"We need rain, dear," is a common comment from gardeners these days. Some of us have a different request. We need reindeer!

I have already pulled out some of my toy reindeer collection for decorating. I cannot really remember when my fascination with them began. As the new natural resource agent, my educational responsibilities include wildlife and the environment. Perhaps you will also enjoy my interest as I share some facts and fantasy with you.

Being a native Floridian, my only exposure to reindeer has been through Santa at the holiday season. Every year, eight or nine of them (depending if Rudolph was needed) pull him to my house and Santa unloads his loot under my tree.

When I was young, I thought reindeer only lived at the North Pole. Then I learned that the Laplanders and Siberians had domesticated their native wild reindeer herds. Eurasians have been domesticating reindeer for more than 7,000 years. In North America we call wild reindeer, caribou.

There are five subspecies of our native caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) that have adapted to a wide range of northern ecosystems in areas less desirable for human settlement, allowing them to maintain herd size. There are large native caribou herds in Alaska and Canada, but they are now extinct in Maine and the Great Lakes states. There is an endangered herd in northern Idaho and northwestern Montana.

By the mid-1800s, commercial whaling and hunting had seriously depleted the main food supplies of our native Alaskans, the Eskimos. Eskimos traditionally harvested only what they needed for food and clothing. In 1891, 16 reindeer were introduced from Siberia as a way of helping the native people survive. A domestic herd would provide food and clothing but required a nomadic life. Politics, religion and the Eskimo social structure contributed to slow adoption of reindeer herding. Eventually the Eskimos learned better herd management techniques, and populations have increased. In 1999, there were 14 herds with about 20,000 reindeer, mainly on the Seward Peninsula of Alaska. Only native people can own reindeer as a result of the Reindeer Act of 1937.

Children shouldn't worry about reindeer getting cold in their nighttime travels. Reindeer fur helps them survive harsh winter conditions. A thick long overcoat of hollow hairs and a dense undercoat provide flotation and insulation. They can lie on snow and ice without melting it and can float across icy rivers to graze new territory.

Their feet consist of a split hoof that spreads out and acts like a wide snowshoe, preventing them from sinking into deep snow. Reindeer eat lichen, mushrooms, underground rhizomes, sedges and tender shoots and leaves of some woody plants. Mds who put out special treats for Santa and his reindeer on Christmas Eve might consider willow, blueberry and huckleberry shoots.

Reindeer and wild caribou are the only deer where males, females and calves have antlers. The antlers are an adaptation to help them dig to find lichens and tender new growth under deep snow. Like other deer, they lose their antlers each year. Males lose their antlers during the fall mating season though young males may retain their antlers until January. Pregnant cows and calves retain their antlers until spring.

This leads me to believe that Santa's reindeer are all pregnant females, except for the young Rudolph. I think the antlerless males were either too bruised from fighting for the females' attention to pull the heavy
sleigh or decided to defend their herd from wolves, a winter predator. The females jumped in to help Santa deliver his heavy load. The moral of this story? When the going gets tough, the girls get going!

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