

The Pepper Patrol: Eradication, Education, Restoration

by Mariella Smith, Suncoast Chapter

When we see a monstrous jungle of alien Brazilian pepper spreading cancer-like along a forgotten Florida creek, most of us just sigh and ask ourselves, "Can't somebody do something about this?" Suncoast chapter member Barbara Waddell saw that sight and asked herself "What can I do?" Her answer, it turns out, was "plenty."

Under Barbara's laughing, lighthearted leadership, the "Pepper Patrol" she founded five years ago has succeeded in re-creating a beautiful native Florida landscape on Hillsborough County property around the Ruskin library and fire station. On December 12th, 1998, in one work- and fun-filled day, the Pepper Patrol completed Phase III of their shoreline restoration along the banks of the now-lovely Marsh Creek Pond. This tidal pond — so important to the estuarine ecosystems that feed Tampa Bay — was once totally surrounded by a formidable thicket of noxious Brazilian pepper (*Schinus Terebinthifolius*), lead trees (*Leucaena Leucocephala*), and Australian pine (*Casuarina Equestifolia*). The all-volunteer Pepper Patrol has eradicated these invasive non-native plants and created an educational, well-labeled, idyllic Florida landscape which welcomes native birds, butterflies, fish, and manatees back home once again.

On a sunny Saturday, over 25 Pepper Patrol members and friends turned out to plant 200 trees and shrubs purchased with a grant from the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD). The

\$2500 grant included \$2000 for plants and materials plus \$500 for educational signage. The planting was planned by Brian Schatz, who contributed in-kind services as well as his expertise. The volunteers included members of the Suncoast chapter of Florida Native Plant Society, the Eagle Audubon chapter of Florida Audubon Society, and Sun City Center Audubon.

Thank goodness for the gas-powered auger acquired from SWFWMD by Pepper Patrol Lieutenant Shelly Allen! With that machine digging the holes, the plants

was finishing the work! About 13 Americorp volunteers, under Shelly Allen's guidance, planted the last of the plants and spread osmocote and mulch.

This grassroots effort has been guided by Robin Lewis from the beginning. It has been helped along the way by the Department of Parks & Recreation and the Division of Resource Management, the Tampa Bay National Estuary Program, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Environmental Protection Commission Wetlands Management Division, and Tampa

BAYWATCH. TECO has funded the publishing of educational brochures. The Ruskin library and fire departments are very supportive. Establishment and maintenance of new plants, and control of invasive plant re-growth will be continued by Pepper Patrol volunteers.

As Barbara says, "Brazilian peppers are horrible, but there is one

wonderful thing about them. In getting rid of them, you meet the niftiest people and develop rich associations." For information about or to volunteer to help the Pepper Patrol accomplish its goals of native ecosystem protection and public education, call Barbara Waddell at (813) 645-0440 or Mariella Smith at (813) 645-4218. ☀

Boy, those Suncoast folks are impressive. Pepper Patrol and service-award winner Barbara Waddell, the *Right Plants in Dry Places* book, a steady stream of jaw-dropping photographs from Betty Wargo, and now we hear they've got WalMart selling native plants. Can't wait to see what's next!



Ah, the joys of planting. Volunteer workers have at it.

were almost all in the ground by 12:30, when the hard-working crew broke for a delightful luncheon in the Ruskin library conference room. The whole back wall of this room is one long window overlooking Marsh Creek Pond and the lovely landscape now in place around it. Barbara brought in samples of invasive plants and conducted a playful contest to identify them, with each lunch table forming a team. Expert botanists Allen Shuey and Brian Schatz then taught everyone a little something interesting about each plant as the group lingered over dessert of home-baked goodies and fruit. The luncheon ended with the happy announcement that while this crew was relaxing, another crew