

BEAUTYBERRY POST

THE NEWSLETTER OF MACKAY GARDENS AND LAKESIDE PRESERVE

November/December 2016



In Touch by Steve Franklin

One day a while back, I was outside walking shortly before sunrise. Dawn was obviously approaching, yet the cloudless sky continued to allow me to admire some of the brightest stars,

planets, and a shiny white sliver of new moon. A cool breeze caressed my face. It was easy to imagine that it was already October rather than the next-to-the-last day of August. But just a couple of hours later, as I knelt on one knee pulling weeds from a flower bed at Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve, my glasses kept sliding down my sweaty nose and drops of perspiration dripped from my forehead onto each lens of my glasses. My view of the colorful landscape surrounding me became blurred, distorted.

August is without a doubt one of the most distressing months in which to work in a yard requiring care. The heat, the humidity, and the hungry insects, which thrive in late summer with the sole intent of making outdoor work a miserable endeavor, are never more at the height of their careers than on an August day. Yet there we were, Tom, Gary, and I, pruning sagging limbs, digging up weeds with tools or with our gloved hands, or dragging fallen fronds onto gray piles littered with the corpses of their fellow dead. Why?

Why weren't we sitting in a comfortable recliner sipping coffee and enjoying the cool, dry, climate-controlled atmosphere of an air conditioned home? Why weren't we either floating in the clear blue water of a swimming pool or upon the calm surface of a lake as we dangled hook, line, and sinker from the side of a bobbing boat?

There are probably any number of reasons why the three of us often spend Tuesday mornings working to improve the appearance of Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve. Maybe it's because we enjoy working with like-minded people beneath the sturdy limbs of shade trees as their leaves whisper secrets to the passing wind. Maybe trimming trees and shrubs gives us a feeling akin to what Michelangelo must have felt as he released his David from the rock in which he had been incased. Maybe the happy song birds who whistle while we work keep us coming back.

Maybe it's the immediate gratification we enjoy as our work reaches fruition, or maybe we simply hope to sanctify our souls by immersing our hands in the soil from which so many heavenly organisms sprout and grow. I'm sure all of those factors attract us to the volunteer work we pursue, but for me there is one more reason I'm there. Each morning, as I arrive at the property, the famous words of President John F. Kennedy sound in my head. They are, "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

It's hard to believe that those simple yet powerful words could have meant so much to so many a few decades ago, yet now seem to have been forgotten or at least reversed in the minds of so many others. I wish there were adequate words to allow me to explain to each of you in the very clearest of terms how good it makes people like Tom, Gary, and me feel as we make the world a prettier place in which to live. Someone once said, "If you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen." In my opinion, it's never too hot to help improve our country, our community, or our gardens.



Top photo: ***A swallowtail butterfly nectaring on blazing star, a native *Liatris* species of wildflower.***

Calendar of Events

November

- 11/3- **First Thursday Annual Luncheon-10am.** Anyone who has attended a First Thursday program in the last year is invited to this social potluck. Bring a dish to share and a plant or fun gift for the plant exchange.
- 11/6- **Interpretive Nature Walk** with Steve Franklin-2pm. Join our seasoned environmental interpreter on a guided walk along MGLP trails. On this moderately easy walk Steve will also share information on the natural and cultural history of this area along with an occasional poem.
- **November volunteer work days:** 1, 8,15,22,19. Tuesdays 9am-12pm*
- 11/12-**Saturday** volunteer work day. 9am-12pm**

December

- 12/1 -**NO First Thursday presentation**
- **December volunteer work dates:** 6,13,20,27, Tuesdays 9am-noon*
- 12/4- **Interpretive Nature Walk** with Steve Franklin – 2pm.
- 12/10- **Saturday** volunteer work day. 9am-noon**

*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. This important and fun work will involve hand removal of troublesome plants or their seeds within the Preserve.

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 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 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.



