

Landscape Elements for a Florida-Friendly Yard¹

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F LORIDA-FRIENDLY YARDS vary greatly in style and appearance, but they share common elements that incorporate Florida-Friendly principles and good design practices for a healthy and attractive yard. Several elements are essential for the function and maintenance of an environmentally sound yard, while others contribute to the beauty and perceived value of the landscape.

Elements generally fall into one of three categories: environmental health, function, or design. The overall guiding concept for all three categories is the principle of “right plant, right place,” a concept that guides the selection and placement of plant material based on the conditions of the site, growing requirements of the plants, and needs of the user. Category I (environmental health) includes the plant materials and landscaping concepts that relate to environmental health. Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ principles in this category include using mulch, planting for wildlife, protecting water bodies, and planting to reduce pests. Category II (function) includes plant materials and other landscape features that relate to function, including maintenance and user comfort. Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ principles in this category include reducing stormwater runoff, using compost to recycle yard waste, and watering efficiently. Category III (design) includes the plant materials and hardscape features that relate to aesthetic design and composition. Important design concepts for this category include color, texture, shape, scale, and spatial organization.

Design elements are located spatially in the yard based on ecology, function, and aesthetic appeal. The example landscape plan (Figure 1) illustrates the location of components in a typical residential landscape. Although the model plans include examples of nearly all the elements, the most critical elements for a Florida-Friendly yard are those that affect environmental health and function. Chief among those are locating plants in the right place, placing mulch

and compost in plant beds, grouping plants based on water needs, and choosing low-maintenance plants that will clean and filter water and attract wildlife.

Category I – Environmental Health

Follow the “right plant, right place” concept – Locate plants that have similar water and light needs in areas that have the appropriate moisture and shade coverage or hours of light needed for optimal growth.

Include plants to attract wildlife – Small urban species can find food and habitat for nesting in small spaces. These animals have adapted to humans and do well in yards that provide the cover and food sources they need. Wildlife contributes to the ecological well-being of the environment, and homeowners enjoy the sight and sounds of the animals, birds, and insects.

Locate plants to reduce pest problems – Plants located in the right place will be healthy and thrive. Plants in the wrong place will be stressed and more susceptible to pests. Avoid using plants that are susceptible to common pest problems.

Use water-conserving plants – Choose plants that need little supplemental water after establishment. All plants need frequent watering when first planted—typically three to six months for bedding plants and shrubs and six months to a year for trees. After plants have rooted, they should only need irrigation during periods of drought or high temperatures.

Use mulch in plant beds – Mulch is needed to suppress weeds, retain moisture in the soil, and prevent soil erosion. Mulch should be about 3 in. deep, should be applied immediately after planting, and should be reapplied when the mulch has broken down and no longer provides adequate coverage.

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Florida-Friendly Landscape Elements

FIGURE 1. Florida-Friendly Landscape elements. (Illustration: Gail Hansen, UF/IFAS)

Group plants based on water needs – A Florida-Friendly yard can include a small area of plants that require more consistent water. The best strategy is to group the plants in a very visible and accessible area, such as the front entry. Grouping the plants provides the opportunity to use a greater variety of plants for more impact and aesthetic appeal.

Use low-maintenance plants – Choose plants that require less pruning or trimming and less mowing, fertilizer, and pesticide. Low-maintenance plants also require less energy and time to maintain a well-kept appearance.

Use evergreen and deciduous plants – Mix evergreen and deciduous plants for variety and change throughout the seasons. Ensure that not all deciduous plants are grouped in one area so as to prevent large empty spaces in the yard in the winter. However, deciduous trees should be grouped on the south side of the house to allow sunlight into the house for light and energy conservation in the winter. For continuous color, locate native plants based on their bloom periods.

