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June 2023 Issue

Summer is upon us! Stay cool, stay safe, and enjoy the season, whether you are gardening or waiting for the cool weather.

Three cheers for the red, white, and blue!

By Ellen Mahany, Master Gardener Volunteer

The title of this article is a line from the patriotic song, “Oh, Columbia the Gem of the Ocean.” As the Fourth of July approaches, we can take our patriotism to our gardens to celebrate flowers in our nation’s colors. I share with you a few flowers in these colors from my garden.



Left to right: Rosa spp.St. David (Bermuda mystery rose) with honey bee (Apis mellifera), snow squaristem shrub (Melanthera nivea) with white peacock butterfly (Anartia jatrophae), day flower (Commelina diffusa)



Left to right: Amaryllis (*Amaryllis* spp.), Jamaican caper (*Capparis cynophallophora*), Plumbago shrub (*Plumbago auriculata*) with unidentified moth caterpillar



Left to right: Pentas (*Pentas lanceolata*) attracting gulf fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*), frost weed (*Verbesina virginica*) being pollinated by love-bugs (*Plecia nearctica*), skyblue cluster vine (*Jacquemontia pentanthos*) on fence.

Photos by Ellen Mahany

Native Florida Was Not Manicured

By Linda Smock, Master Gardener Volunteer

Drive down many streets in contemporary Florida and you will see lawns that have been mowed, edged, and look like carpet. For others, you may perceive that the owner wants it to look like carpet because of the watering system, the apparent use of fertilizer, or the landscaping truck parked along the street with a variety of lawn equipment. That's not what native Florida looked like, however.

So what do we perceive native Florida to look like? That depends on the part of Florida and the elevation. Let's focus on the Pinellas County peninsula, named for the pine tree, which was common in much of our county. There were several kinds of pine trees, with longleaf (*Pinus palustris*), and slash (*Pinus elliottii*) dominant in the uplands, with sand pines (*Pinus clausa*) in the sandy soils, and some pond pines (*Pinus serotina*) in the lower areas.

The higher landscape also included many sabal palms (*Sabal palmetto*) and saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*). These were sometimes interspersed among the pines but may have dominated an area. There were patches of sawgrass (*Cladium jamaicense*) and gall berry bushes (*Ilex glabra*). Interspersed throughout the higher elevations were beautyberry (*Callicarpa*



americana), pokeberry (*Phytolacca americana*), and broom sedge (*Andropogon virginicus*), with occasional gopher apple (*Geobalanus oblongifolius*), spiderwort (*Tradescantia* spp.), and prickly pear (*Opuntia humifusa*). Frogfruit (*Phyla nodiflora*) and other low-growing plants were plentiful. Vines including Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), bamboo vine (*Smilax laurifolia*), and muscadine grapes (*Vitis rotundifolia* Michx) grew upwards and outwards, covering whatever was near them, often palmettos and pine trees. Passion vines (*Passiflora incarnata*) attracted gulf fritillary and long-winged zebra butterflies.



Frogfruit (*Phyla nodiflora*). Photo: M. Leonard-Mularz, UF/IFAS

Low areas and ponds had a different landscape. Live oak trees (*Quercus virginiana*) helped form a transition between the higher elevation and the ponds, where water collected in rainy seasons, some staying year-round, but most evaporating away at times. Laurel oaks (*Quercus laurifolia*) could also be found in these areas, often a little closer to the water. Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) hung from the limbs and resurrection fern (*Pleopeltis polypodioides*) appeared green on the trunks and branches.

Ponds often had the white-water lily (*Nymphaea odorata*) floating around the edge in the shallow water, and native Americans ate these as a delicacy. Cattails (*Typha* spp.) also surrounded the edges in the shallow water. Occasionally the yellow water lily (*Nymphaea mexicana*) could be spotted. Many other plants lined the edges of these ponds and wetlands, and deeper waters had submersed plants, all of which provided fish and wildlife habitat. Swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) welcomed monarch butterflies to lay their eggs and produce a crop of caterpillars that would munch on its leaves and stems. Marsh rabbits enjoyed both the water and the slightly higher elevation around the edge and could be seen at dusk and dawn.

