

A quarterly online magazine published for Master Gardeners in support of the educational mission of UF/IFAS Extension Service.

Natural Area Trail

By Linda Smock, Master Gardener Volunteer

As a Master Gardener Volunteer, the chances are good that you had a tour of the natural area on the east end of the Botanical Gardens during your training. Have you been back since? Are you aware of the seasonal changes that occur in natural Florida, and can you educate guests on what native Florida is like? Why isn't it as green as other areas of the Botanical Gardens? Why do we preserve natural Florida areas?

The total area of the Botanical Garden consists up of 120 acres, with approximately 30 acres under cultivation. You are probably most familiar with these cultivated areas, including the wedding garden, the cactus garden, the palm garden, and the vinery. The formal gardens are just over four acres. There are 90 additional acres. Part of that is accessible by trail for you to see the scrub and sandhill communities. Very few of these areas are available for viewing in Florida. Many have disappeared entirely, replaced with homes, businesses and roads, using well water or aquifer water to sustain plants and people.

The Park Department purchased these acres with grant funds from the P2000 grant program in the 1990s from the Whitesell family. Much of it was unspoiled; some was not. The 30 acres north of the Whitesell property is unique, but this area is currently not accessible to the public as Duke Energy has a beltway running through the middle of it. Another section had seen use for both agriculture and homes.

Fire suppression has also had its effect on the native ecosystems. Efforts began to restore the native habitat in April 2007. A large portion of the south property was "ROTO-Chopped" using a specially designed mower meant to remove the top growth of plants. Periodic fires would normally remove such top growth. Development did not allow those fires to take place. The pine flatwoods have evolved into a hardwood forest dominated by laurel oaks. Chemical suppression of the inappropriate plant material took place before

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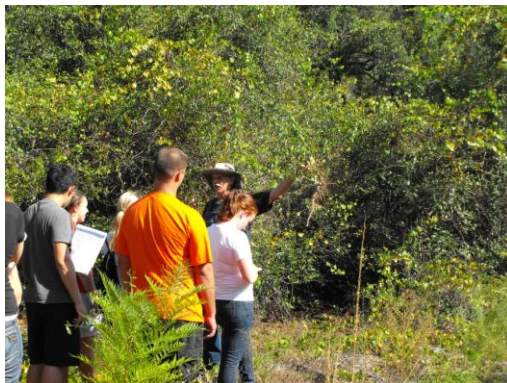
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Master Gardeners Speakers Bureau

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mowing with much of the effort done by Master Gardener Volunteer Dr. John Hood.

An extensive planting took place in May of 2007 with temporary irrigation put in place and removed once the rain began in mid-summer of that year. Unfortunately, some invasive plants still exist. Periodically, plantings still occur to assist the area in replanting itself with all native vegetation. There is no irrigation so it is not green and lush like some parts of the Botanical Gardens unless rain provides that benefit.



Left: Master Gardener Volunteer, John Hood giving a tour. Right: View along the trail.
Photo Credits: UF/IFAS



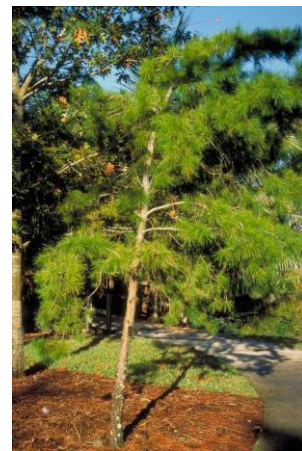
These efforts are paying off. You are often able to see the wildlife you would have seen in the early 1900s, including the gopher tortoise, eagles, snakes, woodpeckers, butterflies and dragonflies. At dusk, watch for the bats and note where they make their homes if you get to see them exiting. Occasionally, you can see a chameleon changing from brown to green. Check out the snags with binoculars; you will likely see lots of activity!

