

Florida-Friendly Landscaping

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A lawn care company grows by adapting to new state law

When Christine Collins started Sustainable Lawns by Wildrose Lawncare in the Tampa Bay area in 2002, the novelty of being a woman-owned lawn service is what gained her attention, and her first customers. However, it was eventually her focus on Florida-Friendly Landscaping (FFL) that set her apart from other businesses, as she was recognized as an industry leader in the promotion of Florida-friendly landscaping.



This residential landscape demonstrates partial lawn conversion where native plant beds replace a full front lawn, reducing irrigation requirements. The introduction of a pervious brick pathway allows runoff to percolate down instead of running off into storm drains or water bodies.

Photo courtesy of Southwest Florida Water Management District.

The FFL program is a new state law that was signed by Florida Gov. Charlie Crist in July 2009 to promote the installation of native landscaping. The law states that HOAs can not fine homeowners for brown lawns when they are abiding by water shortage rules, such as the district's water shortage orders that restrict residents to watering their lawns one day per week. This triggered an enormous movement and a unique model where, for the first time, homeowners and landscapers united in adapting sustainable practices for landscaping.

FFL was created to include the already-existing Florida Yards & Neighborhood program (FYN)—both the homeowner and builder and developer components—and the Best Management Practices (BMP) for Protection of Water Resources by the Green Industries. Traditionally, FYN has served a homeowner audience, while the BMPs are directed toward commercial horticulture professionals. Because FFL terminology is used in state law, both the University of Florida/Institute of Food & Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) felt it appropriate to find a name for the overarching philosophy that embraces both homeowner and professional audiences. More programs may be added under the FFL umbrella as funding becomes available.

BMP practices are based on horticultural and environmental science-based information. The UF/IFAS Extension offices and other venues statewide deliver the program via training to green industry workers, and many cities and counties have enacted local fertilizer ordinances that require lawn care professionals to become certified in the BMPs.



The Southwest Florida Water Management District held an FFL Landscape Challenge event for professional landscape teams last April. Pictured, left to right: Sylvia Durell, Southwest Florida Water Management District; Merry Mott, Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscapes Association; Paul Rauch; and Christine Collins, Sustainable Yards by Wildrose Lawncare.

Photo courtesy of Southwest Florida Water Management District.

For Collins and her husband, Paul Rauch, it wasn't just a business decision to focus on FFL, it was a commitment to help her customers create attractive landscapes that would conserve water and protect the environment by minimizing pesticide and fertilizer use. Each year, she produces the Florida Yard Fandango in collaboration with the Southwest Florida Water Management District and FYN. This daylong event attracts hundreds of area residents interested in learning about low-impact landscaping.

Sustainable Yards by Wildrose Lawncare has some commercial customers, including the Florida aquarium, and its residential niche lies with high-end customers. "Our customer base consists of those who care about the environment," says Collins. "They already know environmental landscaping as a concept."

Although the company does few new constructions, and instead focuses on retrofits, it believes that FFL fits well with its practices when it comes to replacing traditional thirsty plantings, such as St. Augustinegrass. "We're not purists. We do use some chemicals when necessary and plant nonnatives, too. It's all about balance," says Collins.

"What we find over and over again is that people tell us 'We would incorporate these principles, we would love to have a beautiful landscape, we just don't know how,'" she says. "So, our goal with our workshops is to help them put it all together and to be a resource when they have questions."

One of the difficult hurdles of the new FFL law is to persuade homeowners that a Florida-friendly yard is indeed low maintenance and requires low water use, yet can still provide a plant palette that includes color, diversity and support wildlife habitat. It cuts down on the chemicals and emphasizes the state's unique flora and fauna.

Collins works closely with Southwest Florida Water Management District, one of the main supporters of FFL. "We support or help to support education programs at UF Extension offices in 11 of the 16 counties within this water management district," says Sylvia Durrell, FFL manager with Southwest Florida Water Management District. "In addition, FFL has been incorporated into the Florida Water Star program, a voluntary certification program for residential and commercial properties to conserve water, which we and two other water management districts promote."



An important FFL principle is to encourage homeowners to create a maintenance-free zone between their lawn and a water body to protect it from nutrient and pesticide runoff as shown here.

Photo courtesy of Southwest Florida Water Management District.

Durell adds, "Because homeowners can no longer be prohibited from following FFL practices, they will have more freedom to choose the type of plants and turf that are right for their property. This is a great opportunity for homeowners and their landscape professionals to get to know their yard's sun, soil and moisture conditions and put the right plants in the right places."

Durell says more and more community associations are asking the district and county extension agents with the FYN program for help with their landscape and irrigation concerns. Some of the common problems landscapers see include excessive watering and fertilizing, as well as overpruning and improperly maintained irrigation systems. She believes the program is working because more property managers are looking at FFL to solve ongoing landscaping problems.

When it comes to HOAs, BMP-certified landscapers know that the two key practices to improving turf health is maintaining efficient irrigation systems and mowing lawns to proper height. Other options include installing turf that requires less water and increasing the size of the planting beds with native perennials.

The PGA Village in Port St. Lucie was one of the first HOAs to take FFL on. Known primarily for its well-groomed golf greens, the HOA decided that irrigating a profusion of lush green lawns off the course and water-thirsty flowering annuals around the course was a runaway cost that could not continue. Enter the FFL. Five landscaping companies worked with the PGA landscaping committee and the 33 individual neighborhood associations to save nearly \$30,000 a year by not putting in annuals several times a year. Instead, native perennials blooming at different times throughout the year, including blue plumbago bushes, multicolored crotons and flowering groundcovers more than make up for the former color of annuals.

When it came to turf alterations, the Gulf Harbors condominium complex, also located in New Port Richey, incorporated FFL into their plans. Still suffering from a three-year drought, it had an ongoing problem with declining turf areas consisting of variations of St. Augustinegrass located between its carports and buildings. There was no irrigation system in these areas because it was cost-prohibitive. Some of the areas were dry, others were wet and many were partially shaded. Instead of replanting turf, a variety of native plants, including groundcover, that weren't dependent on irrigation were used.

Where previously the large turf areas had a set schedule for watering, whether needed or not, now it is carefully monitored according to wet and dry periods. Durrell and other officials with FFL believe that if it wasn't for FFL, HOAs like Gulf Harbor wouldn't have necessarily instituted these sustainable solutions.

"There is such a large majority of lawns in Florida that are being taken care of by our industry whether part of an HOA or not," explains Collins. "In the past, the message has been aimed at the individual homeowner, which is certainly an important message, but the landscaping industry also needs to be educated in these principles."

As far as the landscape professionals segment, Collins finds that many of her colleagues do practice sustainable principles, but often times, they are too "quiet" about it or practice it in their own way. She is also finding that many landscapers are resistant to the increase in regulations for pesticides and irrigation, which is not what FFL is about. "I see it as a huge opportunity for us as an industry to step up as leaders in this area," she says. "It's not a cost barrier, it's really a revenue generator."

She adds, "The landscaping industry in south Florida is very competitive, so in order to have a competitive edge and to differentiate my business, I chose that niche of being 'Florida-friendly' and getting the education needed to do Florida-friendly landscaping and incorporating the principles."

For the past 20 years, Tom Crain has been a regular contributor to B2B publications, including many in the green industry. He is also a marketing communications specialist for several companies in the travel, agriculture and nutrition industries.