BEAUTYBERRY POST

THE NEWSLETTER OF MACKAY GARDENS AND LAKESIDE PRESERVE

September/October 2016

In Touch by Steve Franklin

It's often amazing and sometimes troubling how an idea for another article for this newsletter makes its way into my mind. This article arrived via an outrageous incident performed by a man who I'll simply refer to as Jack. The incident occurred on a Saturday morning in July. It happened on the observation deck above the Visitor's Center atop Brasstown Bald in north Georgia, and it made a shambles of what, for me, should have been just another pleasant, productive day of volunteer work. My duties that day were greeting visitors, answering their questions, explaining why and how the Chattahoochee National Forest

had come to be preserved, and offering them an opportunity to use a very powerful pair of binoculars to get a closer look at distant points of interest.

It had been a typically busy day punctuated by the exuberant sounds of excited voices as people enjoyed the awesome view of the massive, forest-covered mountains for the first time. But then a well-dressed lady walked up to inform me that her husband was at the other end of the observation deck taking pictures of a young man who was carving something into the wide top rail of the overlook's perimeter wall. The carver and his family were halfway to the stairway leading down to the exhibit hall when we encountered them. I asked him if he'd been carving on the building, and he admitted that he had as the lady's husband, who'd been following him, confirmed it and added that he'd taken pictures as the carving occurred.

I was shocked and angered by the unmitigated gall of this thirty-something-year-old man, so I didn't respond very professionally or with political correctness when I asked him, "Are you stupid or what? Why would you do something like that to U.S. government property?" His reply was, "Well, I saw that other people had done it before me so I thought it would be alright." To make a long story short, eventually the man was dressed down by the manager on duty and made to vow that he'd never do anything like that again. Head down, he slunk away, and by the next afternoon a volunteer maintenance man had sanded away the evidence of the man's existence and poor judgment.

So what does this incident have to do with Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve? It's a universal problem. There are a certain number of people in the world who seem to have concluded that the best way to immortalize themselves is through the use of graffiti, carving, or other useless forms of property destruction no matter how offensive the rest of us may find their actions. Frankly, I don't care how intensely Jack loves Jill, or if any two such people even exist. I'm much more likely to remember and admire a person for the good he has accomplished for his fellow man rather than for his or her skills as a defacer of property.

The ignoble people who litter Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve and who destroy or deface parts of it will soon be forgotten. Their carelessness and ugly efforts to immortalize themselves will be removed from view, and for most of us those people will soon cease to exist. In contrast, Nancy Daley, a mother, grandmother, former Cypress Gardens water skier, and an active member of Lake Alfred's city commission will always be fondly remembered as an ordinary citizen who helped spark a grassroots effort to save the Mackay estate from total destruction. She and volunteers like Cathy Butcher, a musician, Master Naturalist, Master Gardener and the Volunteer Coordinator at Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve, will be venerated for their insight, leadership, and on-going efforts to restore and maintain the historic property. They will long be remembered for their selfless work to promote Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve as a classroom and retreat where the residents of Polk County and their visitors can go to learn how to live a sustainable lifestyle while getting away from the daily pressures of city living.

Ordinary people can chose to accomplish extraordinary deeds, and because of their efforts earn the lasting respect and appreciation of their fellow man. Now's the time for more of us to do something good for society, and becoming a volunteer anywhere is the best way to get started. Thoughtful, constructive behavior truly is memorable and rewarding.

Top photo: ***Bromelia pinquin***

Read more about this interesting prickly bromeliad in the Master Gardener Corner in this issue.

B. pinquin photos by Cathy Butcher

Calendar of Events

September

- 9/1-First Thursday Presentation: ***Habitat Restoration and Conservation Landscaping*** with Juliet Rynear, Chair of the Conservation Committee for the Florida Native Plant Society-10am-noon. Juliet returns to Mackay to review native habitat restoration work in Central Florida and will explain the importance of preserving remaining intact habitats which support an amazing diversity of plant species. Juliet will share the important role that home gardeners and landscaping professionals play in this effort.
- September **volunteer work days**: 6,13,20,27. Tuesdays 8am-11am
- 9/24 **National Public Lands Day**- 8am-noon.This day is set aside annually in our nation to recognize and participate in events that protect and preserve America's natural heritage. This **Saturday** work day will focus on removal of invasive plants within the preserve. Lunch will be provided. Please register for this event by calling Anaeli Quinones at (863)291-5272 or email aquinones@mylakealfred.com. **

October

- 10/6-First Thursday Presentation: ***Florida Bats*** with Shannon Carnavale, Natural Resource and Conservation Agent for Polk County-10am-noon. Shannon will educate us about these fascinating yet unappreciated creatures that are so valuable to our environment.
- **October volunteer work dates:** 4, 11, 18, 25. Tuesdays 9am-noon*
- 10/9- **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.
- 10/29- **Saturday** volunteer work day. 9am-noon. **
- 10/29- **Astronomy night** with Cleve Carter-7-10p.m. 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.

