BEAUTYBERRY POST

THE NEWSLETTER OF MACKAY GARDENS AND LAKESIDE PRESERVE

March-April / 2015

Re-Discovering Goodness by Steve Franklin

The day after leading a very diverse group of people on an interpretive nature walk along one of the tranquil, leaf-lined trails at Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve, I realized something very special had happened during the course of that walk. It occurred to me that in spite of the heartrending pictures and divisive news reports that foment distrust, fear, and hatred as they're broadcast daily by television and social media, this diverse group of strangers had parted company like old friends.

In the past, as I contemplated harmful news reports, I wondered if an antidote would ever be discovered that could overcome the debilitating effects of such potent psyche poison. Following the nature walk I decided that there are several remedies for the injurious results of hurtful news, but I'm only going to write about the one that works best for me.

To feel better, I begin by turning off all of my electronic devices and walking away from them. I leave all of that noise behind. Really, it can be done. I walk into the depths of a deep green forest where sturdy oaks, slim pines, fruitful hickories, water-loving cypress trees, and other shade-makers cleanse the air while cooling the soil that cushions my steps. As I walk I admire the swaying grasses and wildflowers, which carpet the ground and enrich the air's aroma everywhere that the trees allow sunlight to settle. I stop and listen to the wild sounds of insects humming and birds singing as they hastily but happily go about accomplishing the work that each of them was destined to perform. I sit peacefully on a bench beside a lake listening to the rippling water, which rhythmically laps the shore as the breeze that steered it my way gently caresses my face. After a while, because I've remained still and silent, a black snake may slither from beneath leaf litter toward a lizard resting on a fallen limb near my feet. The alert lizard soundlessly scampers away, and the snake continues its stealthy search for sustenance apparently undaunted by its most recent disappointment. Meanwhile, two yellow warblers might playfully flit from limb to limb overhead as I watch an osprey hover over the lake before diving and skillfully plucking a fish from the choppy water.

By the end of the interpretive walk with my new friends, if we hadn't experienced all of the nature-related moments just mentioned, we'd at least talked about enough of them to savor the delicious sensations they produce. All smiles, we lingered a moment in the shade of the dinner plate tree at the edge of the preserve. As we quietly talked, I sensed that this small cross-section of humans had experienced something that brought us closer together and from which we were all reluctant to depart. Maybe we were all mature enough to realize the futility of distrust, fear, and hatred, but I like to think that by devoting a little bit of time to re-connecting with nature we had also re-discovered the inherent goodness in each of us, and that's why we were hesitant to part company. Such is the healing power of the natural world.

The picture above is a painting by artist John Dame, Jr. inspired by the bald eagles at Mackay. See accompanying article.

Editors note: John H. Dame, Jr. is a seventh generation Floridian, a professional nature artist and a third generation ecologist. He has spent most of his life exploring and documenting the natural world in Florida and all over North America. His artwork is displayed in private collections all over the world.

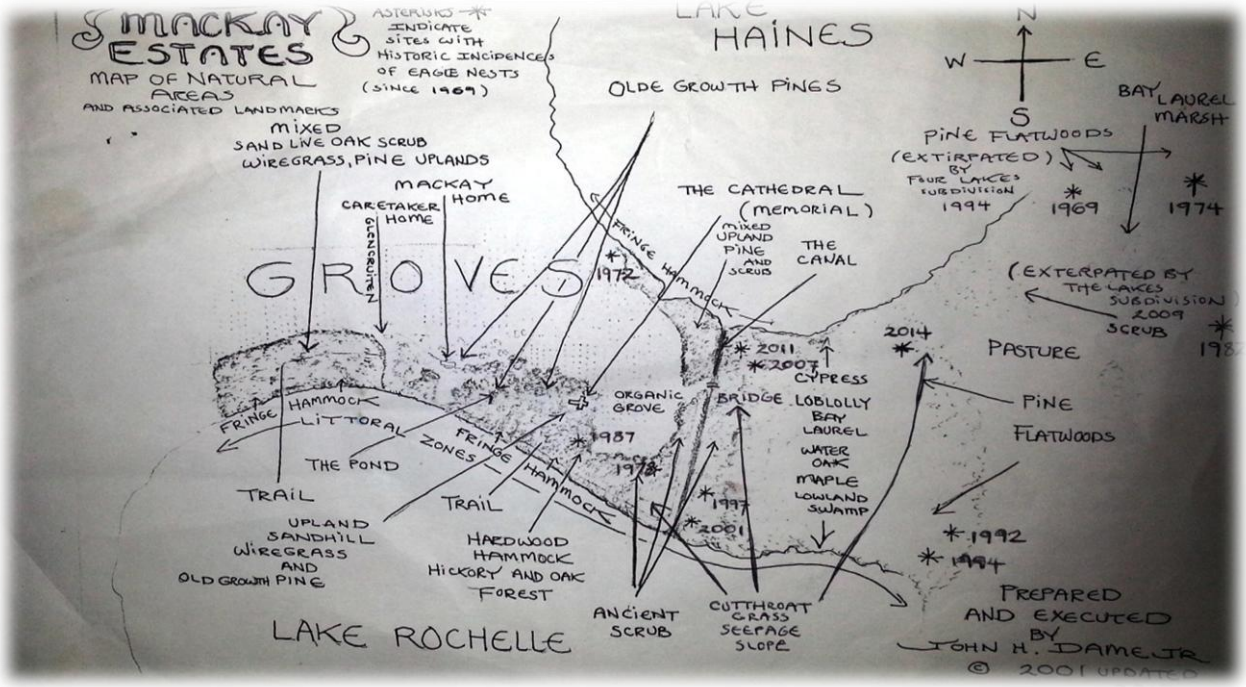
John spent many years of his youth exploring the property of the Mackay family in Lake Alfred and developed a close friendship with members of the family. Recently I talked to John about those memories and felt the importance for him to share some of those treasured moments in this newsletter. John also presented me with a copy of the map he speaks of in this article. It documents the eagle nest sites around the property since 1969. This wonderful document will be archived in the Mackay history collection.

