



AL BURT'S FLORIDA

SCRUB PINES & SAW PALMETTOS

The saw palmetto fills an essential if small part in the fascinating mosaic of Florida.

Can you love a saw palmetto? That is the test. Does this native shrub growing even in the scrubbiest parts of Florida, the one with the curved spines and fan-shaped leaves, the one so attractive to rattlesnakes, give you a warm feeling of home?

For Maggie Hurchalla, that separates the truly caring Floridian — native or adopted — from the skimmer and the gawker. It is easy to love the beaches and the lakes and the rivers, but if you love the saw palmetto you have reached the inner circle of believers.

Hurchalla is a tall woman with a lovely face and a loud voice and the direct personality of a political fullback. In Stuart, where three times she has been elected to the Martin County Commission, the voters cheer her and other politicians sometimes refer to her as "that damn broad."

She is a Floridian whose life makes a difference in her community and state. She has a vision of Florida as a unique place that need not be homogenized by growth.

Hurchalla uses the status of the saw palmetto to symbolize a waking up process in Florida. "There used to be a special act of the legislature for Martin County that made a palmetto prima facie evidence of the need for lot-clearing," she said.

"There were people in the past who thought that palmettos naturally bred rattlesnakes, that they sort of dropped off like little seeds or something."

Now the saw palmetto has emerged as a native shrub that evokes a sense of what this state is. It serves ideally for certain landscaping chores, and it can thrive in almost any soil without the need for repeated doses of water and fertilizer.

Once understood, the saw

palmetto seems almost magical in its suitability. It is not ugly, but beautiful, and it fills in an essential if small part in the fascinating mosaic of Florida.

For Hurchalla, the evolution of respectability for the saw palmetto parallels the evolution of Florida leadership. At the top in Florida government now are three native Floridians — Gov. Bob Graham, Rep. H. Lee Moffitt of Tampa and Sen. Harry A. Johnston II of West Palm Beach — who grew up during a period of changing perceptions of what growth means to Florida.

"For their fathers' generation, growth meant you got rid of the privy, you got the road paved, you got rid of malaria and you got schools for the kids. It really meant something," she said.

"But for this generation, growth has meant the public beach shrunk, the old fishing hole was gone, the traffic was awful, the schools were on double sessions and crime hit the national statistics.

"I really sense that making a difference in terms of the push to do something better to manage Florida's growth. We're in the process of a turnaround. I think it will come all the way around in the next five years."

Her name was Maggie Reno, a native of Dade County, and she was part of a large and remarkable family that includes Janet Reno, Dade County State Attorney. Maggie met Jim Hurchalla at Swarthmore College, married, and they moved to the Stuart area when he became an engineer.

They live on four naturally wild acres along the Intra-coastal Waterway at Port Salerno, just south of Stuart. Their four children, all in college now, grew up there among the mangroves, mosquitos, scrub pines and saw



Maggie Hurchalla believes that if you love a saw palmetto you will prosper.

palmettos.

Maggie, always a naturalist, began her service on the Martin County Commission 10 years ago as an advocate of growth restrictions. Since then, in this environmentally sensitive county, she twice has been re-elected by 2-1 margins and each time carried every precinct. As a member of the Governor's Water Task Force, whose work encompasses the dilemmas of growth, she has studied the problems statewide.

Her time in public office has deepened the advocacy into firm conviction. She believes that Martin County (1983 pop., 74,143) — one of Florida's beautiful places, stretching from Lake Okechobee to the spectacular confluence of rivers at St. Lucie Inlet — has proved that growth controls not only foster a better lifestyle but fuel a superior business climate.

"Martin County (while dou-

bling in population, including the numbers of young and working people) produced more jobs per capita and better jobs per capita in the last 10 years than any other place in Florida," she said.

"One of the interesting ironies is that every time we passed a growth restrictive ordinance, somebody warned us we were driving away business. But, as a matter of fact, Martin County has grown faster and faster the more we've restricted it. The process only makes it a better place to live, and therefore more attractive."

But she admits the county has been lucky, too. "We are not the greatest, brightest people in the most wonderful place that ever happened that suddenly got this new good idea," she said.

"We owe so much to Dade and Broward counties. Dade faced the problems 30 years ago when there had not developed this knowledge and awareness. At Broward it

suddenly began to exist as the wave was breaking, and it was too late.

"What they learned — through court decisions, things like that — made it possible for us. We benefited from what happened to everybody else. This county was determined to dig in its heels and try to be different."

The struggle now is to get sound ordinances into place before the population numbers soar higher, possibly to levels more comparable with Palm Beach, Broward and Dade counties.

No place yet ever really licked boom growth like that.

Success so far seems to have been because the county has reached a working consensus that the first priority is a nice place to live. That standard takes care of everything else.

Put Maggie Hurchalla's way, the Martin County lesson reads: Love a saw palmetto, and prosper.