As you walk the trail loop, you will note the interpretive panels bordering the mowed trail. Take time to read these—they are very educational. Look for native plants such as the cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*), pawpaw (*Asimina reticulata*), gopher apple (*Licania michauxii*), blackberry (*Rubus* spp.), prickly-pear cactus (*Opuntia humifusa*), sand pines (*Pinus clausa*), wiregrass (*Aristida stricta*), gallberry (*Ilex Glabra*), and a large variety of scrub oaks (*Quercus* spp.). Some of the plants are easiest to identify in spring, when they are blooming, but come back during other seasons to see how they change year-round.

Occasionally, volunteers are needed to assist in helping rid the park of exotic invasive plants and to assist in planting native grasses and flowers. Wear closed toed shoes and jeans or other long pants in the native areas, in case you stub your toe, or come upon a slithering native snake.

Watch for upcoming tours of the Natural Area Trail or explore on your own. You will find many Florida treasures in the area, be able to relax, and see a beauty unique to native Florida.

Special thanks to Theresa Badurek and Robert Albanese for their assistance in providing background information.



Top from left: Cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*), pawpaw (*Asimina spp.*), and sand pine (*Pinus clausa*).

Bottom from left: Pileated woodpecker and gallberry (*Ilex glabra*).

Photo credits: UF/IFAS

Delectable Truffles

By Janis Rosser, Master Gardener Volunteer

Delectable truffles are the luxury cousins of mushrooms. Recall that mushrooms are fruiting bodies of certain fungi. However, there are distinct differences between the mushroom and the truffle, particularly in their physical characteristics and in their harvesting. Generally, of European origin, Florida has its own delectable truffle.

Pecan truffle. Photo credit: UF/IFAS



Truffles are round and wrinkly with no stem and range in color from black to dark brown to off-white. Unlike mushrooms, truffle fruiting bodies develop underground generally intertwined with tree roots. This limits the ease of harvesting, making it almost impossible to cultivate, which in turn contributes to the truffle's reputation as a rare delicacy. The most coveted ones are the white truffle found in Italy and the black truffle found in France, which can sell for up to \$2,500 per pound.

When truffles are mature, they produce an aroma that attracts animals, especially pigs, who dig them up for food and disperse the spores in their scat. Initially, harvesters would use pigs to identify collection sites. However, pigs would dig up and eat their loot. People now train hunting dogs to sniff out the truffles, as the dogs have no interest in digging and eating.

Florida has its own truffle, native to eastern North America. In 1980, scientists discovered a fungus growing in soil around pecan trees. This fungus turned out to be a true truffle, named aptly, the pecan truffle (*Tuber lyonii*). This truffle is light brown and about the size of a golf ball with a slightly nutty flavor. The cost is approximately \$160 to \$320 per pound, making them more affordable than their European cousins.

One caveat—in case you are lucky enough to come by a truffle. Cooking can destroy the aroma that is their essence. So eat raw or cook at low temperatures with butter or other fat as the fat captures the aromatics and preserves them.

Bon appétit.

Reference:

The Pecan Truffle (*Tuber lyonii*): A Gourmet Truffle Native to the Southeastern US

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/PP/PP33000.pdf>

Veteran's Tribute Garden Goes Florida Friendly

By Dianna Martin, Master Gardener Volunteer

What began as a desire to help clean up the Veteran's Tribute Garden at Service Source in Clearwater, turned out to be my Master Gardener Trainee project in the summer and fall of 2018. Being a newcomer to Florida, I had a lot to learn about Florida native and friendly plants, water irrigation rules, fertilization, the role of pollinators, and most importantly using the right plant in the right place.

Haphazard planting in the past, as well as the rampant overgrowth, were the main problems. The first step was to remove the invasive plants and weeds. The second was to draw up a landscape plan that would be pretty, functional, and relatively easy to maintain. Though I spent many hours in the garden, trying to do this on my own could have taken years. Fortunately, I had the help of both large and small volunteer groups from Home Depot, Bank of America, Johnson & Johnson, and a couple of youth groups. Besides providing countless hours of manual labor, some of the companies also provided new plants, tools, fertilizer and decorative containers.