Cypress trees grew around the edges of the ponds and in the creeks and branches that ran through the area. The knees of the bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) grew in the water and along the banks, providing stability to the trees. Red maples (*Acer rubrum*) were in the



surrounding swampy areas, often uprooted by strong winds of storms that came through in summers and falls.

The Tampa Bay area is also known as the lightning capital of the world. Therefore many of the pine forests showed evidence of fire started by lightning. This provided a natural habitat for the gopher tortoise, a keystone species that provided habitat for many other animals and insects. Indigo snakes and eastern diamondback rattlesnakes lived in the gopher tortoise “rooms” that bordered the tunnel. Cottontail rabbits bounded through the areas while hawks and eagles looked from perches on snags and tall trees to spot their next meal. Deer were common among the pine trees and down into swamps and wetlands. Dark brought out the opossums, raccoons, bobcats, skunks, and larger mammals.



Indigo snake. Photo: Peter May, UF/IFAS

No, Pinellas County was not well-manicured in its native state. There were no streets but there were trails created by wildlife and used by humans. There were no exotic invasive plants or animals, only those that were native to the habitat before European occupation.

We can never return to that habitat, to that environment, and most of us don't want to. But we can encourage people to do less manicuring of their lawns and use more of our native plants that will become host to our native insects, birds, and wildlife.



Does Your Back Hurt?

By Rebekah Heppner, Master Gardener Volunteer

Sounds like a rhetorical question, right? We're gardeners, our backs always hurt. Sometimes our knees do, too. Oh, and have I told you how my hands cramp up after pruning for hours?

I could go on, but I'd rather focus on a possible solution to all those aches and pains. If you attended the Master Gardener statewide conference "Growing Together" in Kissimmee in October, you may have some idea of what I'm about to suggest. The closing keynote speakers were from the [PBS series, "Garden Fit."](#) Now that the conference recordings are available to everyone, I'd suggest you watch Madeline Hooper and Jeff Hughes, the "stars" of "Garden Fit" as they share strategies to put an end to some (might we hope for all?) of your pain.



The link to all the conference recordings came to you in an email and a Facebook post recently, but I'd like to send you directly to the Garden Fit presentation here: [Garden Fit presentation](#). This recording is of the entire last day of the conference, so you'll need to skip to about the one-hour mark to get right to Garden Fit. There is a twenty-minute intro to the TV show, so the "good stuff" that might ease your pain starts about 1:20, with the quote "Your body is your most important gardening tool." Isn't that the truth?

I've watched the entire "Garden Fit" PBS TV series and would recommend it. You will see some amazing gardens from all over the U.S. and learn specific remedies for the biggest complaints of each of the featured gardeners (about their pain, not their plants).

When you're done with that, remember that watching the [recordings of the conference](#) counts as training hours, so why not watch them all?



Basic Compost Bin System (BCBS)

By Jay Gould, Master Gardener Volunteer. Photo credits: Jay Gould

Are you tired of having to replace the sides of your compost bin because they rotted?

Are you tired of struggling to turn the contents of your bin because you have to reach over the tall sides of the bin?

Are you tired of bowing or twisting side walls in your bins?

Do you want to replace your current compost bin with one that solves all of these issues and so much more?

Here's the tested solution developed over 20 years of experimentation. The Basic Compost Bin, the **BCB**.



The revolutionary design employs upright corner posts that have circular holes drilled through them. Bamboo or other circular materials slide through the holes. The corner support posts are braced on their tops and bottoms, but **ALL** the side bamboo poles slide out for easy access to clean, fill, or turn the contents.