A Love for Eagles by John Dame, Jr.

The eagles of the Alexander Mackay estate have been a lifelong interest for me. I was born in June of 1961, and at that time, the American bald eagle was at its most critical stage of endangerment. After years of suffering from the effects of the pesticide DDT, the eagle count in Polk County often sunk to single digits. Even though their numbers were so diminished countywide, eagles were always at Mackay! Thanks to the efforts of conservationist Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, DDT was banned and subsequently the eagle populations slowly rebounded.

The first nest I knew about had been around for many years when it was blown down by hurricane force winds in 1969. It was located on the east side of Lake Haines on the Mackay property, very close to the border of the adjacent Tilden property. I am not certain how long that nest had been there but I remember it from when I was very young, possibly 1964. It became large enough that a full grown man could have stood up in it and not be seen! There were reports that the crash was heard all the way across the lake!

Throughout the years, the eagles have nested in multiple places in and around the Mackay property. During the proceedings that ultimately resulted in the acquisition and creation of the Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve, I created an ecosystem map with the historic incidence of eagle nests included. Today, the eagles have a nest on the east side of the property, on the other side of the bay laurel swamp. (Continued next page)



We owe an incredible debt of gratitude to the Mackay family for being such thoughtful stewards of this Land. It resulted in a safe haven for the eagles during their time of darkness and now there are countless eagles, possibly hundreds, which have resulted from the offspring created there and their offspring's offspring! It is wonderful that the City of Lake Alfred is continuing the legacy of the Mackay family by watching over the eagles and practicing good stewardship of this special place.

What's Blooming?

Have you seen these spectacular blooms before? *Spathodea campanulata,* or **African tulip tree**, can be located behind the restrooms by the shed. It is in full bloom this March. For some time this particular tree was thought to be the only specimen on the property but recently eleven more trees were located elsewhere including what is likely to be the original plant. This rainforest tree does not like temperatures below 30 degrees F., however, it can survive and may grow back with multiple trunks. The newly discovered trees were thought to be Nile tulip trees, *Markhamia lutea*, until the recent blooming prompted closer inspection. Both are in the family Bignoniaceae.

Another mild winter has prompted a glorious burst of color throughout the Gardens. The **kapok** trees are starting to show their large brilliant red flowers, **Chinese hat** shrubs throughout are sporting their delicate orange "hats", the **wooly congea** vine is draped over the grotto covered in fuzzy pale pink bracts, and the **powderpuff** bushes are bursting with pollinator-attracting red blossoms**. Cherokee roses** are climbing high into trees with a profusion of single, large white flowers. Fragrant **orchid trees** can be seen in white and purple, also attractive to bees and nectar- seeking insects. The **pink tabebuia** tree in front of the house has sporadic color and the **yellow tabebuias** are preparing to come awake any day now.

Our native pygmy fringe tree is a delicate cloud of white, cherry laurel trees are showing small white blooms, and pignut hickory trees are showing deep rose flowers although inconspicuously.

Calendar of Events

March 2015

- 3/5 First Thursday Gardening Series 10a Perennials for Florida
- 3/8 Historical Nature Walk 2p
- 3/10 Mackay volunteer work day 9a-noon (Tue)
- 3/17 Mackay volunteer work day 9a- noon (Tue)
- 3/24 Mackay volunteer work day 9a-noon (Tue)
- 3/28 Mackay volunteer work day 9a-noon (Sat)
- 3/31 Mackay volunteer work day 9a-noon (Tue)

April

- 4/2 First Thursday Gardening Series 10a More Edible Landscaping
- 4/5 Historical Nature Walk 2p
- 4/7 Mackay volunteer work day 9a-noon (Tue)
- 4/14 Mackay volunteer work day 9a-noon (Tue)
- 4/21 Mackay volunteer work day 9a-noon (Tue)
- 4/28 Mackay volunteer work day 9a-noon (Tue)

May

- 5/7 First Thursday Gardening Series 10a The Magical Springs of Florida
- 5/16 Astronomy Night 7p

Save the dates: August 15, November 14- Astronomy Nights 7-10p

Volunteers are a necessary component for progress and success at MGLP. Whether it is working to improve the gardens, restore native habitat, or assist with advertising or fund-raising events please consider a donation of your time for this worthwhile endeavor to protect a piece of Florida history and habitat. We need volunteers! Contact Volunteer Coordinator, Cathy Butcher, to find out more. **cassiebelle@verizon.net**

Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve is located at 900 Mackay Blvd. in Lake Alfred, Florida, 33850. It is free and open 7 days a week from dawn until dusk. To inquire about renting the house and facilities or to ask about upcoming events please call Parks and Recreation at 863.291.5275.

