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Calendar Photo Submission Time!

Each year, we produce a calendar featuring photos of lakes, ponds, streams, and rivers in Hillsborough County. The photos all come from our program participants, like you! We would like your help again to make the 2016 Stormwater Environmental Programs Calendar another success.

If you would like to submit a photo for consideration, email your high-resolution photo to Jennifer Aragon at AragonJ@HillsboroughCounty.org. Include the photographer’s name, the waterbody, and a catchy title for the picture. We may also use photos in future publications. The photo submission deadline is August 23, 2015.

We will send out an announcement once the 2016 calendars are available for ordering.

Free Plants for Your Pond

Would you like to add native plants to your pond? Get them for free through the Adopt-A-Pond program. To see if your pond qualifies for the program, complete the application found at www.HillsboroughCounty.org/AdoptAPond. The pictures below highlight just a few of the many plants available through the program.

Trash Catcher Giveaway Continues

We are very fortunate for the opportunity to continue offering free trash catching devices to our program participants. Funding from the Florida Department of Transportation District Seven is helping make this a reality for several pond and lake restorers.

If you live on a pond or lake in unincorporated Hillsborough County and your property has a stormwater pipe, you may be eligible to receive a free trash catcher. All you have to do is send Jennifer Aragon an email at AragonJ@HillsboroughCounty.org. Include your name, address, the location of the waterbody, where the trash catcher would be installed, and a brief description of how your pond would benefit from receiving one. Only one trash catcher will be available per qualifying waterbody. The giveaway is only for a limited time, so submit your entry today!
Floating Docks - Consider the Possibilities

If you live on a lake, you probably have a dock. Docks make it possible to sit over the water, access a boat, and dive and swim in the water.

But, did you know that docks are one of the single most controversial items on lakes? Questions arise like, How big it can be? How far out can I put it? How should I build it? A lot of the controversies about water levels in lakes stem from docks that are too wet or too dry.

Fortunately, there is a cost-effective solution that can resolve many of these questions: floating docks. This type of dock comes in many shapes, sizes and materials. They can be anything from multi-level structures to undulating platforms that can float over heavy surf. They can even be made into a hybrid dock where part of it is floating and part of it does not move.

With a floating dock, it will always be at the right height, because it adjusts with the water level. If the lake recedes, you can easily move it farther out to where the water is. This is especially good for shallow lakes with large wetland buffers. You can lay a floating walkway across the reeds far easier and cheaper than sinking pilings for 400 feet of fixed boardwalk. This is how the old Florida settlers did it before there were managed lake levels and seawalls.

There are even floating docks that can help keep your lake clean. A few companies make living docks. The decking looks just like any other dock, but underneath, there is a buoyant mesh where plants can root. You can grow flowers right out on the water. Underneath the dock, you’ll find the roots hanging. The plants help clean the water and protect small fish.

If you are looking for a new dock, make it a floating dock. You’ll save yourself a lot of trouble. And with a living floating dock, you can also help improve your lake. In Florida, floating docks are the way to go.
**Benefits of Duckweed**

By: Chelsey Swats, University of South Florida, Volunteer

In many water bodies, duckweed is considered to be a nuisance plant. But did you know that it is native to Florida? You have probably seen duckweed before. It is a fast growing, small leaved plant that floats on ponds and can cover the whole surface of the water. A lot of times, people do not like the look of duckweed covering a pond. Many people who find it in their pond will remove it by skimming it out, or by spraying it with chemicals.

Many times, people focus on the negatives associated with duckweed, but did you know there are some positive sides to having it in your pond? Duckweed lives off nutrients found in the water, mostly phosphorus and nitrogen. If the nutrients are low in the water, the duckweed does not grow rapidly. However, if duckweed quickly spreads to cover a pond, it can be an indicator that there are a lot of nutrients in the pond.

