Creating A Beautiful Pondscape

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Freshwater Fish Feature: Florida Gar

By: Susan Kittel, University of South Florida Volunteer

The Florida gar (*Lepisosteus platyrhincus*) is a freshwater, prehistoric fish that is covered in bony scales creating a defensive coat of armor. This fish is native to Florida and is marked with irregular, dark, round spots on top of its body. These markings run from head to tail and expand across its fins. There are no spots on the Florida gar’s whitish-yellow belly. A true survivor, this species can live in low oxygen environments, like stagnant water, by using an air bladder to breathe air.

The Florida gar is found as far north as the Ochlockonee River, which starts in southern Georgia and empties into the Gulf of Mexico, south of Tallahassee. The fish is found through most of the Florida peninsula as far south as Lake Okeechobee. It lives in streams, canals and lakes with muddy or sandy bottoms and plentiful underwater vegetation.

Typically, the Florida gar will live in deep water during the day and venture into shallower water at night. Younger gar feed on small fish, insect larvae and tiny water bugs. Adults typically eat fish, shrimp and crayfish. The Florida gar is a sneaky predator and uses very small tail flicks to slowly position itself next to its intended prey. With a quick sideways lunge of the head, it captures its prey in its toothy jaws in less than a second.

This fish is important to the environment because it is an important staple in the diets of alligators, bald eagles, osprey, blue herons and other shore birds. Additionally, the Florida gar hunts other fish and helps keep those populations balanced.

Any angler who catches a Florida gar is in for a sporty fight. The fish grows to about 3 feet but has occasionally been measured in excess of 4 feet. A big fish is considered to be 5 pounds. The current state record was recorded in March 2001 for a 9.44 pound heavyweight caught in Orange County. Use minnows or artificial lures as well as gigs, snag hooks, or bow and arrow to capture this fighting fish. The Florida gar is edible and reportedly has a mild flavor and white firm flesh.

Contact Info Update

If you have recently moved, changed your email address, or have any other contact information that needs to be updated in our records, let us know. We want to be able to let you know about freebies, program events, and other related information. Not junk mail.

We also provide this newsletter electronically. If you would rather receive it by email, tell us that as well.

Contact us at AragonJ@HillsboroughCounty.org or (813)744-5671 with your updated information. Make sure to include the old information too, so we can change it in our list.
Creating A Beautiful Pondscape

Beautiful ponds do not just happen on their own. It takes a combined approach of changes in the pond and in the neighborhood. Here are the things Adopt-A-Pond staff look at when rating a pond:

Pond Plants
Plants are great for ponds. They clean the water, prevent dirt from washing away, and offer a place for birds and fish to live. It is good to have a variety of plants in a pond. A pond that is overrun by just one plant can be a problem. Replacing the bad plants with good plants will make a better pond.

Wildlife Habitat
Bird houses, trees, butterfly gardens, and natural spaces are good for animals. Ponds can be made into great places for birds, fish, turtles, dragonflies, and even otters.

Florida-Friendly Yards
These yards have less pollution and are better for the environment. Not all Florida-Friendly yards look alike. Pictured to the right is just one example. Visit www.FloridaYards.org for more ways to improve your yard.

Visible Pollution Control
Pollution - like trash, pet waste, lawn clippings, and leaves - are all bad for ponds. Even if they are dropped several houses away from the pond, they can still end up in the water when it rains. To stop this, pick it up. Keep it off the streets. A trash catcher net can also be used in the pond to make trash clean-up easier (pictured on the left).

Storm Drains Marked
All of the storm drains in your neighborhood should have the colorful markers that read “No Trash in Drains, Keep Your Water Clean.” If not, order a Storm Drain Marking Kit at www.HillsboroughCounty.org/AdoptAPond.

Duckweed & Algae
A little bit of duckweed or algae in a pond is alright. But, it is good to keep it from completely covering the pond. Both can be harmful for the pond in large amounts. The Adopt-A-Pond notebook found at www.HillsboroughCounty.org/AdoptAPond has tips for keeping these from harming your pond.

