that taxonomy is the pedestal upon which all biology rests.

In addition to his contributions to understanding *Ipomoea batatas*, Dan was a major contributor to floristic treatments of Convolvulaceae. He wrote checklists or complete floristic treatments of the morning glory family for much of the world (e.g., Austin forthcoming; Austin and Huaman 1996), including North America (as well as regional treatments for Arizona, Bahamas, Florida, Four Corners Region, and the Great Plains), Mexico (Northwest and Sonora), Central America (Nicaragua and Panama), South America (Amazonia, Ecuador, the Guianas, Venezuela, and Southern Cone), Asia (Ceylon and West Pakistan), and Oceania (Hawai’i).

Dan’s second academic interest was the vegetation and flora of southern Florida. This began with his immersion in a tropical dominated flora, as a

young assistant professor at FAU. It led, not surprisingly, to his studies of Florida Convolvulaceae (e.g., Austin 1979b). However, it expanded to other areas as well. All told, he wrote 114 journal articles, popular articles, and other contributions on plants of the southernmost state. Thirty-seven of these concerned exotic and invasive species, a major threat to the state’s natural ecosystems. He was among the first to publicize the impact of alien flora, and this area of research produced his second most cited paper (Austin 1978b, cited 51 times, Table 2).

Most of Dan’s Florida publications (87) focused on native plants, journal rare and endangered species. He and his students also examined the vegetation and flora of plant communities in southern Florida. For example, Austin et al. (1990) published an inventory of the vascular plants of the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve (FSSP) in Collier County, Florida. The Fakahatchee flora is arguably the most unique in the continental U.S., with species occurring nowhere else within country. FSSP and its rare ghost orchids (*Dendrophylax lindenii*) were the subject of the 1998 Susan Orlean novel *The Orchid Thief. Adaptation*, the movie based on the book, failed to capture the beauty and the mystery of the Fakahatchee, a place Dan dearly loved.

Dan wrote 27 articles for *The Palmetto*, the primary publication of the Florida Native Plant Society. More than half treated species with human uses. His *magnum opus* was *Florida Ethnobotany*—a 900-plus page book that treated 500 Florida plant species and their uses from published data that he had compiled (Austin 2004). The tome includes more than the typical descriptions of plant use. It is as much a linguistic treatment as an ethnobotanical resource. Not surprisingly, Dan paid special attention to taxonomy and describes the derivation of generic names and specific epithets as well as

relevant taxonomic history for each species. He also included an extensive list of common names and their meanings from throughout each plant's range. *Florida Ethnobotany* won the 2005 Mary W. Klinger Book Award from the SEB.

Another Austin contribution was the underused neologism "ethnoflora" (Austin and McJunkin 1978). More inclusive than the botanical pharmacopoeia, the ethnoflora represents the subset of a flora that is employed by humans. Unlike its definition in the online Merriam Webster Dictionary (2015), Dan would not have limited the scope of the flora to "aboriginal" use. In addition to its flora, Dan's interests in Florida are reflected in his 10 papers on the history and fauna of the state.

Dan's concentration on Convolvulaceae and the flora of Florida both overlapped and spurred his growing interest in economic botany and ethnobotany. He published his first *Economic Botany* paper on Mexican sweet potatoes in 1972 (Austin 1972). His final *Economic Botany* paper addressed human transport of *Ipomoea sagittata* from the Americas to the Mediterranean (Austin 2014). Like his 22 *Economic Botany* publications, Dan's interest in plant-people interactions spanned his entire career and resulted in journal articles, encyclopedia summaries, popular articles, and books, 95 in total. His 2010 *Baboquivari Mountain Plants. Identification, Ecology, and Ethnobotany* (Austin 2010) earned a second Klinger Award in 2011, making him the only author to be twice honored.

Many laud his efforts as book review editor for *Economic Botany* beginning in 1993. The book review editor's work can be onerous, but charging the bibliophile Austin with the task was akin to throwing Brer Rabbit into the briar patch. He edited well over 1,300 and wrote 126 reviews, impishly reserving the books close to his interests for his own appraisal. Twenty-one years of access to the most important texts on the subject granted him a grasp of the ethnobotanical literature that few others have. Most would agree that he set the standard for the quality and expediency of book reviews.

The final phase of the Austin career could be called the desert years. A sabbatical in Arizona initiated a deep fascination in desert plants. The relocation to Arizona in 2001 brought the same excitement of a new flora that he experienced in the 1971 move to Florida. Dan soon launched new studies and began publishing on the Arizona flora (e.g., Felger and Austin 2005), after wrapping up a backlog of Convolvulaceae and Florida manuscripts. This new area of research culminated a decade later

with a floristic treatment of Convolvulaceae for a region of southwestern Arizona (Felger et al. 2015).

