

THE

GARDEN BENCH

The Manatee County Master Gardener Newsletter

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Examples of FFL certified
yards in Manatee County



Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ and your Homeowners' Association

By Amy L. Stripe, Master Gardener Volunteer 2008

Florida-Friendly Landscaping (FFL) is an integrated approach to maintaining landscapes that require less input (fertilizers, pesticides, water), protect water quality, and are friendly to wildlife. When implemented correctly, an FFL yard will be less work than a traditional yard.

If you live in a community with a homeowners' association (HOA), you may find some resistance to the idea of going Florida-friendly with your own landscape. Board members of HOAs are usually focused on aesthetics and attendant property values in their neighborhoods, and there may be misconceptions that FFL is unattractive, will eliminate all turfgrass, will require the use of only native plants, and/or will result in weedy, overgrown yards. People often mistakenly equate FFL with xeriscaping, a landscaping practice designed to eliminate supplemental irrigation and suited for dry climates (not Florida!).

As a homeowner who wants a Florida-friendly landscape but not at the price of falling out with your HOA, here are some steps to take to smooth the way:

- **Become familiar with FFL principles.** Visit <http://fyn.ifas.ufl.edu> for a wealth of information, including landscape design ideas and plant selections, plus photos of FFL yards in other communities.
- **Understand your HOA's deed restrictions and covenants;** many HOAs will require you to seek approval from their Architectural Review Board (ARB) before making any material changes to your landscape. Know who they are and how they work.
- **Understand state law:** SB2020 prohibits HOAs from preventing FFL but does say that "reasonable limits" may be placed on some FFL practices, e.g., requiring compost bins be not visible from the street. The above website has legal information under the "Community Associations and Property Managers" section.
- **Analyze your site conditions** including soil pH (you can get soil tested here at UF/IFAS Extension Manatee County office) in order to assist you in making your case for plant selection, hardscaping, mulching, etc.
- **Develop your landscape plan for submission to the board or ARB.** Include photos of plants you intend using (always have alternatives!), as well as photos of other FFL landscapes in order to show how diverse and attractive they can be. Submit a written description of your plan.

Pointing out the **aesthetic appeal, environmental responsibility** and **lower maintenance level of FFL** should help clinch your board's approval.

(Note: the article was adapted from a presentation on June 11, 2019 by Brian Niemann, FFL Extension Agent, Hillsborough County, FL.)





Dear Master Gardener Volunteer:

My friend who lives in Citrus Hills two hours north of here has pine trees that are dying, and they have these large weird lumps on them. He said he knows there are bugs inside because he finds a lot of sawdust at the bottom of the trees.

Do you have any idea what these lumps are from?



C.R.



Dear C.R.:

Your friend is losing slash (*Pinus elliottii*) and sand (*Pinus clausa*) pine trees. It appears the growths are galls. A gall is a tree's response to a pest or disease problem: it responds by trying to isolate or compartmentalize the issue.

If the galls are caused by a fungus, such as Eastern gall rust, that fungus is dormant and becomes active in the spring, so some of the tell-tale identifiers aren't visible now (such as orange globules oozing from the trunk.) Death of the tree is inevitable.

You could try to resolve it by cutting back the branch 6 inches below the gall; however, the open wound that results leave access for fungal spores that are microscopic and everywhere, and therefore could infect the tree all over again. Sand pines are especially susceptible to fungus galls. It's recommended to use other species that aren't as prone to this disease.

Because your friend lives north of us here in Manatee County, I suspect it is Eastern gall rust.

Following are two links about gall rusts, including fusiform rust. As for the 'sawdust', is it woody material expelled by a boring insect or is it "powdery" which could be spores from a fungus? The cross-section of the gall looks like it could be insects as there is a hollow gallery between the sappy part and the hardwood. Insects can cause a physiological response in the tree to produce galls, as in oakleaf galls, from an insect laying an egg on the oak leaf. The tree responds by encapsulating the egg thus producing the gall.

