

BEAUTYBERRY POST

**THE NEWSLETTER OF MACKAY GARDENS AND LAKESIDE
PRESERVE**

May/June 2026



In Touch by Steve Franklin and Cathy Butcher

Gopher tortoises, a very important keystone species, found only in 6 southern U.S. states, may also be seen at Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve (MGLP). They are considered a keystone species because their burrows provide safe havens or homes for more than three hundred different species of insects, reptiles, birds, and other mammals. Their numbers have been slowly increasing at MGLP due to the efforts of volunteers to eliminate an overabundance of non-native invasive plants and to control rambunctious native vines and trees such as grapevines and cherry laurel saplings. That makes it easier for the ground-level tortoises to move around the property to search for their favorite foods and find a mate.

Unfortunately, over a period of years, several species of non-native plants have found their way to MGLP in one way or another, and then they outcompete our native plants. *Bromelia pinguin*, a highly ornamental bromeliad when in bloom, was most likely planted by the Mackays' groundskeeper to decorate the landscape with their bright red-orange central leaves and bright yellow fruits. The edges of this interesting plant have very sharp recurved spines. In some Central and South American countries, it has been used to create fence-like barriers around properties. This bromeliad not only spreads by underground stolons, forming huge colonies, but is also spread by large mammals that eat and deposit the seeds in other locations. It has now established numerous hard-to-remove colonies in various parts of the preserve. Very few animals, including humans, are able to pass through the spaces that they occupy.

Another noxious plant, Rosary Pea vine, spreads across the ground and climbs to the heights of trees. The vines create a tangled mess, hard to pass through wherever they show up, and are adorned with clusters of tough black pods filled with numerous shiny red and black seeds. The poisonous seeds germinate quickly in Florida's tropical environment.

There are also patches of Caesar Weed, with rose-pink flowers resembling miniature versions of their cousins, the Hibiscus. Their Velcro-like seeds are burrs that attach themselves to clothing and animal fur. In this way they are transported to other parts of the preserve where they may be brushed off,



dropping to the ground to germinate and form a thick community of undesirable plants. Guinea grass and Cat's Claw vines, with beautiful yellow flowers, are two other exotic plants thriving at MGLP. They thickly crowd out native plants and serve very little purpose for the native wildlife. All of the above-mentioned plants are virtually impossible to eradicate.

However, there are strategies available that can help control the growth and spread of these plants. During the last week of April, Gold Coast Land Management

Company, hired by the City of Lake Alfred, initiated the first step of this process.

With specially designed mulching machinery, they began the process of removing the



excessive undergrowth in the forest on the eastern side of the preserve. The resulting mulch debris is left on the ground to dry out. This is a necessary step that will prepare the way for the Florida Forestry Service to initiate a controlled burn of the area in the fall. A controlled burn will slow down some of the invasive plant growth, add valuable minerals back into the soil and stimulate native plant growth. The mulching work also helps reduce the danger of a wildfire caused by an overabundance of ignitable fuels.

Before man arrived on the scene, lightning-caused wildfires were common and a natural way of maintaining healthy ecosystems in Florida. Now it has become a necessity for man to assist nature in this process because, for too many years, we unknowingly tried to "protect" the environment from its natural way of maintaining balance by suppressing fire.



The goal of all this work is to make the preserve a healthier habitat in which native plants and animals can survive and thrive. This land management will assure that the devastating wildfires that destroyed homes and cities in California in recent years do not become a possibility at MGLP. In this regard, the City of Lake Alfred's leaders continue to keep this area a safe, vibrant, and attractive feature of the town in which they live.



Featured Cover Photo

By Cathy Butcher

Passiflora incarnata, Purple Passionflower or Maypop, is a beautiful Florida native perennial vine that uses tendrils to rampantly climb fences in the garden or trees in the wild. Here it is seen growing over a recently disturbed area in the preserve at MGLP. This overgrown area was cleared several months ago to create a firebreak along the property line. In nature, this disturbance would happen naturally due to fire. The seeds, lying dormant in the soil, took advantage of the lack of plant competition and abundant sunlight to burst into growth.

Calendar of Events



Ridge Art Exhibit

Are you an art lover? The Ridge Art Association has an exciting exhibit located upstairs in the historic Mackay house. Come take a peek at local artists' works that can be viewed during business hours, 8am-4pm, M-F. Enter through the Parks & Recreation office.

Ask a Master Gardener First Mondays



Gardening and landscaping questions? We've got answers. Stop by to chat with UF/IFAS Extension Polk County Master Gardener Volunteers every **first** Monday of the month from 9-11:30 a.m. at MGLP. Don't forget to visit the Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Demonstration Garden while you are there!

Mackay Gardens & Lakeside Preserve (MGLP) is located at 945 Mackay Blvd. in Lake Alfred, Florida, 33850. To inquire about renting the house or picnic shelter, or to ask about upcoming events please call Parks & Recreation at 863-291-5272.