None can argue that Daniel F. Austin made significant contributions to botanical science in several fields. Besides his floristic, Florida, and econobotany papers, he established 28 infrageneric names and 48 new species or new species combinations in Convolvulaceae. He was honored several times by the Florida Native Plant Society and elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London. Andrew McDonald (*Merremia austinii*, McDonald 1987) and George Staples (*Hildebrandtia austinii*, Staples 1990) named species in his recognition. Maria Teresa Buriel and Ana Rita Simões (Buriel et al. 2015) recently established a new genus of Convolvulaceae—*Daustinia*. "The genus is named in honour of Dr. Daniel Austin for his great contribution to our knowledge of Convolvulaceae from the American continent" (Buriel et al. 2014).

Academic achievements and awards alone do not adequately convey Austin's impact on botany. Dan introduced hundreds of undergraduates to the marvels of Florida plants, collaborated with botanical colleagues around the world, and served as the major advisor for more than 20 M.S. students. His mentoring efforts will long endure and they now span three academic generations (Fig. 3). Bryan Steinberg (M.S. 1976), one of Dan's first graduates, wrote, "His students all loved him. He seemed in a level of expertise all of his own." Bryan reminded me of Dan's fondness for Coca Cola. He was seldom seen without a can of the beverage invented by the morphine-addicted pharmacist John Pemberton. Actually, fondness is not the correct term to describe Dan's relationship with Coca Cola; like its inventor, he was an addict, albeit to a more benign vice. From the abundant supply of empty Coke cans, his students fashioned a wreath that hung on his office door for many years. Bruce Tatje, a former FAU student, said, "Dan made such a difference in the lives of so many of his students. One class with him and a light bulb went off in my head and I changed majors to study botany." George Staples (M.S. FAU 1979, Ph.D. Harvard) attributed the "best career advice anyone ever gave me" to Dan. Dan had told him, "First figure out what it is in life that you really enjoy, and then figure out how to get someone to pay you to do it," a philosophy that George has pursued throughout his own career.

In the mid-1980s, the late Al Radford told me that he was amazed by Dan's success at a new, and then relatively obscure, university.



Fig. 3. Dan Austin (center left), his M.S. student Brad Bennett (2nd from right) and Bennett's students Samantha Gerlach, Allison Adnoizio, Katrina Bradbury, Stephen Hodges (from left to right) at the 2003 SEB Meeting.

John Rashford (2007 SEB president) remembers Dan as “a delightful person and a wonderful scholar who was committed to the Society of Economic Botany. He was always kind and supportive of young SEB members like myself, which is what I appreciated most about my earlier participation in the society.” Dick Workman, an Austin colleague from Florida, shared Dan’s interest in ethnobotany. Dan graciously served as his informal mentor. The two botanists, and others, established the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) in the early 1980s. A decade or so later, Workman presented the FNPS Mentoring Award to Dan at the society’s annual meeting. Dick describes the event: “Appreciating his somewhat dry sense of humor, I listed among his accomplishments that with his lectures and writings, he encouraged people to expose themselves to native plants. Through the laughter and applause Dan accepted the award, with a wry smile on his face.”

I met Dan in 1978, at the suggestion of Iain Prance (1996 SEB president and 2002 Distinguished Economic Botanist), and a year later began graduate studies with him at FAU (M.S. 1982). I learned too late that the easiest way to pass an Austin taxonomy exam was not through study. Rather, one simply drove to the Austin home to learn what was flowering. The landscaping eventually assumed the form of a tropical jungle, through little effort or intent by Dan. He simply let nature take its course. Whatever seed landed in his yard was allowed the chance to germinate and establish. The vegetation once became so out of control that he asked me to come by and “do a little

pruning.” The resulting debris filled several dump trucks. During my tenure at FAU, Dan and I and other graduate students, especially Julie Jones, spent many delightful days slogging through the swamps of the Fakahatchee, trying to avoid the ubiquitous alligators and water moccasins and the much more dangerous human poachers. Those days were the most enjoyable part of my career.

Today, I parked under a mastic tree (*Sideroxylon foetidissimum*) on campus and remembered that I had learned that species on a 1981 Austin field trip (Fig. 2). Dan died January 20, 2015, the day after suffering a major stroke. I won’t park under that tree for a while.

Acknowledgments

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