

BEAUTYBERRYPOST

THE NEWSLETTER OF MACKAY GARDENS AND LAKESIDE PRESERVE

January/February 2017



In Touch by Steve Franklin

Today I read that the center of the earth is about 4500 miles beneath its crust. Being a lover of sweets, that information inevitably led me to think of an apple pie with a flaky, light brown crust topping. From there my mind transitioned to picturing a tremendously thick piece of our world, filled with chunky, super-hot earthly ingredients, being removed with a giant spatula and then slapped down on an enormous plate. No apologies. That's just the way my warped mind sometimes works. But let's return to the topic. I'm a crust lover, and maybe that explains why I so enjoy spending time with my hands ensconced inside the dough of life, the soil found around our homes, in our parks, and our preserves. I'm not alone.

Yesterday it was brought to my attention that one of my fellow volunteers at Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve has a special request. After she passes away she would like to

have her ashes spread upon a portion of the garden, which she has maintained for several years, a very touching gesture of her love for that place. Later, I got to thinking that it would be like sprinkling powdered sugar on the crust of a freshly cooked pie, except this pie is still in the oven, still evolving.

Perhaps frequent subtle changes are what lure some of us to work in gardens or to make repeated trips to the shaded trails of our parks, preserves, and national forests. Curiosity and an innate desire to connect with as many of the other mortal beings who make the earth's crust a deliciously diverse blend of vital life forms are behaviors that attract some of us to nature just as the aroma of a baking dessert invites others to visit a kitchen. That has been a truth for generation after generation, and I hope those kinds of behaviors remain habits that people pursue well into the future.

The center of the earth is way down there. Most of us will eventually occupy a very insignificant space in its crust, no more than six feet below the surface. There we'll join the current residents of such spaces---loved ones, friends, enemies, strangers---becoming ingredients flavored by aspirations, hopes, desires, pride, fears, regrets, embarrassments, and, last but not least, the joy of living interesting, productive, meaningful, happy existences.

Our volunteer friend plans to do more than spend the remaining years of her life slowly decaying, only to be lowered into the ground inside an expensive, beautifully designed box in which she would eventually decompose. She's working hard to make the earth's crust a prettier place on which to reside. Later she'll make it greener too. That's what people who live well do. They add their favorite flavors to the recipe making the crust appear even more delicious to those who follow.



Top photo: ***The FWC Ridge Ranger Volunteers at MGLP. See Recent Happenings for the story.***

Calendar of Events

January

- 1/5- **Gardening with Daylilies in Florida** with Master Gardener Ginger Hansill-10am. Ginger introduces you to some of Florida's easiest and most delightful flowers to grow in your landscape.
- 1/8- **Interpretive Nature Walk** with Steve Franklin-2pm. Join our seasoned interpretive guide for a moderately easy walk along a MGLP trail. Steve will share information on the natural and cultural history of this area and discuss some of the environmental issues we face as we attempt to conserve and protect our natural resources.
- **January volunteer work days:** 3, 10, 17, 24, 31. Tuesdays 9am-12*
- 1/28-**Saturday** volunteer work day. 9am-12**
- 1/28- **Astronomy Night** with Cleve Carter-7pm-10. This ever popular event teaches the basics of astronomy. An observation session on the back lawn will follow the presentation, weather permitting. Some telescopes will be provided but feel free to bring your own.

February

- 2/2-**Natural Products for Pest Control** with Master Gardener Celia Beamish-10am. Learn about methods to control pests in your garden that are easier on the environment & your budget.
- **February volunteer work dates:** 7, 14, 21, 28. Tuesdays 9am-12*
- 2/5- **Interpretive Nature Walk** with Steve Franklin – 2pm. See above.
- 2/18-**Saturday** volunteer work day. 9am-12**

If you are unable to join Steve Franklin for his MGLP nature walk then consider attending A Virtual Walk Through Mackay Gardens & Lakeside Preserve at one of these locations: Bartow Library, January 12, 10am-11; Lake Wales Library, January 21, 2pm-3.