Spring volunteer work day hours are Mondays 8 a.m. until noon. Contact Volunteer Coordinator Cathy Butcher with questions about volunteering to help maintain & restore the historic Gardens & Preserve. Email Cathy at cassiebelle@verizon.net.

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 parks@mylakealfred.com. Find us on Facebook at **Friends of Mackay Gardens and Lakeside Preserve**. Photos in this edition by Cathy Butcher and Paul Butcher. Historic photo provided by Connie White.

Recent Happenings

By Cathy Butcher
Field Trips



In March the Lake Alfred Elementary School first graders **(Left photo)** made their annual trek to MGLP for two mornings of fun-filled field trips. They learned about Char, a resident gopher tortoise, and his long-leaf pine and turkey oak sandhill habitat which makes up a large portion of MGLP.

Volunteers and city staff provided the kids, teachers, and chaperones with activities that included a hike into the preserve, a presentation on gopher tortoises with a visit by Paulie (a live waif tortoise), a puzzle, learning about commensals who use the tortoise burrow, and singing the Char Cha Cha.

In April, the Haven Homeschoolers returned for their second-year field trip that was all abuzz about the importance of pollinators and the need for us to help them survive.

Activities included a reading of *Penelope Speaks*, written and presented by Steve Franklin. Jessica McGuire portrayed the character in the story, Penelope (a talking Zebra Longwing butterfly), who tells her life story to Mackayster volunteer Steve Franklin. She was dressed in a



delightful butterfly costume made by Nancy Daley (**above photo**).

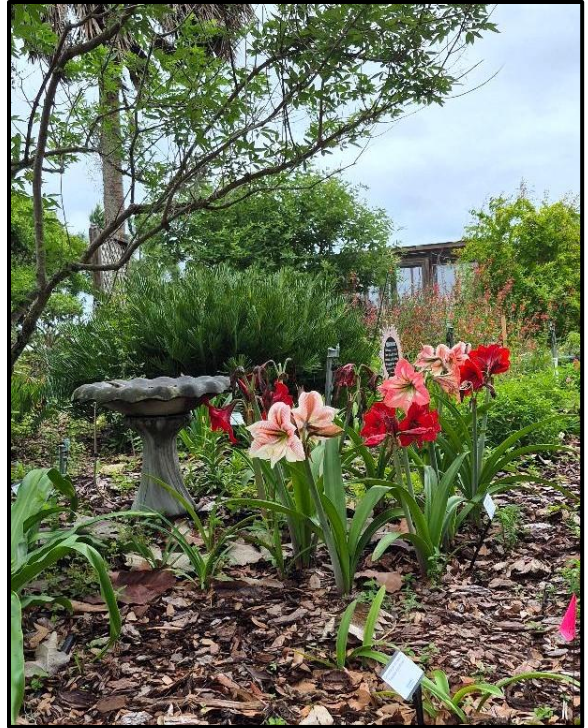
Polk Master Gardeners hosted the event. They gave tours of Penny Park, a pollinator garden, and the Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Demonstration Garden to look for pollinators in action (**left photo**). T

The morning concluded with an exciting Scavenger Hunt. The parents and kids hunted through the two gardens seeking answers to the questions. Everyone went home with a live native wildflower to start their own pollinator garden.