<http://sfrc.ufl.edu/extension/4h/foresthealth/diseases/fusirust.html>
or <https://bit.ly/3906WWO>.

Master Gardener Volunteer Karen Holleran answers your email questions and looks at photographs for identification of problems at ManateeMG@gmail.com.

What's This?

The Century Plant Bloom

Text/Photo by Norma Kisida Master Gardener Volunteer 2018

Years ago, as a new Master Gardener Volunteer, I brought home from the Extension Service several small century plants (*Agave Americana*) that had been donated and put them in various places in my garden. I watched them grow and put out smaller plants at the base. Not having researched the plant well, I was surprised when, seven years later, they started putting out a thick stalk which grew and grew until it reached an impressive 15 feet and flowers started to open at the bottom. As the buds opened over a period of the next couple of months, they were constantly swarmed with honeybees and other pollinators. The lower flowers faded as new ones higher up opened. Near the end of the bloom cycle the original plant declined and died, leaving many small plants behind.

The century plant is one of two hundred species in the Agave family, all of which are drought tolerant. It is a blue-green plant with thick succulent leaves sporting a sharp point on the end of each leaf. At maturity (usually about ten years) the plant puts out an enormous flower stalk. As the flowers faded the mother plant dies, leaving behind multiple "pups" which can be shared. Many of the agaves have sharp spines along the leaves as well so use care where you put them. The sharp tips of the leaves can be clipped without harm to the plant if near a walkway.

For more information see: "Agave – get the point" <http://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/charlotteco/2018/10/31/agave-get-the-point/>.





Need Help with Your Landscape? Our Landscape Assistance Program Is for You!

Text and photo by Nancy Hammer, Master Gardener Volunteer 2014

Do you own a home and want help with landscape plant selection suited to your yard conditions? Do you want to attract pollinators, butterflies, and other wildlife? Wanting to reduce turfgrass, use of irrigation water, and pesticides? Do you want to improve your home's curb appeal? Need help identifying plants previously installed in your landscape? Do you live here seasonally and want a landscape that will tolerate your absence? Or for that matter, are you not a big gardener, and your goal is a low-maintenance yard? If so, you are interested in having a Florida-Friendly landscape!

The Landscape Assistance Program is a free service offered by UF/IFAS Manatee County Extension office to help guide you through the principles of Florida-Friendly Landscaping™. To schedule a meeting, contact Susan Griffith, Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Coordinator. Susan says, "Our service can be equally helpful for people who have lived here for 30 years as for those who moved here just last month."

During your phone call with Susan, she will ask about your objectives, get an idea of your site conditions, and set up a time for your consultation at our Extension office in Palmetto.

She will likely ask you to bring soil samples to the Extension office to test for pH and soluble salts two weeks in advance of the meeting. She may also ask you to measure, and if possible, take photos of your landscape beds with a smartphone or tablet. A plat or site plan of your property is also helpful.

During the consultation with Susan and Master Gardener Volunteers, we discuss your goals and site conditions and guide you through the principles of Florida-Friendly Landscaping™, including "right plant-right place" plant selection, irrigation, fertilization, and so on. We are not landscape designers but do offer you a copy of a free publication, "The Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Guide to Plant Selection & Landscape Design." There is a small fee for the soil test (\$5 for pH and soluble salts), but the Landscape Assistance Program itself is free.

Susan Griffith can be reached at (941)-722-4524, ext. 1825, or by email at sigriffith@ufl.edu.

We hope you will avail yourself of this unique (and free) opportunity to discuss the Florida-friendly landscape of your dreams. We are here to help! For more information on Florida-Friendly Landscaping™, visit <https://floridayards.org>.

The Truth about Ruellias

By Mary Lange, Master Gardener Volunteer 2017



Ruellia simplex – Mayan White



Carolina Wild Petunia



Mexican Petunia

Photos: UF/IFAS

Studying for my Master Gardener's exam back in 2017, my trick to remember the Latin name of the showy Mexican petunia (*Ruellia simplex*) was to think of it as a "simply cruel" invasive species taking over our native habitats. It is a Category I invasive plant per the Florida Exotic Plant Pest Council and classified as an "Invasive / No Uses" plant by University of Florida's Assessment of Non-Native Plant Species. The truth, of course, is more complex.