Construction Process

Hints:

- Use clamps to hold materials in place before screwing.
- Use exterior construction screws. Nails lose their grip over time.



- Don't sweat exact measurements.
 - Use scrap materials.
 - Substitute other materials for the sides if you don't have bamboo.
 - Substitute steel rebar sections for steel posts. Try to avoid wood posts pounded in the ground. They will rot.
1. Decide on desired height of bins. Recommendation is six feet because contents will settle as much as 50%. An eight-foot height won't require cutting lumber and the overhead braces won't interfere with future turning contents or hit your head.
 2. Cut holes for the side bamboo culms (sticks). Measure up 3". This will be the bottom edge of the first hole. Use a circular 2" hole cutter on a drill to saw the holes. The process takes some time; don't rush. Cut the remaining holes 6" apart. If you cut a 6" section of scrap lumber for a guide, you can mark each hole quicker than measuring each time. If you are using 1X4 lumber, make the holes slightly off-center so that a steel post can be attached along one side of the board later.
 3. Repeat cutting holes in four boards which will form the four corners of the bin.
 4. Position the corner boards. Place a small paver/brick/or other rot-resistant material as the base for the board to prevent the end from contacting the ground and rotting. Drive a 24" steel post (green fence posts) into the ground at the edge of the paver. The lumber will be screwed to this post to prevent lateral movement. Attach the corner board to the steel post – use braces to secure until the other corner posts are in place and can be joined together to support each other.





5. Repeat for all four corners. I recommend a width of about 38" to ensure inside volume of 36" and a depth of 52" to accommodate a depth of 48". These dimensions can be significantly increased if decided, but don't have any one side shorter than 36".
6. Once the four corners are in place, plumb (not leaning) each corner and secure with braces attached to the tops of each corner.
7. The corner lumber may want to split along its grain after the holes are drilled. Screw short blocks (4-to-5-inch squares) at the top of the boards to prevent splitting.
8. You can substitute additional braces between the corner lumber and eliminate steel posts into the ground. If so, you don't need to drive any post into the ground.

Materials list for six foot tall, three foot wide and four-foot-deep box

Quantity	Description
4	1.25 in. x .75 in. x 3 ft. Green 14-Gauge Steel U-Fence Post \$4.56 each. \$18.24. Can substitute wood board braces between corner posts.
6	1 in. x 4 in. x 6 ft. Appearance Grade Southern Pine Pressure-Treated Board \$4.18, total \$25.08, for corners and top braces
4	1 in. x 4 in. x 6 ft. Appearance Grade Southern Pine Pressure-Treated Board \$5.38 for top braces
20	1 5/8" exterior screws to attach steel posts to lumber and top braces, approx. \$2.50
24	48" long bamboo sections for ends- can be longer if desired
24	66" long bamboo sections for sides – can be longer if desired

Tools needed

2" hole drill and electric drill
Two-foot level
Screw driver or screw bit for drill
Tape measure
Saw to cut bamboo



Using the Bin

1. To prevent loose materials from tumbling between the side sticks, use those delivery boxes and other cardboard to form temporary interior sides of the bins. The cardboard will deteriorate and disappear as the pile decomposes.
2. Anticipate turning every several months. If you have a compost thermometer, turn the pile when it's no longer warmer than ambient air.

Submit Your Articles and Pictures to The Dirt

The Dirt is published January, April, June, and October for Master Gardeners by Master Gardeners. The deadline for the next issue is **October 8**. If you would like to submit an article or photo feature, see the following guidelines:

- Articles should be 250 to 300 words.
- The topic can be anything you would like to share to educate your fellow gardeners.
- You may send pictures, poetry, or garden-related articles.
- Submit only Word documents, not PDF, so that edits are possible.
- Send tips or information about a community or Master Gardener project for a potential article.
- Send photos as attachments and include proper attribution.
- Send submissions to Susan Ladwig at ladwig.susan@gmail.com

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