



Wekiva Wilderness Trust – Newsletter April, 2022

Wekiva Events

Serenity Garden Groundbreaking – March 16, 2022



Left to Right: Robert Brooks, Park Manager (behind); John Leaman, volunteer; Aline Guy, District Aide for State Rep. Keith Truenow; Bryan Nelson, Apopka Mayor; Jason Brodeur, State Senator; Chuck Hatcher, Acting Director Florida Park Service; Don Philpott, WWT President; Tammy Gustafson, President Florida State Parks Foundation; Pauline Russo, Florida State Parks Foundation; Cate Manley, President/CEO Apopka Chamber of Commerce

Groundbreaking Speeches and Comments

Don Philpott, President Wekiva Wilderness Trust

Welcome again to everyone and thank you for coming. This day has been a long time coming but today we are literally making history. The Serenity Garden – a park within a park – is the only one of its kind in the U.S. and hopefully, it will become the model for many more both in the United States and overseas.

The almost 1½ acre garden has been designed to provide a unique sensory experience for people with diverse abilities and special needs. Visitors will be able to see, touch, smell and hear nature and interact with it in a safe environment.

We know that just being outside and surrounded by nature has an effect on our health and well-being and when we combine that with the healing benefits from looking at plants, flowers, bees, butterflies and the like, these effects are greatly increased. That is what the Serenity Garden is all about.

It has taken almost four years to design, working with a team of nationally acclaimed experts, and talking to a wide range of organizations representing people with particular needs to ensure that their requirements are met.

The garden is unique because it will serve as a sanctuary for a largely underserved population throughout Central Florida and further afield. We know that there is a need because every week I get phone calls from people all around the country wanting to know if the garden is open because they want to come and visit.

Many thanks to the hundreds of people who have helped fund this project but special thanks to our major funders - Florida State Parks Foundation, Florida Park Service, Felburn Foundation and the Ford Bronco Wild Fund.

And many thanks to all the people and organization who have been involved to date. In particular I would like to thank Amy Wagenfeld, Ph.D., one of the world's leading authorities on therapeutic gardens; the Adventist University of Health Sciences, Seminole Master Gardeners, Chris Sacca with Lighthouse Works, Mary Edwards our consultant arborist from Rollins College, our landscape and design consultants, the Community Solutions Group, and James Quartel, with engineering consultants CPC, who provided all the early survey and topographical work pro bono. We are indebted to each and every one of them and all the others who have supported this worthwhile project.

To make the garden the very best it can be we still have more fund raising to do but today, we are now able to start work as part of a phased construction program. As each phase is completed, more of the garden will become accessible.

The first phase will be to grade the site and build retaining walls and then install paths and boardwalks. All paths will be nine feet wide to allow two wheelchairs to pass safely and no path will have a gradient of more than three degrees. Then we will start on the remaining hardscape features such as raised flower beds and special seating and constructing the many smaller areas within the garden which will provide the different sensory experiences. Finally, the garden will be planted with a wide variety of Florida native plants which will help attract birds and butterflies. Plants have been selected that can tolerate sun and draught and that will provide flowers at different times throughout the year.

The garden will feature three areas that can be used by school groups or for group therapy, art and physical activities like tai chi. It will also be used to educate visitors about Florida native plants and wildlife, the need for sustainability and protecting the environment.

Today, we start a new and exciting adventure at Wekiwa Springs State Park which has a long record of innovation, especially in the area of accessibility. Increasing accessibility is one of the missions

of our incredible award-winning Florida Park Service and it now gives me great pleasure to hand over to the Director of the Florida Park Service, Chuck Hatcher.

Chuck Hatcher, Acting Director Florida Park Service

I recently had the opportunity to participate in an amazing event at one of our parks. A few weeks ago, we held a ceremony at Wekiwa Springs State Park near Orlando to celebrate the groundbreaking of the park's new Serenity Garden.

The Serenity Garden will be a one-acre "park within a park" where people of all ages and abilities may experience and enjoy nature.

The garden was designed to align with principles established by the American Therapeutic Horticultural Association and will create accessible, nature-based experiences for seniors and for people with visual impairments; those who use mobility devices or who experience post-traumatic stress disorder; and people with autism, among others.