Creepy Crawlies by Steve Franklin

Photos by Cathy Butcher

It was an ideal day for a walk in the woods. The deep blue summer sky was dotted with distinct white clouds shaped like cuddly toy animals. The morning breeze, slipping serenely shoreward from Lake Rochelle, brought with it cooler than normal air that swept through the tree tops like an invisible flock of hummingbirds. And though the breeze was light, the air was heavy with the earthy aroma of dying vegetation and the fresh green fragrance of fast-growing plants. I was strolling peacefully, almost silently, upon the soft sand and limber grass of one of the trails at Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve, enjoying the feel of cool air as it brushed by my face and arms. Suddenly I was startled by a nearby noise, which resembled the threatening clatter a rattlesnake might create when unexpectedly confronted by a predator. I froze in place. Goosebumps immediately rose on my forearms, and the back of my neck tingled as I became more aware of my surroundings. Before either the fight or flight response could kick in, I saw movement in the grass between the lake and the trail and recognized the dark, slender form of a black racer snake, which swiftly slipped away, taking shelter beneath a fallen snag. I relaxed, breathing a sigh of relief. Apparently, upon sensing my presence, the snake had characteristically vibrated his tail against leaf litter and grass in an attempt to mimic a

rattlesnake in order to scare me off. I probably hadn't seen him first because sometime earlier he'd kinked his body to camouflage himself by taking on the appearance of a fallen branch. When I didn't run from him, he used his "racer" speed to escape from what he assumed might be a predator.



I've often wondered why so many of us seem to have been born with an instinctive fear of things that creep and crawl. One theory I've proffered to friends is that many of us, at a very young age, learned the story of Eve's encounter with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, which might have created a lasting impression on us, causing us to subconsciously associate snakes with the devil. Okay, I know it's a stretch, but how else can any of us explain a fear of snakes dating back beyond the easily recalled past? Sure, there were nature documentaries, like *Wild America*, on which narrator Marty Stouffer carefully handled wild animals while explaining their behaviors. Those shows might have cultivated some healthy fears, the kind that would cause you to give a wide berth to a snake lying on a trail, if not simply choosing to leave him alone by backtracking. I also remember reading *The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and wondering where I'd find a deer liver to use as a poultice if I was ever bitten by a rattlesnake while hiking in the woods. The boy's father had just killed a deer in that famous story, so after being bitten, he had its liver handy. Still, our fear of snakes seems entirely overblown.

I think a little fact checking might convince some of us that going for a walk in the woods is a relatively safe and pleasant way to pass the time. The *Florida Backyard Snakes* website offers some valuable information and helpful pictures. There I discovered that approximately 50 species of snakes may be found in Florida, but only 6 are venomous and only 4 of those poisonous species are found in Central Florida. There we learn why snakes are beneficial to the environment. They eat: rats, mice, worms, toads, frogs, birds, shrews, fish, eggs, and some, like the indigo and king snakes, eat other snakes, including the venomous ones. Snakes, by behaving as they do, help keep ecosystems well balanced. So, it's actually good for the environment to leave snakes alone, and in doing so, they will leave us alone as well.

What about the probability of being bitten by a venomous snake? According to Wikipedia, 7000-8000 people per year are bitten by a venomous snake in the U.S., and only about 5 of those people die. Since the year 2000 only 4 people in Florida have died from a snake bite, and half of them had riled up the snake while attempting to kill it. Compare those numbers with the Florida Department of Transportation's graphs indicating the number of fatalities resulting from automobile wrecks in Florida during the year 2015 alone. Over 2300 motorists died of injuries incurred during an accident. So, the chances of being bitten by a poisonous snake while walking in a preserve in Florida are remarkably low compared with some of the other ways we could meet with a premature demise. In fact, I've hiked hundreds of miles of trails throughout the U.S. and only once or twice even spotted a venomous snake along the way. A walk in the woods really is a safe, relaxing form of entertainment.

The two snakes most likely to be seen along the trails at Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve are both non-venomous. Black racers (*Coluber constrictor priapus*) and eastern corn



snakes (*Pantherophis guttatus*), also known as the red rat snake, may occasionally be found resting beside one of our trails or dangling from a nearby tree or shrub. The diets of both snakes are similar and may be summed up in the list previously mentioned. Neither snake is large enough to include humans in their diet, but if you try to capture the black racer it might bite you if it doesn't have time to race away, so leave it alone. Corn snakes are a bit friendlier, yet they too may

bite if they feel threatened. However, they are frequently raised as pets, which may live up to 22 years in captivity. The Black racer's scientific name implies that it constricts its prey to kill it before consuming it, but this is not the case. They generally consume their prey immediately upon catching it. Corn snakes, on the other hand, do constrict their prey before devouring it.