To start with, all ruellias are not cruel and invasive. The genus *Ruellia*, named after 16th century French botanist Jean Ruelle, includes around 350 species of mainly herbs and shrubs. Five ruellias are native to Florida, the most common being *Ruellia caroliniensis* or Carolina wild petunia. According to the Florida Wildflower Foundation, this is a great host plant for pollinators, particularly the white peacock and common buckeye butterflies

There are also three relatively new *Ruellia simplex* cultivars developed by the University of Florida and introduced in 2012 and 2013 under the names 'Mayan Purple,' 'Mayan Pink,' and 'Mayan White.' These 'Mayan' cultivars are sterile, meaning they do not produce seeds. Another cultivar named 'Purple Showers' is also considered sterile. Sterile cultivars, unlike their Mexican petunia ancestor, are not considered invasive. *However, they can still spread via underground rhizomes or uncontrolled clippings.*

Unfortunately, it is still far easier to identify invasive Mexican petunias (see photo) in Florida than to spot native ruellias or cultivars. The invasive *R. simplex* (also hiding under the aliases *R. tweediana*, *R. coerulea*, and *R. malacosperma*) originates from Mexico, the Caribbean, and parts of South America

and was introduced to Florida gardens in the early 20th century. By 1933, it was found to have gone rogue and invaded native habitats along the west coast of Florida.

Its ability to grow in diverse conditions, spread by rhizomes, produce copious seeds, and disperse seeds far and wide has resulted in naturalized populations in at least 28 counties. As a Category 1 invasive plant, it is "altering native plant communities by displacing native species, changing community structures or ecological functions, or hybridizing with natives."

For homeowners battling with Mexican petunias, the University of Florida recommends the following control measures:

- Do not buy or plant non-sterile Mexican petunias.
- If you plant sterile cultivars, ensure careful disposal of plant clippings to prevent uncontrolled spread.
- Remove invasive Mexican petunias from your landscape. A few plants here and there can be tackled by tearing up the whole plant as well as its underground rhizomes. Larger invasions may require an initial application of glyphosate (e.g., Roundup) followed by a second application 3 – 6 months later.
- Minimize the chance of reinvasion by replanting the area with more Florida-appropriate eco-friendly plants.

For more information:

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep498> or
<https://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/plant-directory/ruellia-simplex/>.



Cherries, Grapes, and Plums: Summer Tomatoes for Florida

By Jim Haupt, Master Gardener Volunteer 2015

Tomatoes are one of the most popular vegetables in a home garden. Beginning and veteran gardeners can grow them easily. However, when the average temperature reaches 80 degrees F and rainfall increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to grow them in Florida's quirky climate. There are, however, some tasty varieties that do well as we get into the dog days of summer. So rather than thinking big, think small, and consider planting cherries, grapes, and plums (all tomatoes!)

Cherry tomatoes are one of the most popular and versatile of all tomato varieties. With orange, red, yellow, and purple varieties, they add explosive color and flavor to salads, pasta, and meat. There are two shapes of cherry tomatoes: the round and the elongated varieties, called "grapes." The round varieties are slightly larger than grapes, but the elongated varieties are meatier, a bit sweeter, and have a longer shelf life. Given the many varieties available, choose the one you and your garden like best.

When shopping for tomato varieties, you may notice that some are labeled either indeterminate or determinate. Indeterminate tomatoes are everbearing plants that grow quite tall and usually requiring stakes or cages to support them. Determinates are bush varieties that stop growing when flower buds emerge, producing fruit within a window of 10 to 20 days. There are several determinate and indeterminate varieties recommended by the University of Florida that adapt well to Florida's climate and are resistant to some of the common tomato diseases.

