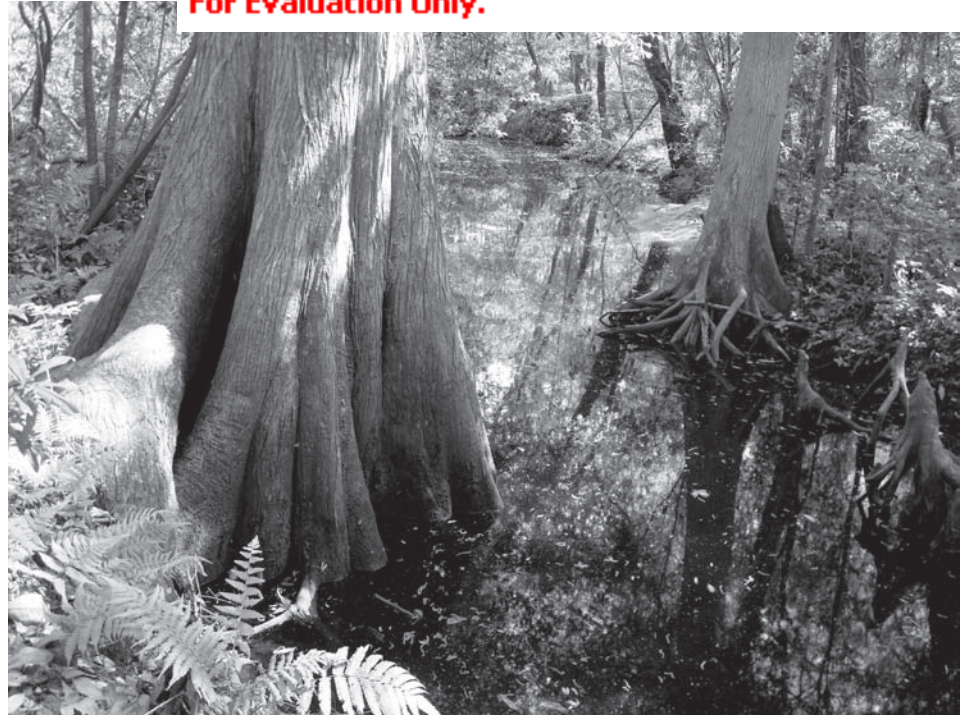




Artist Randy Pitts will be participating in A Brush with Nature



The old cypress trees lend an air of enchantment to the Arboretum

A brush with nature

Experience the Arboretum **BY ANNA RABHAN**

In East Arlington, just off of 9A, lies one of those hidden jewels that makes you say, "Jacksonville is a cool place!" The Jacksonville Arboretum and Gardens is a passive park owned by the city but leased and operated by the nonprofit Jacksonville Arboretum & Gardens, Inc. (www.jacksonvillearboretum.org). It opened in 2008, but volunteers had begun preparing the 120 acres several years before. The property has an interesting history. The Humphreys Gold Mine property – no, there's no gold in them thar sand hills – was abandoned for about 30 years. Finally, as a result of a spirited protest, the city and JEA agreed to use the land as a buffer between JEA's wastewater treatment plant and the Holly Oaks neighborhood. The area's colorful history made for an exciting cleanup effort. Gail Beveridge, the Arboretum's Event Co-Chair, says, "We pulled a lot of illegally dumped cars out of here and had to call the police once to make sure there weren't any 'surprises' in one of them!"

Hundreds of volunteer hours later, the Arboretum has been reborn as a beautiful natural preserve. It includes an impressive 13 distinct ecosystems. You can see tidal marsh, oak hammock, upland sand hill and more in the same day on easy to moderate trails. Although you're more likely to see osprey and turtles, a bobcat and other unusual fauna have been spotted. Fabulous flora abound as well. The wild azaleas are gorgeous, and the largest loblolly bay tree in the country lives here. There are also live oaks that are more than 100 years old, beautiful cypress trees surrounded by colonies of gnomish cypress knees, wild blueberry bushes, an intriguing palmetto grove no one seems to know the origin of, and so much more that the park has an enchanted feel to it.

Mother Nature did an amazing job of restoring the area, but humans have helped out too. In addition to cleaning, clearing, and making the trails, volunteers have planted over 400 trees and plants. In the process of relocating some gopher tortoises within the park, one of the board members became a licensed expert on wildlife relocation, so now the Arboretum can be called on for advice when the need arises. Such hands-on involvement within the organization is common. While EU was there, Board President Lynda Aycock showed up with a plumbing valve and, on her way to install it, said, "I've learned more out here than I ever imagined." The Arboretum has also gotten lots of help from outside. The constant improvements in accessibility and amenities have included pea gravel on some parts of trails, boardwalks built by the Boy Scouts, a bridge built by the Mormon church, and signage provided by the nonprofit Greenscape. Future plans include completion in the next few weeks of the ADA-accessible Lake Loop trail and installation of public restrooms, a pavilion, a visitors center, and possibly a natural amphitheater around the lake.

The variety of programs available at the Arboretum illustrates the creativity of the folks there. In addition to the naturalist-guided walking tours and monthly volunteer work days, the New Moon Owl Prowls, held on the closest Saturday to the new moon, allow visitors to commune with the barred owls that call the Arboretum home. Visitors can enjoy the simple pleasures of roasting marshmallows, telling stories and singing during the Full Moon Campfires. Also, for two months now, the Arboretum has offered Yoga Under the Trees. Best of all, thanks to volunteer gatekeepers, this natural sanctuary is free and open to the public seven days a week during daylight hours!

Creativity was also required when it came to figuring out how to get the word out about the Arboretum and how to raise some funds. A "plein air" art event, which organizers started planning a full year ago, seemed perfectly matched to the features of the Arboretum and the strengths of its caretakers. In a nutshell, painting "en plein air" means painting outdoors and is a mode that has regained popularity in recent years. "My co-chair, Mindy Hawkins, had organized a plein air event at her church," says Beveridge, "and she thought this would be the perfect place to do something like that."

From Thursday April 7 to Saturday April 9, the Jacksonville Arboretum and Gardens will present "A Brush with Nature." Thirty-seven regional artists will participate. Jacksonville residents might recognize names such as Jim Draper, Paul Ladnier and Randy Pitts. The artists will be painting on site beginning Thursday. On Friday, there will be demonstrations and lectures by some of the artists. Saturday will be the big family event. The artists, three of whom are on the Arboretum board, will get to choose where they want to paint. Beveridge says, "When they see [the Arboretum] and all the different settings – the creek, the lake, the live oak, the marsh – they're really excited about it." Allison Watson, one of the artists who will be participating, adds, "The beauty and mystery of wild Florida and all natural environments has intrigued me for as long as I can remember." Guests will receive a free artists catalog and can explore the trails, stopping to watch artists as they work, or there will be guides available to direct people to specific artists they may want to see in action. There will also be live music, food and a children's art tent. The event at the Arboretum is free and open to the public, and you can purchase the art you see. There will also be a gala reception and art sale, featuring music by Joe Williams and food by Pastiche, on Saturday from 7 to 9 pm at Gate Riverplace Tower, Plaza Level. Tickets to the gala are \$50 and can be purchased at www.abrushwithnature.org.

Please email your questions, comments or suggestions to anna@eujacksonville.com.

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