A lot of research is being done on duckweed for its beneficial uses in wastewater treatment, its nutritional value for both animals and people, and its use as a biofuel. Duckweed can also help clean up nutrient pollution in ponds. Since the duckweed grows from nutrients, it stores them in its leaves. By skimming or pumping the duckweed out of the pond, you are taking the nutrients out with the plant. This can help reduce algae and weed issues. So next time you see a pond covered in duckweed, take a second glance and appreciate the benefits duckweed provides as an indicator for high nutrients and for its ability to remove them from the water.

**Pond Plant Spotlight: Beach Sunflower**

By: Chelsey Swats, University of South Florida, Volunteer

Beach sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*) is a beautiful plant that you probably have seen many times and not even noticed. The plant is native to Florida and is a terrific plant for ground cover. The plant does well in most Florida soils. It thrives in sandy soil and is also known by the name sand dune sunflower.

The flower is very tolerant of drought conditions. It does not need much water. The plant is very low maintenance. It can cover an 8 foot by 8 foot area and can be anywhere from 12 inches to 24 inches tall. Before it has rooted, it does need to be watered regularly and may need a little pruning. If there is a freeze, the plant is a great self-seeder. If one plant dies, a new plant will arise very soon after.

Are you already interested in adding this low maintenance plant to your own yard? It gets better! You can plant these beach sunflowers from the beginning of February to the beginning of December. They bloom almost year-round with their best blooms showing in Spring, Fall, and Winter. This plant is also great at attracting all different kinds of insects and bugs. It is a great nectar source. Butterflies, bees and beetles frequent the flowers. Beach sunflower is a great plant to add to your landscape to help you in attaining a Florida-Friendly yard.
Study Evaluates The Link Between Our Landscape Behaviors and Water Quality

Recently, the Tampa Bay Estuary Program did a study on people’s behavior and the link to water quality. The study was done in the Tampa Bay area, including Pinellas, Hillsborough, and Manatee Counties. The goal was to see if there was any link between the local fertilizer ordinances, people’s awareness of the ordinance details, landscape management, and local water quality.

Each county has a slightly different fertilizer law. Hillsborough County’s rule prohibits using phosphorus in your landscape without first having a soil test. It requires leaving a 10 foot fertilizer-free area around any waterbody. It prohibits the application of fertilizer within 36 hours before it is predicted to rain at least two inches within 24 hours. It also requires training for lawn care professionals. The details of this rule can be found at www.epchc.org.

In addition to the requirements in the Hillsborough County rule, Pinellas County’s ordinance requires residential fertilizer to have at least 50 percent slow-release nitrogen. It also prohibits the application and sale of fertilizer with nitrogen during the summer rainy season (June 1 to September 30). The Manatee County ordinance is similar to Pinellas County’s except they do not restrict the sale of fertilizer with nitrogen over the summer.

When comparing the communities involved in the study, they found that people who lived in Pinellas County were the most aware and knowledgeable about their ordinance. Pinellas County residents also applied less fertilizer than in the other counties in the study. The study also found that nitrogen (a nutrient in fertilizer) increased in all the community’s stormwater ponds during months when fertilizer was reported to be used most often (March, April, and October).

The study recommends further research in this area, including the collection of water samples from stormwater ponds for at least five years. To read the entire study, visit www.theptech.org and search Tampa Bay Residential Stormwater Evaluation Final Project Report in the 2015 technical publications.

Calling All Lakewatch Volunteers

Most of our Lakewatch volunteers stay active for a long time. Unfortunately, every year we have a few volunteers that stop sampling. If you are a Lakewatch volunteer and have not sampled in a while, we want to invite you back! All you have to do is start sampling again. If you need new bottles or equipment, just let us know. Sampling is not only a benefit worth several hundred dollars a month, it is also the best way for you and resource managers to know what is going on in your lake.

