Q: How can I make my landscape more environmentally friendly?

A: Although the plants and designs may differ, all landscapes perform the same important functions. A well-planned landscape enhances the beauty of a home and moderates the climate around it by protecting it from extreme wind, heat, cold and glare. Furthermore, landscaping can increase a home’s value and reduce home cooling cost. The way we design and manage our landscapes has a significant impact on the fragile environment of our state.

An environmentally friendly landscape begins with a good design based on a solid assessment of the site. No matter how attractive the plants chosen, or how well tended once they are in the ground, if they are not suited to the site, they may be disappointing. Among the factors to be taken into account are the planting site’s climate, the amounts of direct and indirect sunlight received during the day, exposure to wind, salt, various characteristics of the soil, and of course manmade components such as utility lines, signs, fences and buildings.

Whether you are designing a new landscape or renovating an old one, low maintenance should be a primary concern. A low maintenance landscape not only saves time and money, but also conserves water and energy. Such a design can be achieved through proper plant selection and the arrangement of plants on the site. For instance, placing plants together in beds, instead of scattering them throughout the lawn, greatly reduces the time required for mowing and watering. By grouping plants with similar water requirements together, water will not be wasted on plants that do not need it. Moderately large beds in regular shapes are more efficiently irrigated than a larger number of small, narrow or irregularly shaped beds. Mulches in the beds will keep moisture in the soil and also provide a nice dark background for flowering plants. Plants with high water requirements, such as annuals, can be located near a water source so they can be watered by hand. Large lawn areas are maintenance intensive, a small area of turfgrass combined with ground covers can be equally or more attractive and is generally a more environmentally friendly choice.

Trees can be placed to shade windows on the south and west sides of the house. Deciduous trees (trees that shed their leaves in winter) can be used effectively to shade the house in summer and let the sun warm the house in winter. The outdoor unit of the air-conditioning system will use less energy if it is shaded from direct sun.

How plants are cared for not only determines how they grow, but also has an impact on energy and water consumption and, thus, the environment. Apply enough water and fertilizer to keep the plants growing and healthy, but do not waste water, encourage excessive growth, and pollute lakes and waterways with fertilizer-contaminated run-off. Research has shown that several pest problems are increased when plants are over-stimulated with fertilizer. When you purchase fertilizers, look for those that have at least 50% of the nitrogen in a water-insoluble form. These fertilizers provide nitrogen to the roots of plants for a long time, and less escapes to pollute run-off water. Established landscape plants may not need regular fertilization.
Millions of pounds of pesticides are used each year on landscape plants. Widespread use of chemicals to control pests is not without risks. There is always a chance of contamination, destruction of beneficial organisms, pest resistance and outbreaks of secondary pests. Dealing with plant pests begins with selecting plants that have no or few pest problems. Avoid cultural practices that make lawns and landscape plants susceptible to pests, such as over-watering and over-fertilizing. Frequently monitor your landscape for pests and learn the difference between harmful and beneficial insects. If a pest problem is detected, treat only the affected plants.

Leaves and pruning clippings contain valuable nutrients and should be recycled back into the landscape, either as mulch or as compost. Grass clippings are generally best left on the lawn where they will quickly decompose and provide nutrients to the lawn.

The environmentally friendly landscape is a common sense approach to landscape design and maintenance and helps preserve Florida’s natural beauty. The Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Program from the University of Florida/IFAS Extension was developed to help residents create and maintain environmentally friendly landscapes. The “Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Handbook” was created to help you get started. It can be downloaded from http://fyn.ifas.ufl.edu The characteristics and requirements of many common Florida plants can be found in the “Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Guide to Plant Selection & Landscape Design,” a 110 page illustrated plant list. This publication also includes information on landscape design and tips on how to solve landscape design problems. It can be downloaded from the website of the Southwest Florida Water Management District at http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us

**WHAT TO PLANT**

**Annuals:** Replace declining winter annuals with varieties such as angelonia, gazania, and salvia that will provide color now and into the summer months.

**Bulbs:** Plant caladium for a showy tropical display all summer.

**Herbs:** In addition to their culinary value, many herbs are ornamental and attract butterflies to the garden.

**WHAT TO DO**

**Azaleas:** If azaleas need pruning to shape or produce a fuller plant, do it just after plants finish blooming.

**Prune spring flowering trees and shrubs after blooming:** Prune after the last flowers fade but before new buds set in mid to late summer.

**Prune shrubs and trees when new growth begins:** The end of the dormant season is a good time to prune many trees and shrubs. Cold damaged shrubs can be pruned back to where new growth appears.

**Fertilize:** palms and any other ornamentals not fertilized last month.

**Irrigation:** Now that dry weather is here, check sprinkler systems for efficient use of water. Consider participating in the free homeowner irrigation evaluation program by calling 861-5000 or signing up online at http://sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu/FYN/irrigation.shtml

**Identify and conserve beneficial insects:** Some insects should be encouraged in your yard!

**Mulch:** Mulch conserves moisture during dry weather and minimizes weeds in landscape beds. Organic mulches add nutrients to the soil.

**WHAT TO DO EVERY MONTH**

- Adjust irrigation based on rainfall.
• Deadhead flowers to encourage new blooms.
• Monitor the garden for insects and disease.
• Plant trees, shrubs, and perennials and water until established.
• Mow lawns at recommended heights:
  • St. Augustine & Bahia: 3-4”
  • Centipede: 1.5-2.0”
  • Dwarf St. Augustine: 2.5”

UPCOMING EXTENSION EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS:
Call 861-5000 or register on-line http://sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu
• Florida-Friendly Landscaping: Nine Landscape Principles, North Port Library, 6:30 p.m., March 5
• Horse Health and Safety Workshop, Twin Lakes Park, 6:30 – 9:30 p.m., March 7
• Plant Propagation, North Port Library, 6:30 p.m., March 12
• Organic Food Gardening: Irrigation Management, Phillippi Farmhouse Market, 11:00 a.m., March 13
• Butterfly Gardening, Englewood Community Garden, 1:00 p.m., March 13
• Rain Barrel Workshop, Twin Lakes Park, 10:00 a.m., March 16
• Irrigation 101, Twin Lakes Park, 10:00 a.m., March 19
• Closing Your Home, Twin Lakes Park, 11:30 a.m., March 19
• Canning jam with Fresh Strawberries, Twin Lakes Park, 9:00 a.m., February 14
• Rain Gardensa, Shamrock Park, 2:00 p.m., March 21
• Palms for the Suncoast, Twin Lakes Park, 10:00 a.m., March 27
• Sarasota Garden Club Series: Rain Gardens, Sarasota Garden Club, 10:00 a.m., March27
• Organic Food Gardening: Attracting Beneficial Insects, Phillippi Farmhouse Market, 11:00 a.m., March 27

GETTING HELP
The Master Gardener Help Desk at Twin Lakes Park is available to answer your questions. Call 861-9807 or email at mghelpdesk@scgov.net. Walk-ins are welcome Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m.-4 p.m., closed from noon-1 p.m. Satellite Help Desks are available weekly at library locations throughout Sarasota County.
(Annemarie Post is an Environmental Horticulture Agent with University of Florida/IFAS Extension Sarasota County. Website: http://sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu

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