

Orange Blossoms and Confederate Jasmine

Being raised in rural Central Florida has its moments and it takes a native born Floridian to catch them. One thing that is a pet peeve of mine is hearing the transplants saying that there is only two seasons in Florida, hot and hotter. I disagree and I'm going to take you through the seasons as I see them.

The night air is still chill in the early Spring, and as I lay awake in bed I can hear the lonely song of the Whippoorwill as it calls for a companion that may not call back for several more months. The pigs are busting at the seams, heavy with the babies that are soon to be born. Yet the thing that truly signals that spring has arrived is the heavy aroma of the orange blossoms and Confederate Jasmine. This will always take me back to being a teenager again and is the most wonderful scent that God ever created.

Those wonderful blossoms would stir within us the need to grow something of our own. So we would break out the tiller and the hoe and go to town on about one half an acre of land. We would plant Beefsteak tomatoes, corn, yellow squash, zucchini, black eyed peas, and sweet peas which were our crops of choice. With that done mom and dad would normally drive up to Georgia, where they would buy two to three bushels of sweet, ripe, juicy, Georgia peaches,

The first night they were home we would sit around the table and peel and take the pit out of several peaches each. Then we would slice them into bite size pieces, place them in a bowl and sprinkle them with sugar and ladle ice cold heavy cream right on top. What a great desert that we would have just one time a year.

Early the next day we would start canning the rest of the peaches. We would start off with peach halves and slices, about ten jars each. Then it was on to the best part, the peach jam and jelly, we could feed an army with all the jars of peaches we would have.

Next the temperature starts climbing up to ninety-eight degrees with one hundred percent humidity; this is the time to head off to the springs. Rock Springs, Alexander Springs, or Juniper Springs, where the water is seventy-two degrees year round. Only the brave (or foolish) jump right in. Most of us tiptoe in an inch at a time while our insides try to find refuge somewhere deeper inside of us. Yet at the end of the day it is worth it, because our bodies will remain cool for hours after we have left to travel back home. One memory I will always carry with me is of me and my friends, cutting through Seminole Cemetery, and climbing through the sharp barbed wire fence to sneak back in to a shady knoll that hid a natural artesian well that had a small waterfall ending in a deep pool of crystal clear water. It was cool and refreshing but you would smell like rotten eggs for days. Thank God for long summer days that gave us a chance to let the stench wear off.

On the days that allowed me to make some money, I would rise at six in the morning and slop the pigs, feed the chickens, and milk the cow, then I'd walk down the road to Sarge's house and have a cup of coffee with Sarge, who was the local watermelon farmer, and we would head out into the field where I would spend the day swallowing dust and chunking watermelons onto the

back of a trailer for two cents a million that survived. I'd average about fifteen to twenty dollars a day. On weekends I would work at the egg ranch picking up eggs for ten to twelve hours a day. That would pay three cents a flat of eggs, which is thirty eggs.

Now we move into my favorite time of the year; fall, which means football and hunting. Sure there are only a few of the Florida trees that actually have their leaves change color like the sweet gum, golden rain, and some misplaced elms Yet after four months of the temperatures and humidity being close to or in the triple digits, it is welcome to see the seventies once again.

This brings to mind that first really cool day of fall. The wood and kerosene smoke hung heavily in the air as heaters and fireplaces warmed the homes in the area. My dad and I would hurry to get the chores done around the farm because today there was an added job. Smoke house day.

Down the road a piece, a family by the name of Hogan had a smoke house and they would let some of us in the area use it for a small fee, normally a ham or slab of bacon. Well we would get busy with the task of the day. We'd start off by sinking a fifty-five gallon drum into the ground at a forty-five degree angle, and then we would fill it with fresh, sweet water that we had heated to boiling. To this we would add pine tips which contained turpentine and would help remove the bristles from the pigs. This job done, we would set about getting the pigs ready for the smoke house. We would normally prepare two or three pigs and then we would take what would go into the smoke house down the street and we would help the Hogan's to finish their job. They would normally prepare about ten pigs. It was a long day but at its end we had ham, bacon, and other treats to look forward to. That, my friends, is fall.

Winter is a time for rest. No crops to be tended. Only one boar pig and two or three sows to feed. Milking the cow was actually enjoyable as was making butter and cheese. Pretty much anything that would pass time like reading, playing football, fishing, and the ever famous games of rummy that would go to ten thousand or more.

Christmas time is another story but one that brings back fond memories of cookies baking, mom being happy, and dad being tolerable. So as you can see, the Florida that I was raised in does have four distinct seasons and I'll love them forever. Who says that you need snow or brightly colored leaves falling to the ground?