The Best Maintained Pond Competition is coming up soon. These are all things the judges will be looking at. You can use these guidelines to make your pond better.
On Our Pond

**Pond Plant Spotlight: Lizard’s Tail**

By: Susan Kittel, University of South Florida Volunteer

Lizard’s tail (*Saururus cernuus*) is native to Florida, but is found as far west as Texas, and north into Illinois and the New England area. It will usually appear in Florida’s freshwater wetlands under natural conditions. Lizard’s tail grows in part-shade to full sun and thrives in permanently flooded, still, shallow waters and moist soil.

Lizard’s tail is a perennial plant, noted for its fragrant white flowers and interesting heart or arrow-shaped leaves. It grows two to three feet tall and about one foot wide. The plant spreads through the root system and grows in small colonies. The leaves are three to four inches long and alternate along the stem. The flowers bloom in summer and appear as a bottlebrush of spikes that arch above the leaves. Mature flowers dry and turn into a string of pods that resemble a lizard’s tail. That is how it got its name.

Lizard’s tail provides nectar for bees and butterflies. This makes it an ideal way to extend a butterfly garden to the water’s edge.

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**Adopt-A-Pond Activity**

Three new Adopt-A-Pond groups recently transformed their ponds. It is amazing how much the ponds can change in such a short time.

In Northdale, the Long Boat Landing Pond Group has worked on removing weeds from their pond (pictured on the right) and replaced them with native ones, like pickerelweed.

The Citrus Pointe Pond Team in Citrus Park (pictured on the left) had big problems with trash and some shoreline erosion. They put in a trash catcher that is helping contain the trash and make it easier for them to remove. They have one pond planting under their belt and are planning another planting soon.

The Jillian Pond Group in Brandon (pictured on the right) is working on controlling duckweed in their pond. They added native plants to the shoreline and marked their storm drains to let their neighbors know about preventing water pollution. Next, they will skim out duckweed.

For more Adopt-A-Pond information, visit [www.HillsboroughCounty.org/AdoptAPond](http://www.HillsboroughCounty.org/AdoptAPond).
Lake Carroll Gets Cleaner Water Through Lake Management

How can the Lake Management Program help a big lake? Residents around Lake Carroll can answer that question. The County has recently completed a series of projects to help clean the water in the area that drains to the lake.

Several years ago, residents asked the County for help. Because they were well-organized and the project fell within County goals, the Lake Management Program was able to help. First, we found funding by partnering with the Southwest Florida Water Management District. Then, we did a study to find out how to best keep the water clean. The study identified several projects and we presented those to the community at various public meetings. The list was narrowed down to five projects, and we started construction.

In the end, we built two treatment boxes to capture dirt and other pollutants before they flow into the lake. We also altered three stormwater ponds to help them treat the water better by trapping pollutants. It has been a long road, but we finally completed the projects in October. Now, we’ll continue to sample the water to see how much it improves.

If you live on a lake, and would like to help keep the water clean like the residents of Lake Carroll, the Lake Management Program may be able to help. But you’ll have to do your part too. The first step is to organize your neighbors. You need some type of association to formally represent your community of lake residents. Then you need to have a Lakewatch volunteer for the lake to take samples. The samples tell us what’s really going on in the water. Then you need to work with the Lake Management Program to determine a course of action. Be prepared for a long process. These things take time. But if you focus on the end result and carefully take each step in the process, you’ll be surprised at how much you can accomplish and at how much the Lake Management Program can help.

For more information, visit www.Hillsborough.WaterAtlas.usf.edu/LAMP.
Ask Stormwater Ecologist

Dear Stormwater Ecologist,

What is the difference between a lake and a pond?

Sincerely, Penny Pond

Dear Penny Pond,

There are many different definitions for lakes and ponds. A lot depends on who you ask and where in the country you live. Some definitions are based on the size of the water body, depth, whether light can reach the bottom, and its ability to freeze solid (not a factor to consider in our area).