Beautyberry Post is a bi-monthly newsletter edited by Cathy Butcher with assistance from Steve Franklin. To receive the BP by email please contact Anaeli Quinones at **aquinones@mylakealfred.com**.

Recent Happenings

EagleWatch Coordinator and Lake Region Aubudon President, Reinier Munguia confirmed the sad news that one of the **Mackay eagles**' nests was destroyed during recent storms that brought high winds and rain through the area. This active nest was being monitored by EagleWatch volunteers and believed to have one chick. The massive nest had been leaning for some time and came down during the storms. The chick was not recovered. To learn more about American bald eagles in Polk county visit; www.lakeregionadubon.org/eaglewatch.

Volunteers have begun removing vegetation from the base of pine trees in the northeast corner of the Preserve in preparation for a controlled burn. Vines, shrubs, and nearby trees must be removed as a precaution to keep fire from reaching the crown of the pines which could kill the trees. Otherwise, pines are well-adapted to ground level fire and must have periodic burns to thrive. This work is part of the **FWC Habitat Restoration Plan** to bring this area back to a healthy longleaf pine and turkey oak sandhill.

Photo: Mackayster volunteer Tom Palmer clears around the base of pine trees.

The **First Thursday Gardening Series** hosted by Polk County Master Gardener, Pat Farris, continue to be a huge success with record-breaking attendance for the February presentation on Florida-Friendly Groundcovers given by Dr. David Shibles. Dr. Shibles is the Residential Horticulture Agent for the Extension Service. The February **Historical Nature Walk** led by Mackayster Steve Franklin also reached maximum capacity with 22 fascinated attendees.

Master Gardener Jim Thompson donated four ***Camellia japonicas*** in memory of his late wife, Jodi. There are two plants of each cultivar 'Lady Vansittart' and 'Morning Glow'. Lady Vansittart will produce white striped and spotted- pink semi-double flowers. Morning Glow will produce large double white flowers. The photo shows Master Gardener Lyn Rumrill planting these lovely camellias east of the old tennis court. In an effort to increase the number of MGLP heritage plants, Cathy Butcher successfully propagated four of the old camellias over the summer and those are planted nearby as well. The cultivars are unknown at this time.

Master Gardeners Jim Thompson and Carl Scott have finished spring cleaning chores in the **Florida-Friendly Demonstration Garden**; weeding, pruning, repairing irrigation and preparing beds for emergence of those plants that reseed and others coming awake from winter dormancy. Jim wins the Sore Muscle Award for removing the invasion of stubborn Bermuda grass and Carl did a complete overhaul on the irrigation system should we ever need to use it.

Be on the lookout for thirteen new plant identification labels recently installed in the front yard between the house and Mackay Boulevard. These handsome metal labels correspond to some of the plants on the map for the self-guided nature hike. Maps are located in the dispenser near the parking lot which is also where the hike begins. So grab a map, look for the numbered posts and take a stroll to learn some interesting facts about these native and non-native plants.

In The Woods I Am

By Steve Franklin

Sometimes I feel the urge to simply be
One with the lost inner being in me.
And it's at those times that I seem to know
That to consciously connect I must go
To the woods and become all that I can;
For in the woods I will sense that I am:

An atmosphere colored electric blue,
Even when clouds form to obscure that view;
An oblong raindrop falling from a cloud
To splash on a leaf, though not very loud;
A tree frog quainking to attract a mate,
For the rain makes me want to celebrate;
A robust live oak tree or long leaf pine,
Which mosses, ferns, vines, and animals climb;
A monarch egg under a milkweed leaf---
Stashed treasure to a praying mantis thief;
Or a mockingbird chasing a hungry crow
Away from the nest where my children grow.

In the woods I am:
A stark snag---stripped, bleached, broken, but erect---
A home to woodpeckers, though derelict;
A fallen tree slowly decomposing---
A nest to the insects I'm enclosing;
An armadillo digging near that tree,
Knowing that's where a termite meal might be;
Rich soil sprouting a beautyberry bush
Because a tree died to grant me that wish;
A sound wind enabling trees to sing
Like inspired spirits soon to take wing;
Or a fish gasping in the grasp of a bird,
Which, angel-like, sweeps my soul heavenward.

The woods holds the essence of all that is;
Its good nature is found in all that lives.
I go to the woods to set my soul free.
I go to the woods to simply be me,
For once there I know in the woods I am.
In the woods I am. In the woods I am.