Use a mix of natives and non-natives – Choose plants based on maintenance, water requirements, and wildlife value rather than their native or non-native status. Many natives and non-natives meet the objectives of saving water, using fewer resources, and requiring less maintenance. Some native plants are more variable in appearance through the seasons, losing their flowers and foliage in the winter. A careful mix of evergreens among perennials will maintain a visually pleasing yard.

Include a maintenance-free zone – Establish a maintenance-free zone within 10 ft. of any body of water. No mowing, fertilizer, or pesticides should be used within this zone. The zone is intended to stop grass clippings, pet waste, and fertilizer and pesticides used in other areas of the yard from carrying harmful bacteria and nutrients into the water.

Plant buffers to protect water bodies – Rain gardens and plant buffers at the water's edge are designed to trap and filter water before it reaches ponds, lakes, or rivers. Low-growing plants with a wide base and dense roots, such as grasses, are best for blocking water flow, encouraging filtration, and taking up the water.

Category Two – Function

Maintain a practical lawn area – Maintain a lawn area in a simple shape that is large enough for a play space or entertainment area but no larger than necessary. A lawn area between plant beds and sidewalks holds and filters stormwater runoff and is also helpful to keep mulch from washing onto the sidewalk. Don't make the lawn area so

small that it is difficult to mow or irrigate; a minimum four-foot-wide strip is best.

Group trees for windproofing – Grouping trees so that the canopies touch helps the trees buffer each other from the wind. Collectively, they deflect and slow down wind so that each tree does not withstand the full force. When grouping trees, use several different types for variety, but repeat the groupings to unify the design.

Shade the AC unit – Use medium-height trees to shade the air conditioning unit and lower energy costs. Trees provide more overhead shade midday when the sun is the hottest, and they don't block air flow around the unit. Shrubs can provide a good screen to block the view of the unit, but a gap should be allowed so they don't block air flow.

Shade hard surfaces – Plant trees to block solar radiation on hard surfaces by planting to cast the optimum shade. Choose trees with a wide canopy to arch over patios or driveways to block midday sun, and locate smaller trees to block morning and late afternoon sun.

Plant trees for energy conservation – Plant groups of trees on the west, east, and south sides of the buildings to block solar radiation and keep the house cooler. Trees on the west and east sides should be evergreen for year-round cooling, while the trees on the south side can be deciduous to allow the winter sun to heat the house.

Harvest rainwater with a rain barrel – Locate rain barrels at downspouts to capture rainwater for later irrigation use. Cover the barrel to keep out debris and mosquitoes and cut the downspout to fit into the barrel. Rain barrels can be purchased or made from a number of different containers. Make sure to include a spigot at the bottom to attach a hose and an overflow at the top. For more information about rain barrels, visit http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/publications/files/rain_barrels_guide.pdf.

Capture stormwater with a rain garden – An alternative to rain barrels is the use of rain gardens to capture stormwater runoff. Locate the rain garden in a low area in the yard if possible and create a drainage swale from the downspout or roof to the garden. Install plants that will do well in dry conditions but also survive wet periods. For more information about rain gardens, visit <http://www.tappwater.org/download-guides/RainGarden.pdf>.

Use a water-conserving irrigation system – It is best to hand water if possible. However, if using an installed system, locate microirrigation systems with drip tubing, bubblers, or microsprays in plant beds. Install rain and soil moisture sensors when you install the irrigation system.

Provide a compost bin for yard waste – Locate a compost bin in an area that is convenient but not visible from the front entry, the street, or the backyard entertainment area. Use the bin for yard waste and organic kitchen scraps to create compost for the plant beds. For more information about constructing a compost bin, visit <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/he026>.

Leave a gap between the house and plants – Leave a 2-3 ft. gap between the house foundation and plants. This will allow for air circulation to reduce mold and mildew on both the plants and the house. The gap also helps reduce the number of insect pests in and around the house.

Screen utilities – Choose plants with dense foliage and tight branching to form a solid screen to block the view of utilities, but be sure to provide adequate access. Use plants that are sized appropriately for the utility height and do not require constant pruning.

