



Cracker Rose

Retired Park Ranger Terry Stidham

BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

Old Florida is azaleas under oak trees. It is shaded rocking chairs on wrap-around porches after hard work in thick heat. It is wild coreopsis, crepe myrtles and hydrangeas.

And to Terry Stidham — Old Florida is the roses.

Stidham, a long-time park ranger at Dudley Farm Historic State Park, is now sharing her love and knowledge of Old Florida gardening from her home, Cracker Rose Acres in Fort White.

She is opening up her garden

to tours, wedding receptions and photography shoots — or to anyone who wants to come on by. She wants to teach visitors about the simplicity of growing heirloom roses, while inspiring others through her own work.

“I just love to share,” Stidham, 61, said.

Gardening clubs, church groups or aspiring green thumbs can schedule an appointment to walk through Stidham’s home and acres of blooming Florida. She also sells the 10 easiest-to-grow roses and can help new gardeners get started.

Down a dirt road, Stidham’s

home brings visitors back to the bits and pieces of the Old Florida she has held onto — the pieces from her grandmother, from her 30 years as a farm wife, and from her career at Dudley Farm.

Cracker cows graze behind the tin-roofed farmhouse. The turkey, famous for its stint at Dudley Farm, paces at the edge of the garden. And sweet-smelling heirloom roses border the trellis by the pond.

It has been a 20-year project in the making.

Stidham’s passion for horticulture developed throughout her life. From her childhood to her career,

PHOTO BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

Retired Park Ranger Terry Stidham at the Dudley Farm Historic State Park.



PHOTOS BY LARRY SANTUCCI

Terry Stidham, dressed in period clothing at Dudley farm, talks about the garden she helped maintain for more than a decade and the ways in which it has influenced her own. (photo by Courtney Lindwall)

RIGHT: Stidham said that native species that are adapted to the Florida soil and climate are the easiest to manage.

One of Stidham's favorites is the Louis Phillipe rose, also known as the "cracker rose" in Florida.

Stidham's story has always been in the garden.

Her gardening philosophies emphasize native species and working with the North Florida climate, not against it. Everything in her one-acre garden can thrive on its own without expensive fertilizers or tedious clipping. In fact, if Stidham plants something and it

does not make it on its own – she is not going to plant it again.

The five-acre piece of land was originally surrounded by woods. Much of it was cleared to make room. This is where Stidham raised her four children with her husband and built a career as a park ranger.

But while she was working at Dudley farm, Stidham did not have

as much time to garden at home.

"I'd do it during the day and then go home and do it in my yard until it got dark," she said.

But since retiring last spring, she has been able to devote much more time to her garden. She chooses different projects during the weeks to keep busy — most of which are building new things for the garden. She has added a wedding arbor, a koi pond, a shaded pathway and a greenhouse in the back.

Stidham came to work at Newberry's Dudley farm in the late '90s, years before it would open to



PHOTOS BY LARRY SANTUCCI

The front porch of Terry Stidham's Cracker Rose Acres home, where she invites guests to sit for a while and enjoy the view. Recently retired, she can now devote more time to building new things for the garden, including a wedding arbor, a shaded pathway and a koi pond.

the public as a historic state park. Myrtle Dudley, the last remaining daughter of the original family, had passed away while living on her family's property only a year prior.

The farm is one of the oldest in Alachua County and shows the evolution of life from the 1850s through the mid-20th century. The goal of the state park was, and still is, to preserve the Dudleys' history — from the type of stove they cooked on to the layout of their general store. Documentation from Myrtle about the manner in which the farm was kept has helped the



park remain authentic.

As a ranger, Stidham maintained the Dudleys' front yard. She was made for the job.

She was already familiar with most of the plants at the Dudley farmstead, which were the same as they had been 80 years ago. The plants were North

Florida natives — plants she had seen a thousand times.

She did not need to be trained for a job she grew up doing — digging her hands in North Florida soil.

"My goal was to keep it the same as Myrtle had it — not to lose what we already had in there," she said.

Stidham was not necessarily



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PHOTO BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

As the sign on her gate says, retired Park Ranger Terry Stidham always stops to smell the roses.

“taught” about gardening, she said, but she was always around it as a child. She would watch, listen and help her grandmother, Ruth Nelson, in the yard.

As she gained experience at Dudley farm, she loved sharing what she knew with park visitors, she said. She could teach them about swept gardens — the sandy areas in yards created to keep fires away from the home. She could teach them about the shady lot where the Dudleys planted their pear trees. She could tell them about the history of the old road that runs in front of the farmhouse.

But most importantly, she could teach them about the roses.

The roses became one of her favorite parts of the garden. In the Dudleys’ front yard, the same roses bloom that were there when Myrtle was growing up. Most are heirloom roses, also known as antique roses. They require little work because they are native to the area, unlike hybrid roses that can need a lot of maintenance.

“They are the easiest ones to

take care of,” she said, “and old antique roses almost all smell.”

Even in February when many things were not blooming, the Dudleys’ front yard had fragrant, large rose blossoms.

One of Stidham’s favorites is the Louis Phillipe rose, also known as the “cracker rose” in Florida. It’s “ever-blooming,” easiest for beginners and comes in lots of colors, she said.

“You can not kill this rose,” she said.

Native species that are adapted to the Florida soil and climate are the easiest to manage. In the Dudley garden, low-maintenance was important, Stidham said.

“There was so much to do just to make a living and feed yourself,” Stidham said — so there was little time for rose upkeep.

Stidham’s own garden stretches out in front of her home — a modern version of the “cracker house” like the one at Dudley farm. Made of wood and a tin roof, the house is filled with antiques and original

furniture. A big part of Cracker Rose Acres’ authenticity is the Old Florida home that sits on it.

The porch winds around the outside, filled with benches and rocking chairs for visitors to look out. Stidham mounted an old wagon wheel to the outside of the house — another piece of Alachua County history woven into Cracker Rose Acres.

Yellow coreopsis lines the pond and pathways. Black-eyed Susans, swamp daisies and frogs legs are in bloom — some early risers after an unseasonably warm winter.

But Stidham’s garden is always changing. As the spring rolls in, Cracker Rose Acres begins to transform, as it does again in summer and winter. Pockets of flowers, rows of vegetables and blossoms on trees shift and change — the same way they did 100 years ago at the Dudley farm and the same way they will 100 years from now.

“Even though it’s a lot of work, it’s relaxing to me,” Stidham said. “To work, see it bloom, and then smell it is your reward.” ■