



This photo shows no fewer than 11 wading birds foraging in this natural setting. They don't mind the duck weed. Photo by Kirsten Conover.

Changing Perceptions *...One Small Step at a Time*

By Kirsten Conover

Perception sometimes overrides the reality of a situation, especially within the realm of golf course maintenance. Green speed is an example of this phenomenon within golf. An example outside of golf is the idea that golf courses are bad for the environment and are major abusers of fertilizer and water.

This perception is a stubborn idea that continues to persist despite data and information to the contrary. To attempt to change the collective mind of the general public is an overwhelming proposition but to change the perception of the membership at a golf course or individuals is a little less daunting. However, maintaining a golf course to specified standards takes a great deal of time and leaves little opportunity to tackle other issues. Or does it?

One obvious step to address the environmental issue is to join Audubon International and become part of the sanctuary program. Budget constraints or lack of interest may preclude partici-

pation in this program for some clubs but there are other ways to increase environmental awareness on a course without great expenditures of time or money. At Royal Poinciana Golf Club we try to incorporate environmen-



There may be plenty of out-of-play areas on a course where installing lower-maintenance native landscapes can save time and money and enhance the environment. Photo by Joel Jackson.

tally friendly practices into our regular maintenance work.

When it is time to trim the palm trees on the course, we hold a few trees off the list. The fruit and fronds will provide food and shelter for animals.

We recently released a rehabilitated screech owl that immediately took advantage of a booted, untrimmed sabal palm.

Fox squirrels also utilize the dense foliage to nest and raise young. Rather than cut down dead pine and cypress trees, we snag them to allow for perching and nesting sites for birds. This past winter a peregrine falcon made short work of a songbird on the top branches of a dead cypress tree in the rough on the seventh hole of our Cypress course.

Snagged pines also provide osprey and bald eagles with prime perching sites. Woodpeckers and screech owls nest within the cavities of the dead pine trees.

Instead of hauling downed palm fronds or tree limbs back to the organic dumpster, we create a small brush pile in an out-of-play fringe area. This will create habitat for small mammals like rabbits or foxes. Take a fallen palm tree and instead of cutting it up or hauling it away, place it in a shallow section of a pond or lake to provide sunning areas for turtles or hunting platforms for wading birds.

Aquatic plants like duck potato or

pickerelweed along lake banks provide forage areas for wading birds and cover for nesting birds like moorhens (see photo). These plants can also help regulate the health of the lakes by absorbing nutrients and reduce the time and money required to maintain these aquatic areas.

Allowing these areas to remain natural, duck weed included, creates pockets of wilderness that animals utilize seemingly unaware of the human activity around them. As the wildlife increases and becomes more visible on the course, perceptions may begin to change in the membership and it may become easier to make other changes.

There may be an area on the course that requires time and money but is really an area that does not impact play. It may now be easier to suggest removing the turf and replacing it with plant material that does not require fertilizer, water or mowing. Fakahatchee or cord grass or native plants like firebush or wax myrtle



A couple of turtles enjoy sunning themselves on this fallen palm tree that isn't cut up and hauled away. Photo by Joel Jackson.

work well in areas that require minimum maintenance. This is a win/win situation with the reduction of time and effort from the maintenance standpoint and an enhancement of the environment.

During renovation, we asked for wetlands to be included in the plan. The membership gave its okay. One benefit of the wetlands was the increase of the wood duck population on the course. Prior to the renovation we were lucky to see one pair of wood ducks during the year. This year five pairs visited on a consistent basis and two pairs raised their

young in the improved areas. Granted there are many golfers who don't know a wood duck from a decoy but if just one member or golfer has a positive environmental experience on the golf course, and they tell someone about it, then perhaps a perception has been altered.

We have the opportunity every day to positively influence how people view the environment and we can do this subtly through regular maintenance practices with a few environmentally friendly methods incorporated into the routine.

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