Breakfast at LaPlaya GC

During a recent normal morning ride through on the golf course, a red-tailed hawk, descending rapidly, flew across my path. He obviously was on a mission! I followed in the same direction and there he was with a mate. They had both wrapped their talons around a rabbit that was still jumping for its life.

As I approached slowly from far away, one finally backed off and allowed the other to feast. I got within 15 feet as the hawk dined on his breakfast until he finally got tired of me watching and he took off.

Brian E. Beckner, GCS LaPlaya Golf Club
There are all kinds of ladies. You have young ladies, middle-aged ladies, old blue-haired ladies, ladies in waiting, bag ladies, ladies of the night, the Patron Saint, Our Lady of Perpetual Motion, the First Lady, the cleaning lady, the church lady, the lady upstairs, the lady downstairs, the lady across the street, and on and on like that.

If you live in South Florida and you make your living growing grass, plants, trees, or vegetables, whether it’s on a golf course, in a park, at a nursery, or in the fields of the Redlands, Homestead, or Florida City, one of your favorite ladies is the CEU Lady!

That’s correct sir, the CEU LADY is way up there on your list. Kind of unusual that a lady is running the educational show for the University of Florida Miami-Dade County Extension in Homestead, but that’s what Dr. Mary Lamberts has been doing for the past 23 years. I love it when you find a lady horning in on any predominately male line of work.

Let’s face it; there are not many lady superintendents, nursery owners, farm owners or CEU educators in our area or anywhere else that I am aware of, though Mary tells me things are changing.

Mary was born in Michigan of Dutch ancestry. Ironically, the day Mary was born, her father was accepted to graduate school. With his doctorate in linguistics, he taught at Northwestern and Arizona State. Consequently, Mary attended grade school in Illinois and high school in Tempe, Ariz. After receiving her B.A. from ASU, she was off to the Peace Corps in Thailand. There she taught English as a foreign language. Yes, that means Mary not only speaks Thai, but also a little Dutch and some Spanish.

After her stint in Thailand, she was off to Nepal for two and one-half years where she worked at “various” jobs. During her time in the Far East, she became very interested in plants and horticulture in general. She applied to and was accepted at Cornell (my old pal Alan Weitzel’s alma mater) and there she received her doctorate in vegetable crops.

After she graduated, she moved to Miami (Homestead) in 1983 and went to work for the state at the Ag Extension facility there. Since 1984, she has been the chief trainer for pesticide certification.

I have wanted to do a story about Mary for several years but something always kept coming up to prevent it. You may ask why write about someone who teaches General Standards, Ornamental and Turf, and other license categories. What’s the big deal about that? The big deal is she is so good at it!

I told her when I finally got a commitment to move ahead with the project that I have always had a great deal of admiration and respect for her. She is old school. She cares about the people who come to her classes. Concern for their safety, the people they supervise, the public who could be harmed and the environment are important to her.

Her message always comes across loud and clear. Now it’s easy to be up for a class now and then, but I have sat in on at least 16 of Mary’s presentations over the years and they are always super. They are top shelf because her genuine commitment to her profession would not allow her to give less than her best every time. She is not just going through the motions to collect a paycheck on the first and the fifteenth.

The horror stories about the home and office pest-control applicator makes one wonder why people did not get sick or worse on a regular basis.

I asked Mary to sum up her feelings about the past 23 years teaching people and genuinely making them believe pesticides can be very dangerous and this is what she said:

“My motivation now is stronger than ever. I love my job and go to it happily every day. My main objective is to get people to read and understand pesticide labels before using a product. I change my presentations periodically to keep them fresh not only for myself, but also for the people who attend my classes.”

“The University of Florida is constantly updating its workbooks and the tests for each of the pesticide categories, so I do the same thing. I attend workshops and seminars and get ideas on how to improve my presentations and come up with new concepts. I also take great pride in the proteges I have spawned along the way and it is one of the things I am most proud of.”

If you have not met Mary, it is your loss to have missed a beacon of knowledge akin to the grand lighthouses of this world that stand guard on their rocky and treacherous coastlines, bringing forewarning to those who sail her waters. “Mother, mother ocean, I have heard you call.”
Lost is the science, the reason and reality. Anti-chemical, anti-mankind activists preach nature is supreme and blame man for all the bad things that happen. Even acts of God are now the result of man’s burning of fossil fuels. Well it’s time that people who benefit from having well conditioned golf courses step up and be heard. Here’s what I’ve learned from attending endless meetings on the crises at hand:

• Most local officials still don’t know there are BMPs for lawn care and golf courses. I did mail 67 copies of the Green Industries BMP manual (one to every county chairman or manager or mayor, whatever the title). They will also be getting a copy of the Golf BMP manual once it’s finished printing.

• Even people within our green industries don’t know we have BMP manuals. IFAS has BMP training classes available. Do yourself a favor and take one.

• Most superintendents haven’t brought up the subject of fertilizer ordinances to their owners or club members. What are you waiting for? Tell them what you do and rebut all the nonsense they read in the local paper. Ask for their help. It’s their golf course.

• Most of these ordinances and proposed bans are generated by one group is working to come up with a manifesto and some simple bullet-point facts that can be handed out at your clubs, to your city and county commissions and to the public. But don’t wait for us. We have to scrape up the money to pay for a PR campaign. You can be very effective by speaking out at your club and educating your immediate circle of customers, members, family and friends.

You can either explain the crisis to them now and how it can affect their club and their yards, or you can explain it to them when the turf looks bad and your job is in the balance. Which do you think is the best course of action to take? Are you still willing to be a silent minority?