Top left: The front lawn. Top right and bottom: Invasive and inappropriate plants.
Photo credits: Dianna Martin

Before, all you could see in the garden was an overgrown jungle of green. Now, a year and a half later, there are vibrant colors and flowers that have attracted bees and several varieties of butterflies. Since thinning and moving plants to more appropriate spaces, plants such as the starburst clerodendrum (*Clerodendrum quadriloculare*), crinum lilly (*Crinum spp.*), and some bromeliads have bloomed for the first time. The garden has been transformed into a calming place where staff and clients at Service Source can relax, eat lunch and find a bit of tranquility in a busy day.

Here are some after pictures:



Fields of Firewheel

By Ashley Deshotel, Master Gardener Volunteer

One of the many wonderful things about living in Florida is our spectacular diversity of wildflowers. We are fortunate to have flowers blooming throughout our seasons that not only feed our wildlife but also our hearts. These flowers bloom along roadsides, beaches, and parks. Most importantly, they grow with ease in our own gardens.

The beloved blanket flower (*Gaillardia pulchella*), also called firewheel or Indian blanket, is a top contender in most native home gardens. A Florida native, they date back to when only the indigenous people were here. These wildflowers are found throughout the state and attract a variety of pollinators. The benefits of planting these at home are endless and they make a lovely and valuable addition to the landscape or vegetable garden.

Blanket flowers are hardy, making them perfect for a beginner gardener. These stunning disks of red and yellow are the sun's fiery rays embodied into delicate petals. They embrace arid and hot conditions and grow with ease from seed, which they prolifically produce. Blanket flowers are a patch of happiness ready to brighten up your day. Plant these and experience the warmth of growing Florida native plants.

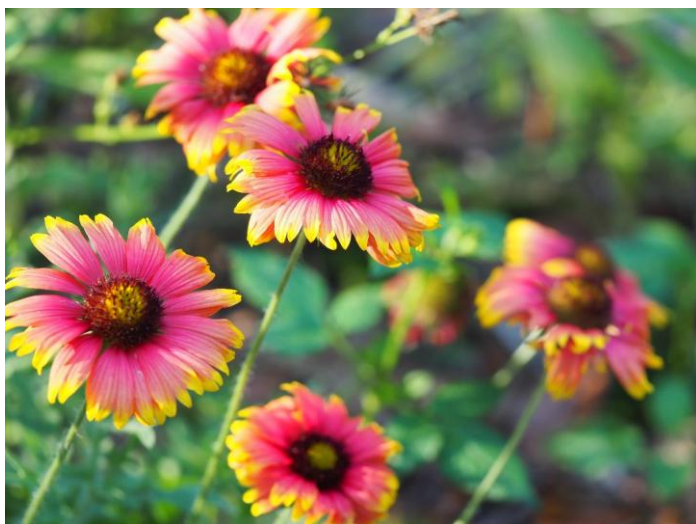


Photo credit: Ashley Deshotel

Shadow of Danger

By Ellen Mahaney, Master Gardener Volunteer

The Jamaican caper (*Capparis cynophallora*) pictured here offers beauty year around. In the spring this native plant is covered with white flowers which turn pink and then lavender as pollinators sip their nectar. Their blossoms evolve into beige capers. As illustrated here, when the capers split open in the fall, they reveal red linings and spill seeds to nourish backyard birds. Although this Jamaican caper is thriving, along with its neighboring snowbush (*Breynia disticha*) and lemon grass shrub (*Cymbopogon citratus*), all three exist in the shadow of danger.



The Jamaican caper and its flower.
Photo credits: Ellen Mahaney



This invasive carrotwood tree (*Cupaniopsis anacardioides*), crowding the telephone pole, casts a shadow of danger over desirable plants. It also drops golden seeds to the ground. These seeds, eaten and spread by birds, result in rapidly multiplying seedlings requiring vigilant removal. Duke Energy spent the greater part of a day trimming this fast growing tree before hurricane season. Yet, less than a year later, it again hits the power line, creating a potential for outages during severe storms.