If you would like to become a Lakewatch volunteer, you will need to have access to a lake and a boat (any size). Sampling takes about an hour a month. Trainers will come to you and all of the supplies are provided. Plus, you will have access to top lake scientists in the nation and special opportunities available exclusively for participants. This is an opportunity worth committing to. For more information, contact John McGee at McGeeJ@HillsboroughCounty.org or (813) 744-5671.
The Story Behind Gene Roberts Pond

By: Eileen Schutz, Gene Roberts Pond Group Representative

In January of 2014, a small group of neighbors in the Windemere subdivision gathered to restore what is now named the Gene Roberts Pond on Gnarled Oak Avenue, in Lutz. Now, after two seasonal plantings, the pond is on the mend. The plantings both in and out of the water and trees along the bank are thriving under the watchful eyes of positive thinking neighbors and the guidance of Jennifer Aragon, the Adopt-A-Pond Program coordinator.

Gene Roberts was a civil engineer and hydrologist who recently passed away after years of service to our community. He often consulted with the Southwest Florida Water Management District. He was one neighbor, among others, who took a special interest in the integrity of the waterways in Hillsborough County. He was always available to discuss proper planning and maintenance of the environment with those that had questions and concerns about Florida-Friendly planting. He shared helpful resources with anyone who asked.

The photos in this article were taken at the spring planting and dedication ceremony. The picture above features his beautiful family. The picture to the right is a tribute to the neighbors who really “dug in” to make this planting a huge success.

Joey Sets a Great Example for his Neighborhood

By: Eileen Schutz, Gene Roberts Pond Group Representative

Meet Joey, an 11 year old who is going into sixth grade. He has been on the Principal’s honor roll at his school since the third grade. His many interests include skateboarding, baseball (he is on a traveling team), golfing, basketball and gardening. He presently has bell and jalapeño peppers as well as tomatoes growing in his container garden.

Joey is frequently seen picking up litter that is left in and near Gene Roberts Pond on Gnarled Oak Avenue, in Lutz. He watches for garbage along the shore and does his share of keeping the area clean. He says that if the area is not kept clean, it will be dangerous for animals in the pond. He enjoys spotting the many types of fish in the pond including small and large mouth bass, tilapia and bluegill. He even met an alligator while cleaning up trash one day. But he just kept his distance and the alligator did the same. Joey also keeps an eye on the culvert so that the pond fills only with rain water from the streets, not trash or debris. Joey sets a great example for his friends and neighbors about the importance of keeping our water clean.
Thinking Differently About Stormwater

Since people began to alter the landscape of Florida in the late 1800s, stormwater management has been an important concern. Early pioneers feared the swamps. Swamps harbored dangers – both real and imaginary – like mosquitoes, alligators, and disease. To combat these dangers, people straightened rivers, dug ditches and canals, and filled wetlands with dirt. Swampland was reclaimed for farmland, and the fertile, organic soils made for a bountiful harvest.

Later in the 1950s, a new type of development started to change the landscape of Florida. The postwar housing boom introduced subdivisions to the state and increased the impacts to waterbodies and wetlands. All too often, more houses meant less wetlands. More development; less natural environment.

But, it does not have to be an either/or question. New ideas about designing urban areas meet both human needs and preserve important environmental functions, like animal habitat and water quality. Green stormwater infrastructure is one way this can be done.

Green stormwater infrastructure more closely mimics nature. Instead of using concrete pipes, water flows through an open swale that meanders like a natural stream. It can also include replacing the standard shingled roof with a green roof – one that includes plants and soaks up rain water. These types of designs build cities that create less pollution and make a healthier place for everyone to live.

Hillsborough County recently finished a study to find polluted areas where old infrastructure can be replaced with these improved green options. In the next few years, we plan to build several demonstration projects in these locations. We will watch them closely and measure changes in water quality. This information helps us fine tune the designs and draft a plan for improvements in other areas across the county.
Photo Unscrambled

Below is the unscrambled photo from the spring edition of our newsletter. We received a few comments back about what some of our readers thought about the landscape. This section of the pond, in Westchase, is landscaped with Florida in mind. The large native plant buffer covers the ground in an otherwise hard to mow area of this steep shoreline. Besides being low maintenance, some of the other benefits of this landscape include preventing erosion, reducing pollutants from washing into the pond, and providing food and shelter for birds and butterflies. This landscaped shoreline includes the following plants: Fakahatchee grass, wax myrtle and duck potato.