When construction is complete, it will be the first public park of its kind in the nation. We hope and believe that it won't be the last.

We're proud to be offering this new space that will allow even more people to experience the best of Florida's natural world.

During the event, I was reminded of our amazing partnerships and how our surrounding communities contribute to our state parks.

This new Serenity Garden is the result of years of collaboration among the Florida Park Service, the Florida State Parks Foundation, the Wekiva Wilderness Trust, the American Therapeutic Horticultural Association, Advent Health University's Occupational Therapy Department, and many local and state leaders and elected officials.

This is just one example of how parks and partners work as a team to create meaningful experiences for our visitors. There are countless others across the state, and we are grateful for each partnership.

See you in the parks.

Shawn Hamilton, Secretary Florida Department of Environmental Protection

On Wednesday, March 16, Wekiwa Springs State Park hosted a groundbreaking ceremony for its Serenity Garden, a special amenity that is believed to be the first of its kind in the nation. This project is deservedly a source of pride for DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) and its many partners.



The one-acre garden will offer a welcoming retreat where visitors – particularly those with diverse abilities and special needs – can enjoy a unique sensory experience. National and regional expertise has been engaged in designing the garden according to principles established by the American Therapeutic Horticultural Association.

Lushly landscaped with an array of native plants, the garden will feature interactive and sensory elements as well as enhanced opportunities for exercise, social gathering and therapeutic programming. The Serenity Garden is a shining example of how Florida is a leader in taking an innovative approach to expanding equitable access to nature.

Additional WWT April newsletter copy

Fund raising

Wekiva Wilderness Trust

March is always our money-raising time and this year the 5K-10K race and Paint Out added just over \$30K to our funds. However, we still have a long way to go to complete funding for the Serenity Garden and many other projects and acquisitions that are in the works. We have a Serenity Garden campaign running on GoFundMe and I challenge every one of you to come up with ideas to bring in additional dollars – whether it is just a few dollars or a few hundred thousand. And, if you are interested in serving on a fund-raising committee, please let me know. Thanks, Don Philpott.

Florida State Parks Specialty License Plate

The Florida State Parks Foundation announced on March 28th that the Florida State Parks specialty license plate is now available at local tag agencies, statewide.

The Florida State Parks specialty license plate has been delivered to tax collector offices and license plate agencies statewide and Floridians who purchased presale vouchers can now redeem them at their local tax collector office or license plate agency. Those who wish to purchase the new specialty plate can also do so at their local office.

The new specialty license plates were authorized during Florida's 2021 Legislative Session, and the presale process began in October, 2021. The Florida State Parks specialty plate is the first plate from the 2021 Legislative Session to meet all design, development, manufacturing, and presale requirements established to begin the distribution process.

The Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles requires that all organizations wishing to introduce a new specialty license plate presell 3,000 units before they begin production. The DMV allows two years to meet this goal. The Florida State Parks specialty plate reached 3,000 presales in just 34 days. \$25 from each plate sold will directly benefit the Florida State Parks Foundation's efforts to protect, preserve, sustain, and grow our award-winning state parks.

“This new revenue stream will provide significant and ongoing funding to enable us to protect and preserve our award-winning state park system,” said Tammy Gustafson, Foundation President.

The Florida State Parks Foundation, founded in 1993 as Friends of Florida State Parks and renamed in 2018, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation whose mission is to support and help sustain the Florida Park Service, its 175 award-winning parks and trails, local Friends groups and more than 20,000 park volunteers.

It does this through programs that preserve and protect state parks, educate visitors about the value of state parks, encourage community engagement and active use of state parks, and advocacy.

A week-long celebration announced to salute the nation’s state parks May 8-15, 2022

The National Association of State Parks Foundation has declared the week of May 8 “I Love My State Parks Week”.

“This week-long event, from May 8-15, will be a nationwide celebration of our state parks which are acknowledged as among the best in the world “, said National Association Chair Marci Mowery.

“States will organize their own events throughout the week under the “I love My State Parks” banner and each day will focus on a different aspect of what makes our state parks important in the lives of people and to economies across the nation,” she said.

The National Association which represents statewide non-profit partners of America’s over 8,950 state parks, said it plans for the celebration to become an annual event.