*All volunteers are invited to Tuesday work days that are devoted to maintaining the grounds nearest the house and the Florida-Friendly Demonstration Garden. This involves the removal of fallen limbs and palm fronds and keeping these areas weeded. Please bring a drink, insect repellent, and small hand tools if possible. See Cathy Butcher, Volunteer Coordinator for assignments and sign in at the Parks and Recreation Office at the Mackay house.

**All volunteers are welcome to assist on Saturday work days also. The focus is on invasive plant removal within the Preserve. This important and fun work will involve hand removal of troublesome plants or their seeds. Bring shovels and small hand pruners if possible. A limited amount of tools are available at the shed. Trash bags and 5-gal. buckets will be provided. Please bring a drink. The use of repellent and sunscreen are recommended. Meet at the parking lot.



All events are **free** unless otherwise noted.

Have you considered **volunteering** at MGLP? Volunteers are absolutely essential to conducting successful programs and continually improving the appearance of MGLP. Volunteers work in garden areas, help restore native habitats in the preserve, develop and perform educational programs, and assist with advertising, fund raising, and volunteer recruitment. By donating a small portion of your time you are helping to improve and protect a piece of Florida's rich history and the habitats which surround it. If you'd like to become involved in any of these very worthwhile endeavors, please contact Volunteer Coordinator, Cathy Butcher, at cassiebelle@verizon.net.

Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve is located at 945 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 or picnic shelter, or to ask about upcoming events please call Parks and Recreation at 863-291-5272. 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. Also, please feel free to forward it to interested friends.

If you would like to peruse back issues of the **Beautyberry Post** you can find them at the City of Lake Alfred's website, mylakealfred.com. Look for the newsletters under Parks and Recreation, Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve.

Please help promote awareness of MGLP by **LIKING** our **Facebook** page. Check out **Friends of Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve** to keep up with events, see photos, and read interesting historical information.

Fat lighter, the Original Yule Log by Richard Weed

While it may be a little post-Christmas for an article on Yule logs, we still have plenty of harsh Florida winter left to enjoy a bon-fire or two. Okay, so maybe I'm exaggerating a bit about how harsh Florida's winter can be, but it does get cold enough most winters to enjoy a few nice bon-fires. And who doesn't love a good bon-fire? I'm sure many of us have fond memories of sitting around a good fire while camping or attending a get-together, joking and laughing with friends or family, enjoying the warmth of the fire and a "cup of cheer." But to have a nice bon-fire, not just any old piece of wood will do.

Growing up in what is left of the great pine flats of Florida, there has always been an abundance of fire wood available to our family, and anytime we go to stock up everyone knows exactly what we are looking for. Not just any piece of wood or log on the ground will work. We are looking specifically for those resin-saturated pine nuggets of gold, which burn like nothing you've seen before. The prized wood we are looking for is known to Florida natives as fat-lighter.

Fat lighter goes by many names. During a quick Google search I found that it is known by different names in different regions of the country. Historically, in the south, it came from long

leaf pine trees. You may know it as rich lighter, fat wood, pine knots, or several other names.



Now, some of you probably know exactly what I'm talking about, and for the most part I am writing this article based on personal experience. I guess, being a native Floridian and avid woodsman, I have always known what fat lighter is and have always used it, but I've been surprised to discover how many people are not familiar with it.

Fat lighter comes from the heart of a pine tree. It is the **resin-saturated core** of a pine that hardens after the tree dies. It becomes extremely hard and will dull the chain on a chainsaw in no time. On more than one occasion I have even seen sparks fly out of a fat lighter stump

when trying to cut a large stump into suitable pieces to burn. After the bark and the first few inches of the trunk rot away and fall off, only the solid core is left. Once that solid core is exposed, the outside of the fat lighter normally has a grayish weathered look to it, but once you cut into it, underneath that surface, it will almost glow with an amber/reddish color, and it smells like turpentine.