Category III – Design

Use a design theme to organize landscape – A design theme guides the type, placement, and organization of plant material throughout the yard. All design themes use a form, such as geometric or naturalistic, which are sometimes referred to as formal and informal, but they can include many styles. Garden themes can be regional, such as tropical or coastal; they can be cultural, such as Spanish, Italian, or Asian; or they can be based on vegetative communities, such as woodlands, wetlands, or deserts. Choose a theme to develop the master planting plan.

Create spaces with plants – Use trees and large shrubs to create spaces or outdoor rooms. The trunks and branches of the trees act as walls and overhead ceilings to enclose the space and give a feeling of privacy and protection. Large shrubs also act as walls to block views into the yard for more privacy and security. Similar activity areas, such as entertainment and play spaces, should be located close to each other, while unrelated activity areas should be separated.

Vary colors and textures – A variety of colors and textures adds interest to the yard. Choose a color scheme and design theme to help guide color choice and use of texture. The colors, texture, and architectural style of the house are good starting points for choosing a theme and colors. Plants can blend with the house or contrast for more emphasis.

Fit the plant size to the space – Match the mature, fully grown size and shape of the plant to the space where the plant will be located. Use plants that do not require trimming to reduce the size or significantly change the shape; trim only for the health of the plant and maintenance of the natural shape.

Use a variety of plant heights and shapes – Varying the height provides interest in the garden and helps create microclimates. Taller trees provide shade for other plants and a comfortable space for the user. A variety of heights and shapes in the plant beds makes the garden more visually interesting.

Space plants for mature size – When installing young plants, leave space between them. This space is needed to allow room for the plants to grow to their mature size. The plants should be spaced so that when fully grown, the foliage will touch and cover the mulch. As the plants mature, the foliage, clippings, and natural leaf litter will cover the soil under the plants, reducing the amount of mulch needed.

Group bedding plants in masses – Use masses of plants in the beds for a more natural, lush look. Arrange the plants in layers so that every mass or grouping has another group of plants behind it, beside it, or in front of it. Vertical layering is the design concept of varying the height of the plants, and horizontal layering refers to how the plants are arranged on the ground.

Screen unwanted views with trees and shrubs – Use evergreen shrubs with dense foliage and low branches to screen unwanted views of neighbors or streets. Shrubs can be planted along the property line or around screen enclosures. Taller trees with a full canopy can be used to screen views from second-story windows or to screen intense sunlight in upper windows of homes that have cathedral ceilings.

Frame views with plants – Use plant material to direct the eye toward a natural or man-made view by planting on both sides to frame the view. Either choose plants that will not compete with the view, such as those with a simple form and fine to medium texture, or choose plants that will add to the view with color, texture, or shape.

Link spaces with pathways – Provide access throughout the yard with mulched pathways, stepping stones, or gravel pathways. The pathways allow access for maintenance of plant materials and help organize the yard into smaller, functional spaces for a variety of activities.

Provide a focal point – A focal point attracts attention through the use of plant materials or yard ornaments in bright colors and unusual forms that contrast visually with the surrounding plants. Focal points help organize the yard by designating areas of importance, such as entryways, patios, and special gardens.

Using the Elements to Create a Landscape Plan

The first step in creating a Florida-Friendly yard is to develop a plan on paper. Consider the elements in each category and use them as a checklist when developing the plan. Start with a design theme to guide design decisions, then analyze the site and create a list of the plants to be used based on the site conditions. Remember to think about wildlife, drought tolerance, maintenance, pest issues, and the color, texture, size, and shape of the plants. Include native and non-native plants. Next, locate the plants on the site where they will thrive and function as intended. Consider water needs, sun and shade patterns, wind direction, buffer creation, water body protection, energy conservation, plant massing, and focal points. Don't forget the mature size and shape of the plant when choosing location. Complete the plan by indicating the location of mulch, maintenance-free zones, water harvesting areas, compost areas, and work areas.

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