

PLANT LIFE COLUMN

FLORIDA YARDS AND NEIGHBORHOOD PROGRAM



While using "environmentally-friendly" practices in home landscaping may strike some homeowners and professional landscapers as a lot of bother with out a lot of benefit, "saving the environment" can actually save them money, time, and energy.

Addressing issues such as controlling yard pests, reducing water runoff, and mulching, the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program is seeking to help people create beautiful and functional yards and public landscapes while reducing negative impacts on the environment. Florida Yards and Neighborhoods is an educational outreach program sponsored by the University of Florida through County Extension Services. Taking into account the unique challenges of landscaping in Florida, program educators teach practical methods of landscaping and yard maintenance, focusing on the following principles:

- **Using the RIGHT PLANT in the RIGHT PLACE** will reduce the need for costly water, fertilizer, and pesticides. Knowing the light and water requirements of plants is crucial before installing them in a landscape. Putting plants in landscape areas that fulfill those requirements is a key to having healthy plants. Healthy plants require less fertilizer and pesticides than plants struggling to grow in inappropriate environments. Grouping plants with similar requirements together allows for efficient watering. Using slow-growing plants with low water needs will save time and water, and reduce yard waste.
- **Learning some basic rules for WATERING EFFICIENTLY** saves money on water bills and prevents fungus and disease. Using suitable watering systems for your landscape, whether it's a drip system, sprinkler system, or hand watering, can cut water costs dramatically. If you use sprinklers, water early in the morning. Watering in the hot sun causes increased evaporation and can burn plants, while watering in the evening allows water to stay on plants, increasing fungus and disease problems.
- **FERTILIZING APPROPRIATELY** can prevent needless spending on fertilizers and pesticides. Over-fertilizing can actually cause pest outbreaks by inducing excessive, lush, new growth, which many insects like chinch bugs are very attracted to. Because our area has extremely well drained, sandy soil, we are at risk for polluting our groundwater with nitrate from chemical fertilizers. Contamination is caused by storm water runoff into bodies of water, and leaching from the soil into our water table.
- **MULCHING** suppresses weeds and keeps soil moist. An example of an environmentally friendly mulch is melaleuca, a pest tree harvested for mulch. Research from the University of Florida suggests that melaleuca mulch is less appealing to termites than cypress and other common mulches. Although cypress mulch was once a by-product of the timber industry, some native cypress groves are now being cut exclusively for mulch.
- **ATTRACTING WILDLIFE**, like butterflies, can add an exciting visual element to any landscape. Even learning to appreciate creatures such as bats has its advantages; they can offer free mosquito control!

- **CONTROLLING YARD PESTS RESPONSIBLY** involves learning to assess plant problems. Misdiagnosis can mean wasted money on pesticides, or destroying natural pest controls, like ladybugs. Integrating natural and chemical pest management techniques is an effective way to deal with pests in any landscape.
- **RECYCLING** yard "waste" (like leaves and grass) as mulch or compost adds nutrients and moisture retention to the soil.
- **REDUCING STORMWATER RUNOFF** from landscapes keeps needed water where landscape plants can use it and prevents destructive erosion. Channeling gutters to drain into barrels is an effective way to reduce runoff from yards, while collecting free water to use in the landscape.
- **PROTECTING RIVERS, PONDS AND LAKES** by waterfront property keeps these areas scenic and safe.

As part of the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program, homeowner's yards, schoolyards, and other public or private landscapes can receive free on-site landscape assessments. After you attend an educational workshop or presentation, trained Yard Advisors from Osceola Extension Services can evaluate your yard and offer suggestions using the above principles. The process involves evaluating the landscape and care practices, and attaching credits, or "inches" to each Florida-friendly feature or action. A free checklist is available to help you do this yourself. If your yard measures at least 36", it qualifies as a Certified Florida Yard.

The Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program offers presentations, workshops, and literature to individuals and groups interested in improving their landscape and their yard maintenance practices. For more information on creating a Florida-friendly yard, or to schedule a presentation, please contact the Osceola County Cooperative Extension Services FYN Program Assistant at (321) 697-3000. See the new FYN website to access free printouts: <http://hort.ufl.edu/fyn>

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jsul@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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