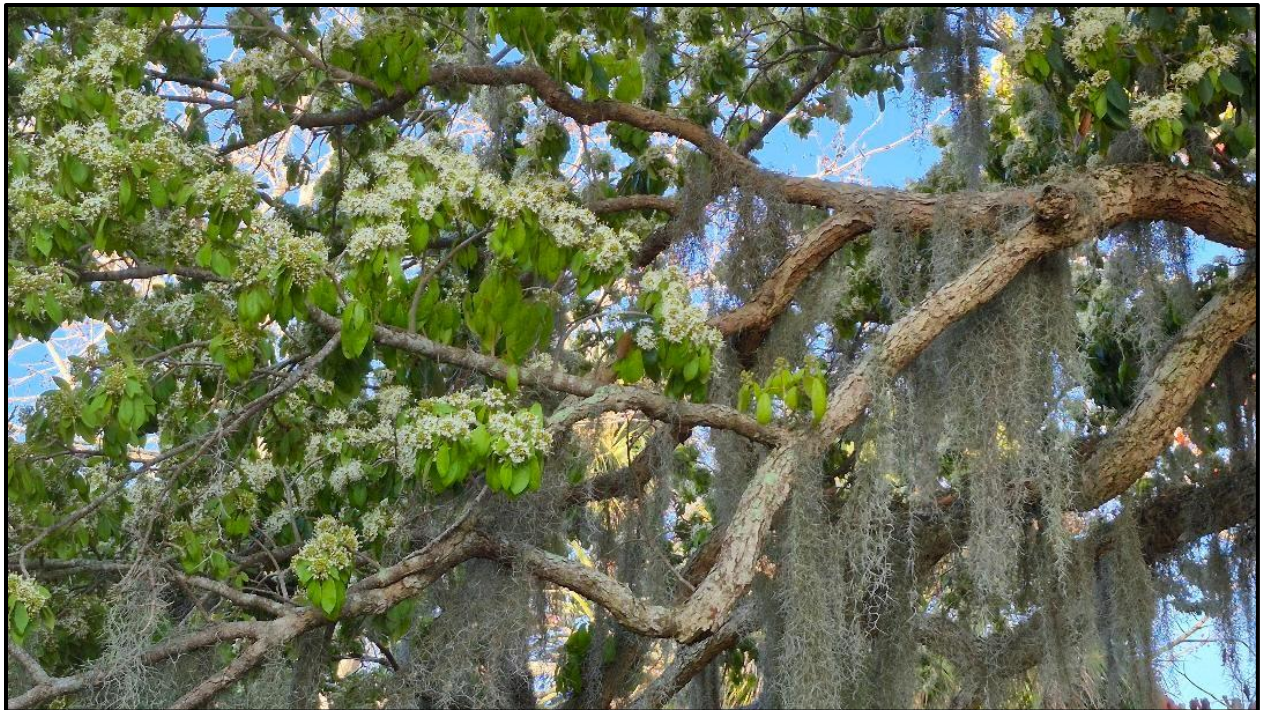
Spring Blooms!



Crinum Lilies



Amaryllises



Thoreau Tree

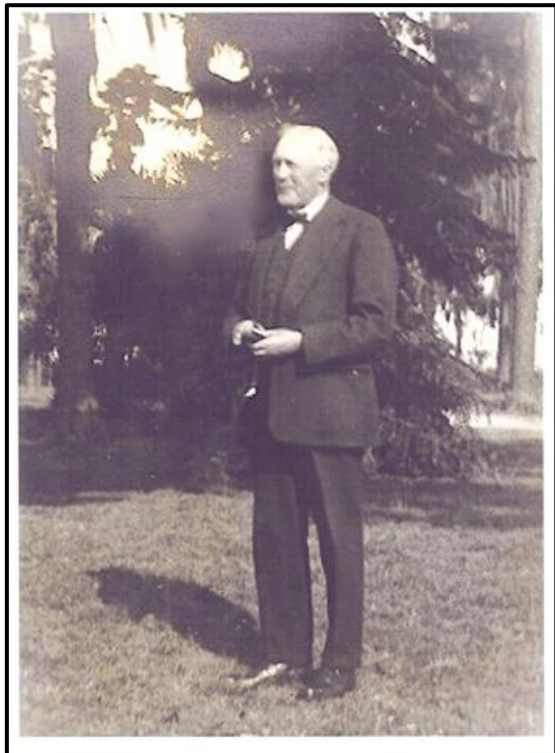
MGLP Historical Review

Who was Alexander Mackay?

By Connie White

Alexander Mackay was born in Scotland on January 8, 1856, to George and Maggie Mackay. He married Edith Helen Burns of Nova Scotia, Canada, in 1890. They had four children—Robert Ferrier Burns Mackay, Edith Margaret Mackay, Eva Mackay, and Dorothy Mackay.

The family lived near Dundee, Scotland, until a fire destroyed their home. They then relocated to a castle-like estate known as Glencruitten House near Oban.



Mr. Mackay was an entrepreneur with a global footprint. He owned Mackay Irons Company, an accounting firm with offices in Scotland and New York City. He served as a director of the Shell Union Oil Company and was chairman of the Matador Land & Cattle Company in Texas, one of the largest cattle ranches in the United States. He was also a partner in several Arizona mining ventures, including the Dundee-Arizona Copper Company, the Belmont Copper Mining Company, and the Queen Copper Company.

In 1915, Mackay purchased 128 acres in Lake Alfred as his first citrus investment. By 1917, he had built a winter home there. His holdings grew to about 1,000 acres, and he supported the town's development as an early bank investor and contributor to the Lake Alfred Citrus Growers Association.

Alexander Mackay died in Scotland on May 23, 1936, and was buried on the grounds of Glencruitten House.

One Thoughtful Soul

Sometimes the contributions of one thoughtful soul,
One person's desire to make a place of peace whole,
Supply the inspiration, which others may need
To join a noble cause, to believe in its creed.

And though the energy required may be epic
And the performers of great tasks not heroic,
These suppliers of good works dig in and progress
Toward conserving spaces we're proud to possess.

So, next time you visit a park or preserve
Where kind, unassuming people are pleased to serve,
Find joy in the presence of wildlife, trees, and plants
Which survive because one thoughtful soul took a stance.

Steve Franklin

April 19, 2026