For the Adopt-A-Pond and Lake Management Programs, the difference is mostly based on how the water body was made. Ponds are man-made and lakes are natural. To find out if the water body you live on is man-made or natural, do not rely on what a friend, neighbor, or realtor told you. A good way to tell is by checking historical records. Historical aerial photos of Hillsborough County from 1938 and 1948 can be found on the Hillsborough County Water Atlas website at Maps.WaterAtlas.USF.edu/Hillsborough/. If the water body was there in the 1938 aerial and no one was living near there, it is probably natural. But, there are always exceptions. You would have to check with a wetland scientist to know for sure.

Sincerely, Stormwater Ecologist

If you have a question for Stormwater Ecologist, email AragonJ@HillsboroughCounty.org or McGeeJ@HillsboroughCounty.org.

Check Out These Apps

There are several mobile apps available to help make gardening easier, including the following:

Smartirrigation Apps: Urban Lawn - Have you ever made the mistake of watering your yard right before it rained? Wish you could have better predicted the weather and not wasted the water? Over watering is not only costly, it can also be harmful to the grass. The Urban Lawn App by Smartirrigation Apps uses real-time weather data to give you a notification of when to water. (Free for iOS and Android)

Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Plant Guide - This app brings over 400 Florida-Friendly plants to your fingertips. It is a great way to find the plants that will work best in your yard. It even has color photos of each plant. ($1.99 a year for iPhone, Android, or tablet). You can also view the print version of the guide at www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/publications/files/FFL_Plant_Selection_Guide.pdf.

Landscape Pests - Do you have a pest in your garden that you would like to identify? The iPest app helps you identify the bug and learn more about it. You can search by the type of damage the bug is causing, the plant that it is affecting, or by the specific bug. ($1.99 for iOS). You can also access this information at pest.ifas.ufl.edu/.

Gopher Tortoises - Not a gardening app, but a neat way to help gopher tortoise protection efforts. Be a citizen scientist and report gopher tortoise sightings. (Free for iOS and Android at myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/managed/gopher-tortoise/app/).
Engineers had the environment in mind when the Hillsborough Community College (HCC), Southshore Campus was designed. Located in Ruskin, close to Interstate 75, this HCC campus was purposely built in an area where public transportation could get you to school to help reduce air pollution. The school also offers preferred parking spots for fuel efficient vehicles and carpooling.

The Southshore Campus parking lot was built to be green...literally. Trees throughout the parking lot provide plenty of shady spots. The trees also keep the pavement and surrounding air temperature cooler.

Gravel parking spots allow rain water to soak into the ground, reducing polluted runoff. The parking lot also drains rain water into several plant beds. The plants clean the water and slowly drain it to a few ponds. Water from the ponds is then used to water the landscape.

In addition to all the environmentally-friendly things found outside, the inside of the school is also “green.” The walls of windows allow sunlight to brighten the classrooms. Solar panels provide some electricity for the campus. Low-flow toilets help reduce water usage. Rainwater is collected from the roof and is used for the toilets. And all the materials used in the construction of the buildings have low chemical odors, helping provide cleaner air.

This college campus is worth a visit. To find out more about their environmental protection efforts, visit www.hccfl.edu/southshore.aspx.
Calendars Ready!

Adorn your wall or refrigerator with the 2015 Stormwater Environmental Programs Calendar.

We were lucky enough to have another year of wonderful photos from our program participants. Twelve were selected for the calendar. We included several other great photos in the Additional Photos section at the back.

To order a free calendar, email your name and address to AragonJ@HillsboroughCounty.org. You can also call us at (813) 744-5671. Supplies are limited, so request one today!

Word Scramble - Unscrambled

BOACAP
BACOPA
HANCI CLERKPIE
CHAIN PICKEREL
GIVNIL SNORELIEH
LIVING SHORELINE
CITYVITA
ACTIVITY
HEALTHY LAKE