Both these snakes tend to occupy the same kinds of habitats, which include: pine lands, hardwood hammocks, swamps, prairies, sand hills, scrub, agricultural fields, and residential areas. In other words, they may be found almost anywhere in Florida. One difference between these snakes is that the black racer is only active during daylight hours while the corn snake is primarily active at night. Their common enemies are birds of prey because they can swoop down from the sky without being detected as easily as other predators.

As far as appearances go, most adults seen in this area are entirely black except for a white chin and throat. Their eyes are a contrasting chestnut-brown. Black racers may grow as long as 55 inches and the maximum length on record is 72 inches. The young of this species looks very different than adults. According to the book *Florida Snakes* by R.D. and Patricia Bartlett, young black racers are actually “...very strongly patterned with...blotches (or crossbars)



on a tan to light-brown or grayish ground color.” These blotches are more rounded than those of young rat snakes and water snakes. Additionally, young racers are more slender and have larger eyes than juveniles of most other snakes in our region. The juvenile pattern of young racers fades to black when the snakes are about 12 inches long.

Corn snakes are variable in size as a result of the diet available to them wherever they live. A mature snake may be from 26 inches to 4 feet in length, but they have been known to exceed 6 feet in length. They also vary widely in color. The FWC *Venomous and Nonvenomous Snakes of Florida* pamphlet describes them as “...usually some shade of yellowish-tan to orange with a row of large, dark-edged, red or rusty blotches running down the back. Its black and white belly resembles a piano keyboard”. Young red rat snakes resemble adults. One of the three subspecies of corn snakes may be found at MGLP and that is the yellow rat or chicken snake, *Pantherophis alleghaniensis*. It is dull yellow with four dark stripes running the length of the body. These really are pretty snakes.

During a seminar on snakes, which I attended a few years ago, the speaker noted that most people who are attacked by poisonous snakes are bitten on the hand or forearm. The reason he gave for this observation was that most of the people who incur a venomous snake bite are people who thought they were trying to pick up a non-venomous snake but were mistaken. My experience has been that by staying on the trail or giving any type of snake I encounter a wide berth, I’ve never threatened any of them, and they, in kind, returned the favor by leaving me alone.

Snakes are interesting creatures and play a vital role in the delicate balancing act, which is constantly in motion throughout the ecosystems that make up our diverse planet. They’re just another creature among the many animals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and insects whose behaviors we’re free to observe and enjoy during a visit to a place like Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve. We can learn to overcome the heebie-jeebies by becoming more familiar with the creepy crawlies.

Recent Happenings

The **First Thursday** presentations held in the Mackay house on the first Thursday of every month, except November and December, continue to draw record attendance. *Common Weeds of Central Florida* presented in August was enjoyed by almost fifty attendees. The October program *Florida Bats* was cancelled due to the approach of Hurricane Matthew. Look for it to be rescheduled in the upcoming 2017 calendar.

Nature walks with interpretive guide Steve Franklin resumed in September after a summer hiatus. A group of adults and youngsters enjoyed hearing about the geographic and cultural history of the Mackay property and strolled along one of the trails learning about Florida habitats and wildlife. Steve also began giving presentations of his PowerPoint creation at local libraries. It's entitled *A Virtual Walk Through Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve*. This "arm-chair" version of his delightful nature walk will be presented at the Haines City Library on December 7th at 1pm; Bartow Library on January 12th at 10am; Lake Wales Library on January 21st at 2pm; and the Winter Haven Library on March 15th at 11am.

Work days in September and October saw a gradual return of Mackayster help as volunteers returned from vacations and the summers' hot temperatures began to ease up. Our newest

Mackayster volunteer, **Donella Hardgrave (left)** exhibits calm interest as a green lynx spider perches atop her gloved hand during removal of invasive plants in the Preserve. No heebie-jeebies from this young woman!



Photo Gallery



A young six-lined racerunner pauses beneath a sensitive brier flower.



Above: Leopard moth



Right: Praying mantis on Nile tulip tree flower buds.