Many states are seeking Proclamations from their Governors and civic leaders to add further support for the event, she said.

“Our aim is to increase the visibility of state parks by sharing the story of state parks and their many benefits. We are also asking the public to share their state park memories – in stories and photos.

“We want to engage new audiences and encourage people who have never visited a state park to do so,” said Mowery.

State parks offer diverse opportunities, providing something for everyone, and this will be reflected in the week of activities. Sunday’s theme will be Cherished Memories, Monday – Heritage (history and culture), Tuesday – Appreciation (thanking park staff and volunteers), Wednesday – Anticipation (planning your next visit); Thursday – Explore Nature, Friday – Health and Wellness, Saturday – Experiences and Sunday’s theme will be a call to be active – urging people to visit their state parks, volunteer, donate and support the nonprofits that work with state parks.

During COVID, state parks and forests provided a haven for hundreds of millions of people, many who had not visited a state park before. As a result, state parks have never been more popular, and many are experiencing record visitation.

State parks get more than 809 million visitors a year, which includes over 61.6 million overnight users, and state parks generate over \$100 billion for local and state economies.

The National Association supports state park volunteer organizations and provides a national voice as advocates for all state parks. Don Philpott is vice chair of the National Association.

Nature News

Nature Center

April is the season of love for the American Alligator so if you're canoeing or kayaking on the Wekiwa River, you might be lucky enough to see an amorous pair. Although they usually mate at night, they spend time together for a few days.

A couple of months after mating, the female (dad is long gone by now) builds her nest, which can be 7 feet wide, and is made up of rotting vegetation. She deposits anywhere from 30 to 50 eggs, and guards her nest from predators until the babies hatch, in about 68 days. When the hatchlings start chirping, the mother gator gently opens the nest. She is very protective of her nest and her young, and should not be approached.

Hatchling gators are about 8 inches long, black with yellow stripes. Many fall prey to great blue herons, snapping turtles, large bass, hawks, and other predators. They stay close to their mother, and even after she loses interest, the pod of baby gators will stay together. They'll often be seen piled on a log sunning, or sliding down the bank into the river if alarmed. The alligator at the right is about 9 feet long.



The baby gator in the picture at the left is about 6 months old. She can be seen at Wekiwa Springs State Park Nature Center, where she is fed and cared for by volunteers.

She is on loan from Gatorland, and will be returned there in exchange for a smaller one when she outgrows our small habitat in the nature center.

A few facts about gators:

1. The temperature in the nest determines the sex of the gator. Below 86 degrees, they will be female; above 93 degrees, they will be male.
2. Although alligators are plentiful now, they are still designated a protected species, in order to protect the much rarer American Crocodile.
3. Alligators are typically not aggressive toward humans, unless they have been fed.

Flower of the Month

Britton's Beargrass or Scrub Beargrass (*Nolina brittoniana*)

This month we celebrate a rare and endangered species (state and federally listed) that can be found within the boundaries of Wekiwa Springs State Park, *Nolina brittoniana*, common names are Britton's Beargrass or Scrub Beargrass. This plant is endemic to Florida and further restricted to central Florida



counties, Marion, Lake, Orange, Hernando, Polk, Osceola and Highlands. These counties stretch across the central Lake Wales ridge and offer the habitat necessary to support Britton's beargrass, i.e., scrub, sandhill, scrubby flatwoods and xeric (dry) hammocks. Several years ago, a Britton's beargrass plant was included in the native wildflower garden located on the youth camp road at the entrance gate to the camp. That planting is well established and seeds from the mother plant are growing nearby both inside and outside of the garden. Perhaps in a few years there will be a large reproducing community of beargrass in that area.

Britton's beargrass is a perennial plant that is dormant in the winter. The basal leaves form a rosette clump around the flowering stalk. The leaves are grass-like, elongated, narrow and stiff. The leaf margins have close-set, cartilaginous teeth. Leaf blades on the flowering stalk are much smaller. Flowering stalks rise about 6 feet above the base of the plant and are branched at the top. Showy clusters of white, six parted flowers open in early

spring. The plant attracts bees, wasps, ants, and sawflies for pollination and depends on these insects to develop viable seeds.