*Note time change. Tuesday work days are for 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.

** Saturday work days will focus 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.

Master Gardener Corner

Heart of Flame!

By Cathy Butcher, Florida Master Gardener

Heart of flame! I smiled when I first discovered this was the common name for a plant at Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve that I would otherwise describe as humble looking or interesting at best. What seems like a wildly romantic name refers only to a few brief days in the life of *Bromelia pinquin* as it bursts into a reproductive display that causes it to morph from "Plain Jane" into "Belle of the Ball". This terrestrial bromeliad in the Bromeliaceae family also shares this common name with a relative having many other similarities; *Bromelia balansae*. My efforts to make an accurate identification of my plant through online research only resulted in painful jaw clenching. My search online pulled up a confusing maze of differing opinions on blossom color, size description discrepancies, and conflicting information accompanying photos of fruits. Until further verification is acquired I will refer to the plant featured in this article as *Bromelia pinquin*.

The name, heart of flame was inspired by the dramatic color change that takes place in this large, green bromeliad when it prepares to flower and fruit after about two years of growth. Over the course of several days, the core of the plant turns a brilliant red-orange which spreads outward through the upper leaves. During this time a cluster of flowers forms in the center. A stalk, called an inflorescence, tightly holds these burgundy and white flowers as it rises above the center of the plant. The flowers gradually loosen onto short, branching stems. To me, the flower color looks burgundy but according to the numerous descriptions I read online, I am probably the only person to think so.

I'm fairly certain that the first time I became aware of these plants at MGLP was due to this extraordinary display of color which attracted my attention. On closer inspection I discovered one of their more unpleasant characteristics. I remember leaning in to appreciate the beautiful coloration only to get snagged by viciously sharp spines growing along the margins of the stiff, arching leaves. To make matters worse, some of the spines grew in the opposite direction. Extracting ones clothes or skin from the grip of this plant proved to be a surprising and painful challenge.

Still, the beauty aspect was alluring and, being the amateur scientist that I am, I decided to learn more about this plant firsthand by doing a loosely based scientific experiment. I cleverly decided to bring a small one home to plant in my yard. That way I could easily observe growth characteristics and selfishly have my own personal explosion of color when the pinquin bloomed. Even though I didn't keep written, detailed clinical notes on my experiment, they were to be painfully imbedded into my memory. The first thing I learned was that "baby" quickly became "mommy". The solitary plant grew rapidly and little pinquins began peeking out from the base of the mother plant. I found these pups connected to the parent plant by underground stems called stolons. I could see that the small space I allotted for this plant would soon be overwhelmed. My first attempts to weed out the pups from underneath the parent resulted in punctured arms, facial lacerations, and ripped hair as "mother"

ensnared me with her thorns. At that point more appropriate names coming to mind were Brom the Ripper or Misery Plant. This initial painful experience made me very reluctant to approach the pinquin again. I cowardly decided to watch from a safe distance but after a year of fruitful progeny production and no sign of dramatic flowering I waded in again to thin the pup population. Now there were several large plants all producing pups and still no sign of flowering. During this time my expletive vocabulary increased considerably. Somewhere in that two year time frame I got what I had initially hoped for except I hadn't realized that the long-awaited event would be so brief. I had painfully toiled with this plant for almost two years only to receive a reward that lasted about seven days! Soon after, oblong yellow-orange fruits developed along the stalk and the rest of the plant began turning brown, dying.

I removed all of my pinquins after that. They were just too hard to maintain in the landscape due to those brutal spines and rapid reproduction.

Because of this little experiment I then became more aware of their presence at MGLP. I was startled to see pinquins growing in multiple locations; seeming to thrive in direct sun, total shade, dry sand, and along the moist shoreline. Apparently they could adapt to just about any growing condition. Because of that ability to grow anywhere and form large colonies they were becoming nuisance plants, crowding out native vegetation. Individual pinquin plants and colonies could now be found scattered over the 112 acres of gardens and preserve.