'Super Sweet 100' is an indeterminate hybrid closely related to 'Super 100', but "modified to be resistant to verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt, and nematodes. This variety is also heat resistant making it a good choice for late season or the summer months."

'Lollypops' is an indeterminate variety with a lemon-like flavor. Tomatoes hang in clusters on the end of the vine like lollypops.

'Sweet Treats' is "a strong, globe-shaped indeterminate tomato that is strong against cracking with outstanding flavor potential."

'Everglade' tomato (*Solanum pimpinellifolium*) is smaller than the classic cherry and was considered a "wild tomato that worked its way into our summer vegetable gardens, and on to our plates." Because of their sprawling habit, they require more room in the garden than other cherry varieties. These tomatoes have an "intermediate resistance to alternaria stem canker and tomato yellow leaf curl virus. If you are determined to grow tomatoes during the hot summer months, this is a good one to try."

'Sweethearts', an indeterminate grape variety with brilliant red color, has the potential to give the home gardener "full clusters of tasty grapes up to the top of the plant, with a high yield potential."

'BHN 785' is a determinate grape variety, a "vigorous grower, with a strong set of fruit and uniform size and shape."

Plum tomatoes (var. *pyriforme*) are egg-shaped, red, and sometimes yellow in color. On the inside, plum tomatoes have fewer seed compartments than cherry tomatoes and less juice and water content. The firmer flesh makes them ideal for sauces and easier to handle during the summer months or off-season. 'Roma', another plum variety, has been improved to be "strongly resistant to verticillium wilt and tomato yellow leaf curl virus."

'Daytona' is a determinate plum variety, that "produces smooth, extra-large fruit that grow well in poor soils" and a "resistance to tomato yellow leaf curl virus."

'Mariana' is a determinate plum variety with "exceptional fruit set, uniformity, a long shelf life, and resistance to Alternaria stem canker."

Yields can be increased during the hot weather season by providing shade in the afternoon using shade cloths or hoops and draping shades. A "50%" shade cloth can reduce sunlight by 50% and heat by 25%."

For further information about tomato varieties, go to:
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/HS/HS118900.pdf>,
<https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/media/sfylifasufledu/baker/docs/pdf/horticulture/Tips-for-Growing-Tomatoes.pdf>.

MARCH IS SEAGRASS AWARENESS MONTH!

By Robert Hinz, Master Gardener Volunteer 2016

Seagrasses are grasses that you will never have to mow. These grasses are true plants, having roots, stems, blades (leaves) and flowers. They grow in meadows, but under the water in lagoons, bays, and estuaries.

The major function of the leaves is photosynthesis or food production they also absorb nutrients and eliminate wastes. Plants are anchored to the sea floor by roots that extend out from rhizomes, horizontally running stems lying under the sand. Rhizomes absorb nutrients, exchange gases, and help in reproduction.

Seven species of seagrass inhabit Florida waters: turtle grass (*Thalassia testudinum*), manatee grass (*Syringodium filiforme*), shoal grass (*Halodule wrightii*), paddle grass (*Halophila decipiens*), star grass (*Halophila engelmannii*), Johnson's seagrass (*Halophila johnsonii*) and widgeon grass (*Ruppia maritima*).

Turtle grass, shoal grass and manatee grass grow along the Nature Coast (the area of west Florida from Pasco to Wakulla counties.) Seagrass should not be confused with algae, blue-green algae, or seaweed, all of which are algae!

Six seagrass species in Florida reproduce both sexually and asexually. Asexual reproduction is done by rhizomes sending new, cloned shoots into the sediment. To achieve genetic diversity the plants also reproduce sexually. Fertilized flowers produce seeds which are distributed by currents, waves, fish, birds, and mammals. Most growth occurs in spring and summer. Optimal temperatures for reproduction for most species of seagrass is between 73.4°F and 89.6°F.

Depending on the species, too high or too low a temperature can stunt growth.