The carrotwood tree is one of the worst of a growing number of invasive plants casting a dark shadow over countless desirable plants in innumerable residential properties and natural area throughout the state.



Carrotwood fruit. Photo Credit: UF/IFAS

What can we do to protect our environment in the face of this menace? It is time to come up with more ways to remove invasive plants.

What are your ideas about ways to reduce invasive plants in our environment? Send your ideas to Dianne Fecteau, dianne@kendiacorp.com

We will share the ideas with readers in the next edition of The Dirt.

New Arbor Day Campus in Florida

By Shannon Brewer, City of Tarpon Springs Municipal Arborist



The UF/IFAS Extension Agent Theresa Badurek and City of Tarpon Springs Municipal Arborist Shannon Brewer have partnered with Tarpon Springs Middle School for a 19 week program which began November 5th and was to end with a tree planting on (or near) Arbor Day 2020 (postponed). The program connects students to nature through trees by encouraging schools and educators to

create purposeful opportunities for students to interact with trees. The program has four goals:

- Create a Tree Campus Team
- Implement tree-related learning experiences
- Offer a hands-on experience
- Hold an Arbor Day observance.

The Tarpon Team consists of 30 leadership students broken up into eight self-directed groups:

1. Fund-raising (raise tools, money, plants, helpers)
2. Marketing/social media (let the rest of the school know, local news, school newsletter)
3. Documentation (create a book, website)
4. Plant selection (learn about the plants and choose the new ones)
5. Design team (to layout design and location of new plants within designated space)
6. Speakers bureau (to contact and coordinate visiting speakers and/or give presentations themselves)
7. Arbor Day group (put together Arbor Day event, postponed)
8. Maintenance liaison group (to work with school ground staff)

On Thursdays, the groups come together during first and second period with Mrs. Badurek and Ms. Brewer for the Project Learning Tree curriculum and activities, engaging students to experience their urban forest. Activities such as “Tree Factory” and “Every Tree for Itself” highlight tree biology and explore how humans affect the working systems of a tree when in a setting such as their school.

All of Tarpon Springs is looking forward to celebrating this great achievement with the students. The Mayor and Board of Commissioners recognized the hard work of the Tarpon Tree Campus Team during a meeting this past December. Once completed, Tarpon Springs Middle School will be the first Tree Campus K-12 in the state of Florida.