Further research unveiled the mystery of how an individual plant could show up long distances from the colonies. Squirrels, raccoons, and opossums would harvest a ripe berry, scurry off to eat it in the woods, and leave behind the large seed ready to sprout and form the next colony of plants in a new location. *Bromelia pinquins* are native to Mexico, Central America, and northern South America and have few pests or diseases to help control their spread in Central Florida. They were surely planted here for their brief ornamental value. That ornamental value was appreciated by European explorers who collected them in the late 1600's along with their close cousin, the pineapple. Indigenous cultures valued them for food, medicine, and fiber. The edible berry pulp provided a refreshing yet acidic beverage or fermented drink. Parts of the plant were eaten raw or cooked as vegetables, and the leaves yielded a strong fiber useful as thread. Certainly a clever use for pinquins in their native lands was as "living" fences. Native peoples planted impenetrable borders of these thorny plants to successfully keep wildlife out and livestock in.

At MGLP pinquin colonies are being removed over time. It is a problem that now requires the use of large machinery and herbicides. Perhaps some individual specimens can be managed in containers so everyone can have a chance to witness their hearts of flame.

Did you know?
Mackay is pronounced mac- EYE?

Recent Happenings

Thursday, August 4, 2016 was a day for celebration at Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve. That morning, city leaders and guests gathered at the property to perform dual **dedication ceremonies**. The first was to unveil a new plaque which recognizes the historical significance of the Mackay home. The beautiful oval plaque, mounted on the wall of the house next to the entryway, explains the early history of the home and its occupants. The second dedication was of the citrus label sign commemorating the Lake Alfred Packing Company. The sign will be located near one of the entrances to the property. It represents a part of the Polk County Citrus Label Tour, an endeavor created by the Polk County History Center "…to help people learn about the citrus industry in their locale." Attending and speaking were Lake Alfred Mayor Charlie Lake, Vice-mayor Nancy Daley, the History Center's historic preservation manager Myrtice Young, and the chairwoman of the Polk County Historical Commission Jennifer Bush.
Sketch courtesy of Margaret Wheaten

Mackayster volunteer, Juliet Rynear, reports that the **Saturday volunteer work days** that she supervised during the hottest months of the year---May, June, July, and August---were productive. "We pretty much got rid of two large areas of Caesar weed and rosary pea (in the preserve) in addition to starting to tackle a large area that is

carpeted with balsam pear." The new backpack sprayer purchased by the city has made it possible to maintain control of areas where invasive plants have been removed. However, Juliet noted "…there is still so much to be done!!! Can't wait for cooler weather!!!" If you'd like to get involved, Saturday volunteer work day dates are posted in the Calendar of Events section of this newsletter.
Photo by Juliet Rynear

Richard Weed, City of Lake Alfred Parks Department Manager, reports that the second story Mackay house restoration project, which began during the last weekend of March, was completed on July 29, 2016. Matching grant funds from the **Florida Division of Historical Resources** helped pay for the project. The total cost of the improvements was $63,874.18. The work included: plaster repairs and painting; sanding and staining of wood trim, doors, and windows; the balconies were opened up, re-roofed, and painted; new siding was added to the south balcony and new railings were installed around the west balcony. These improvements will allow the home to be utilized for a wider variety of events. All monies generated from rentals of the property are used for maintenance, repairs, improvements, and educational programs at MGLP.

Photo by Richard Weed

Richard also gave an update on the **Upland Invasive Exotic Plant Management Program** for this year. He was very pleased with Kestrel Eco Services, the company that won the state bid to chemically treat the east side of the preserve to eliminate invasive exotic plants like running bamboo, lantana, cat's claw, rosary pea, and camphor trees. In the long term this work will

help restore this area to a gopher tortoise-friendly habitat, which will benefit any number of other species of native plants, animals, reptiles, and insects. Funding through this program has once again been awarded to MGLP to begin similar work on the west side of the preserve in upcoming months.

Volunteer Instinct Cultivators

There are so few of us
that sometimes I wonder
if our motivations
might have germinated
during another time,
another existence.

Perhaps that's why we're here---
crawling, pulling, digging,
planting, mulching…teaching.
In coming together
we lost amnesia,
were jointly awakened.

Now, we cultivate instincts
whose aged seeds were planted
by some other people
a long, long time ago
so that we would later
remember their purpose
and transplant them in minds
unwilling to recall.

Steve Franklin
August 15, 2016