Seagrass growth is affected by four factors: irradiance underwater (light), nutrients, water temperature, and salinity. Each species of seagrass requires a different amount of each and therefore grow in different environments and depths.

The amount of light penetrating the water is affected by the number of suspended particles in the water and by the macroalgae and microalgae populations.

Water temperature is affected by the season, and the presence or absence of storms. Salinity of the water is influenced by seasonal storms and freshwater inputs.

Nutrient adsorption is determined by the species of seagrass, the age of the plant, and the environment in which it lives.

Tables showing light requirements, and seagrass reactions to salinity can be seen in the article "Seagrasses of Florida: A Review" by Virginia Rigdon of the University of Florida Soil and Water Science Department.

The benefits of the seagrass ecosystem are often underestimated. It is considered by some to be the third most important ecosystem in the world. It provides habitat for marine life and cleans the water. It helps to prevent erosion and take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. When the blades die, fall to the bottom, and become buried in sediment, carbon dioxide is trapped. Up to 83 million metric tons of carbon per year is captured this way.

Seagrass is also known as “the “lungs of the sea” as one square meter of seagrass can generate 10 liters of oxygen each day. Supporting large colonies of fish and small invertebrates is also a critical role played by seagrasses.

Seagrasses provide food for large grazers like manatees and green turtles. The seagrass blades are also host to many small grazers such as snails and crustaceans that feed fish and birds. When these grass blades die and decay, they provide food for animals that live on decomposing material. Seagrasses are the life blood of Florida’s economy, helping to support tourism, commercial fishing, and recreational activities.

Despite all the benefits that we derive from seagrass, it is under threat. Seagrass coverage is declining globally at a rate of 1.5% per year. It is estimated that 29% of seagrass beds over the last century have died.

Multiple factors seem to be causing this decline, both natural and anthropogenic (human impact). Natural threats include storm events, grazing of aquatic fish and herbivores, and disease. Human impact includes dredging, increased runoff, sea walls, sewer disposal, and boating (scarring). Increased construction along our shores has changed wave energy, leading to higher erosion rates. Armoring of shorelines with seawalls can increase storm water runoff which may increase pollutants and sediment in the water.

There are ways to help prevent further decline of seagrasses. Avoid using boat motor propellers in seagrass areas, don’t walk on seagrass beds, convert septic tanks to sewage mains, and follow UF/IFAS recommendations for fertilizer use. Restoration efforts by private groups, local governments, and the federal government are ongoing.

Becoming more aware of the important role seagrasses play in our environment is an important first step in protecting this vital resource.

For more information:

https://soils.ifas.ufl.edu/media/soilsifasufledu/sws-main-site/pdf/technical-papers/Rigdon_Virginia_Six_Months.pdf,

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/SG/SG15100.pdf>,

<http://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/ncbs/2019/07/18/healing-scars-restoration-of-shallow-seagrass-banks/>,

<http://www.tampabay.wateratlas.usf.edu/upload/documents/Benthic-Habitat-Seagrasses-Appendix-MARES-2013.pdf>,

<http://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/ncbs/2019/07/18/healing-scars-restoration-of-shallow-seagrass-banks/>.



