

Naples boasts largest known Myrtle Oak in U.S.

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Ron Echols thought something was special about the big myrtle oak tree growing along the boardwalk at the Naples Preserve.

Echols, 79, a preserve volunteer, would stop at the tree as he took groups on nature walks. He would crane his neck to look up through the tree's branches. He would talk about how it is suited to survive in the preserve's dry, scrubby ecosystem alongside slash pine trees and gopher tortoise burrows. Then he would walk on. Until one day, he went back and measured it. He used a protractor, angles and a math formula to estimate the tree's height. He wrapped a measuring tape around its trunk. He measured the width of a circle of yellow caution tape laid in the brush beneath the outer edge of the tree's canopy. Echols, a retired oil company geologist who spent a career looking below ground, found a champion growing out of it. Height: 41 feet. Circumference: 70 inches. Average crown: 38 feet.



Clark Ryals, a senior forester with the Florida Forest Service, unveils the new informational plaque for the Naples Preserve's National Champion myrtle oak Tuesday, Jan 17, 2017, in Naples. The Naples Preserve's myrtle oak was recognized by the American Forests, an organization that started the registry of champion trees in 1940, and stands 41 feet tall. Designated as a National Champion, it is officially recognized as the tallest of its species in the United States. (Photo: Luke Franke/Naples Daily News)

"When I first realized we had a champion, I thought, 'This is going be fun,' and it was fun," he said. "The whole process was fun."

He reported his find to Florida Forest Service, which took its own measurements and sent them off to the nonprofit American Forests, which maintains the nation's registry of big trees. Then he waited. On Tuesday the Naples Preserve celebrated the official word from [American Forests](#) that the preserve's myrtle oak is the largest known example of its species in the U.S.

The Naples High School JROTC drum corps played. Members of the city's Tree Board gave speeches. The Naples High Student Government Association and Garden Club sent representatives. Mayor Bill Barnett sent a proclamation declaring Arbor Day in the city of Naples. A state forester unveiled a sign: "National Champion Myrtle Oak." "I don't think people really appreciate having something like this," said Florida Forest Service senior forester Clark Ryals, who took the tree's official measurements.

The Naples discovery knocked a [myrtle oak at Fort Morgan State Historic Site](#) near Gulf Shores, Alabama, off the American Forests list. Crooked River State Park in Georgia also [claims a champion myrtle oak](#). Neither measures up to the Naples champ.

Naples Preserve's myrtle oak is Collier County's second champion tree. The other is a Royal Palm in Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. It stands 82 feet tall, 76 inches around and has an average crown of 14 feet.



The newly dedicated National Champion myrtle oak, back right, seen through the brush and undergrowth at the Naples Preserve, stands 41 feet tall. The Naples Preserve's myrtle oak was given that designation by American Forests, an organization that started the registry of champion trees in 1940, and the tree is recognized as the tallest of its species in the United States. (Photo: Luke Franke/Naples Daily News)

The Naples myrtle oak might never have been discovered had it not been for voters who agreed in 2000 to tax themselves to pay nearly \$9 million to save the 4 acres of woods in the middle of town along U.S. 41 and Fleischmann Boulevard. The property had been tied up in an estate while parcels around it were

turned into Coastland Center mall and the neighborhoods of Lake Park and the Moorings. The scrubby patch stayed scrubby, and the myrtle oak kept growing.

Echols' path to its discovery began in Everglades City, where his family ran the laundry in the historic building that is now the Museum of the Everglades. The Echols family moved to Clewiston in 1945. He was about 7.

After he graduated from the University of Florida, his family moved to Naples, where relatives ran a grocery at Seventh Avenue North and U.S. 41. His father walked to work from the house he built in Lake Park in 1959, the year before Hurricane Donna slammed Naples. The house survived. Echols lives there with his wife, Mary, a short walk from the champion myrtle oak growing unnoticed until Echols got out his protractor.

One thing: "Hugging that tree is not a good idea," Echols said, smiling at the thought of the poison ivy that grows against the champion's trunk.

Volunteers, city officials, and members of the community attended a dedication ceremony to recognize the largest myrtle oak in the United States at The Naples Preserve Tuesday, Jan 17, 2017 in Naples. Ron Echols, a Florida Master Naturalist and volunteer at the preserve, spoke during the dedication ceremony.

Mary Echols, a volunteer with The Naples Preserve, examined the new informational plaque for The Naples Preserve's National Champion myrtle oak.

Champion Tree National Register **Myrtle Oak (Quercus myrtifolia)**

This champion Myrtle Oak of Florida made its debut on the list of American Forests Champion Trees in 2016 as the largest known tree of its species in the country.

By recognizing these champions, we recognize the beauty and critical ecosystem services provided by our biggest and oldest trees.



Data		
Height in feet	35	41

Spread or Crown in feet	40 weighted 1/4	38 weighted 1/4
Circumference in inches	27	70
Total Points	72	120.5

American Forests 202-737-1944-5

Naples Preserve 239-261-4290