Lake Lure Flowering Bridge

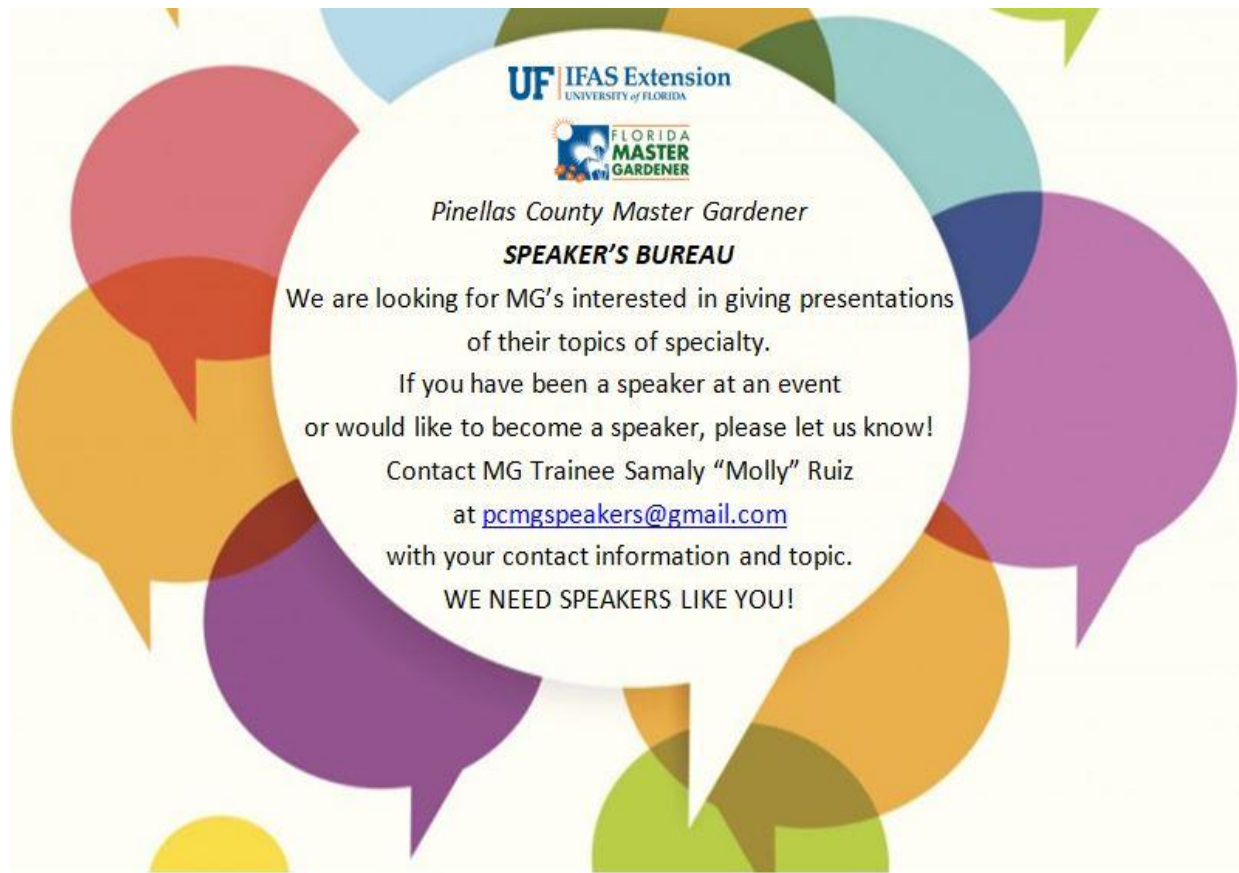
By Dianne L. Fecteau, Master Gardener Volunteer

The Lake Lure Flowering Bridge in Lake Lure, NC is the result of a team of dedicated volunteers coming together to design, create, and maintain a flowering pedestrian bridge across the Rocky Broad River. From 1925 to 2011, this bridge, a 155-foot long, 20-foot wide, three-arch span, carried traffic across the river. In 2011, the state completed a new bridge and closed this older one to traffic. The community went to work with the mission to create a "Gateway to Somewhere Beautiful", emphasizing native plants. The result is over 700 plants spread across a series of themed gardens. These include a pollinator, songbird, shade country, cottage, rock and succulent, rose, whimsical, and herb gardens.

The garden is open 24 hours a day, is free, and you can bring your leashed dog. Their website is <https://lakelurefloweringbridge.org/>

Here are a few pictures I took when I visited.





Send your Articles and Photos

The next Issue of *The Dirt* is October 2020. The deadline for articles is October 4. Share your passion for gardening with your fellow Master Gardeners by writing an article for *The Dirt*. Include images where possible. However, if you include images they must fall under one of the following guidelines:

- your own
- UF/IFAS image
- open access image, as in wiki-commons, where all rights are open and the photographer is credited
- used with the express permission of the photographer

When you do send images, please do not embed them within the article. Include them separately. Please send all files as Word files. I cannot edit .pdf files.

Do you like to photograph plants or trees but don't like to write? Send me your photos with a description, even without an accompanying article, and I'll publish them with the description as well as a credit to you, the photographer.

Send your articles, images, and your photos to Dianne Fecteau at dianne@kendiacorp.com. My phone number is 727.366.1392.

All articles are subject to editing. In addition, Theresa Badurek, Urban Horticulture Extension Agent and Master Gardener Coordinator, reviews and approves all articles prior to publication.

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