March

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Photo courtesy of D. M. FAS

Date	Time	Event
1 st Saturday	10:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.	Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer – Island Library – 5701 Marina Drive, Holmes Beach. Visit the Extension Master Gardener information table and get answers to your gardening questions.
2 nd & 4 th Saturday	10:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.	Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer – Rocky Bluff Library – 6750 US Highway 301 N., Ellenton. Visit the Extension Master Gardener information table and get answers to your gardening questions.
3 rd Saturday	11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.	Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer – Central Library – 1301 Barcarrota Blvd. W., Bradenton. Visit the Extension Master Gardener information table and get answers to your gardening questions.
Saturday March 14	9:00-11:00 a.m.	Extension Master Gardener Plant ID Tour – Emerson Point Preserve – Stroll through Emerson Point Preserve to learn more about Florida's native plants and inhabitants of a coastal habitat. Suitable for all ages. To register call the Extension Master Gardener Volunteers at (941) 722-4524.
Saturday March 14	9:00-11:00 a.m.	Extension Master Gardener Plant ID Tour - Riverview Pointe Preserve – DeSoto National Memorial – Stroll through Riverview Pointe Preserve to learn more about Florida's native plants and inhabitants of a coastal habitat. Suitable for all ages. The hike begins in the parking area of the DeSoto National Memorial Park and enters into the Riverview Preserve at 8250 DeSoto Memorial Highway, Bradenton. To register call the Extension Master Gardener Volunteers at (941) 722-4524.
Sunday March 15	9:00-11:00 a.m.	Extension Master Gardener Plant ID Tour – Robinson Preserve - Stroll through the Robinson Preserve's salt marshes to learn more about Florida's native plants and inhabitants of a coastal habitat. Suitable for all ages. Trail consists of shell paths with little shade. Good walking shoes, drinking water, hat, and sunscreen are recommended. Call the Extension Master Gardener Volunteers to register (941) 722-4524.
Saturday March 21	9:00-11:00 a.m.	Extension Master Gardener Plant ID Tour – Rye Preserve - Take a hike through upland habitats along Rye Branch and learn about Florida native plants, natural history, and early settlement of the area. Drinking water, sturdy shoes, and hiking sticks are recommended. Visitor Center open 9am-noon and 1-4pm. Call the Extension Master Gardener Volunteers to register (941) 722-4524.
Saturday March 21	10:00 a.m.-Noon	Master Gardener School: Fruit Trees in the Home Landscape - Explore your options for the best fruit tree choices for Central Florida and their care. This workshop will teach homeowners how to select, plant, and maintain fruit trees for their home landscapes. \$5 online registration fee - \$10 in person registration fee. Register online at http://uf-ifas-extension-manatee.eventbrite.com/ or call the Extension Master Gardener Volunteers (941) 722-4524.
Tuesday March 24	10:00 a.m.-Noon	Irrigation with Water Conservation in Mind - Don Adkins, Irrigation Program Assistant, will focus on how to adjust your in-ground sprinkler system to conserve water, how you can repair parts, and the benefits of installing smart irrigation devices. We will have a brief discussion on Florida-Friendly Landscape™ tips. Register online at http://uf-ifas-extension-manatee.eventbrite.com/ or call (941) 722-4524, ext. 1828.
Thursday March 26	10:00a.m.-Noon	Landscape Tips for Water Conservation - Valrie Massey, Horticulture Program Assistant, will focus on Florida-Friendly Landscape™ tips such as right plant vs. right place, watering efficiently, and mulch benefits. Also included is brief discussion on in-ground sprinkler systems and the benefits of installing smart irrigation devices. If you have a problem plant, bring a sample branch including leaf and flower to class. Register online at http://uf-ifas-extension-manatee.eventbrite.com/ or call (941) 722-4524, ext. 1828.
Saturday March 28	10:00-11:30 a.m.	Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Series 1: Native Plants for the Home Landscape - Native plants are beautiful and quite beneficial! This workshop is the first in a series of three workshops in a Florida-Friendly Landscaping Series held at the Manatee County Extension in March, April, and May. Anyone who attends all three of the workshops will receive a free gift at the end of the third workshop. Native plants are beautiful and quite beneficial but are still underused in the average landscape. Natives can help sustain pollinators and other wildlife. Learn about some of Florida's gorgeous native plants that will work well for your area of the county. You will be inspired to add a few to your own landscape! \$5 online registration fee - \$10 in person registration fee. Register online at http://uf-ifas-extension-manatee.eventbrite.com/ or call the Extension Master Gardener Volunteers (941) 722-4524.
Saturday March 28	10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.	Open Educational Garden Event – Come enjoy the gardens and varied activities, featuring information/demonstration stations covering school and community gardens, the community seed bank, rain barrels, worm composting, the Florida-Friendly Landscape Assistance Program, the Plant Diagnostic Clinic and more!