Fat lighter seems never to rot and will burn in almost any weather condition, even when it is wet. Because it never seems to rot, it works great for long term storage.

I've seen pieces of fat lighter left on a wood rack for years, and it still burns great. Fat lighter burns very hot, very fast, and produces a thick black smoke, so most people use it as a starter wood by splitting it to make kindling. Those small strips of pure fat lighter can be easily lighted with a match. No other fuels are required. Personally, I like to keep a decent size chunk of fat lighter on my fire at all times with a good chunk of oak sitting on top of it. It keeps the fire hot and bright while the oak lasts.

While doing some research for this article I found that there is a market for fat lighter. L.L. Bean sells a 35lb. "fatwood box" cut into small strips for \$49.95, and larger chunks sold online go for a price of about \$1.25 a pound.

While it is mostly used for fire wood, fat lighter can be used for other projects as well. For example, my cousin built a decorative fence out of some fat lighter logs he found, and I've even heard of some people building benches out of fat lighter logs they had milled.

So where do you find fat lighter? The answer to that is easy. Fat lighter can be found wherever you find pine trees, and personally, I have the best luck on higher ground in more scrubby areas where there is old growth like you find in the east side of the preserve at Mackay. It seems the



older and bigger the tree is the better quality the fat lighter will be. Remember, you're looking for grey, weathered-looking wood with no bark; it almost looks like old drift wood. But before you go looking for this dead pine tree treasure, make sure you have permission to do so, and be careful to look for snakes that hide under these old logs.

Documented research and information seems to be limited on this topic, but a simple Google search led me to several forums that had some good information and videos on YouTube about fat lighter, so check it out for more information. Happy hunting, and hopefully you'll survive this harsh Florida winter!

Recent Happenings

On December 10, 2016 members of the Ridge Rangers volunteer organization teamed up with Mackaysters to help with habitat restoration on the east end of the Preserve. Approximately 300-350 sand live oaks were cut by trained chainsaw operating crewmembers. The object of this project was to make that portion of the preserve easier to burn when we initiate our next prescribed fire in that area. Historically, since Florida has experienced more lightning caused wildfires than any place else in the U.S., many of our native plants became dependent on fire for their survival and regeneration. If we don't continue to introduce fire to certain ecosystems through the use of controlled burns, the long term survival of many of our native plants and animals may be threatened

The Ridge Rangers organization is a group of volunteers that assist the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission by: "...helping to restore and enhance native habitat with activities like planting seedlings, removing invasive species, removing old debris and fences, collecting and sowing native seeds, and maintaining a native plant nursery." Most of these activities and others take place on the Lake Wales Ridge, but since our habitat restoration project has received grant support from the FWC we were very fortunate to qualify for support from this fine group of skilled volunteers. We'd like to thank the following people for their participation in this valuable project: Kenneth Bailey, Roger Bergere, Marilyn Blair, Jerry Burns, Cathy Butcher, Diedrich Dierks, Gerald Fortner, Jason Hewitt, Liane Plumhoff, Ciara Proia, Al Reynolds, Juliet Rynear, and Connie Sweet. Special thanks to volunteer coordinator Bill Parken.

Recently a spray crew has treated the west side of the Preserve in an ongoing effort to remove certain invasive exotic plants from preserved portions of the property. They may return to further attack cat's claw vines sometime in the near future. Habitat restoration projects are vital to assure that native plants and animals thrive in our valuable preserve well into the future.



Habitat Restoration

Some think them much too ready
To use chainsaws, shovels, and loppers,
But intense research and study
Precede these dedicated choppers.
The goal is to improve sites
Where native wildlife once freely roamed
So their ancestors delight
In finding habitats that feel like home.
So when you see them chopping
Remember they love nature as much as you,
And then thank them for dropping
Plants which threaten the natural view.

Steve Franklin/January 3, 2016