

# Going Native

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Florida has a great wealth of native plant material ranging from tropical to temperate species, but many gardens tend to be comprised largely of exotic, non-native species. It might pay to learn more about native plant options for the success and ease of maintenance they will impart in the landscape. In this article, the benefits of using native plants in your landscape will be discussed.

Native plants have become adapted to local conditions over thousands of years. These adapted plants are able to survive and even thrive with the soil, climate and pest pressures that are present in the area.

It is important to point out that native plants do best when placed in an environment that mirrors the ecosystem to which they are adapted. Just because the term ‘native’ is applied to a plant does not mean that it will thrive or even survive in every location in your landscape. Match the plant with the conditions in the landscape. Remember: “Right Plant; Right Place!”

## Benefits of Using Native Plants in Your Landscape

### • Native Plants Require Less Supplemental Water

Native plants are adapted to the average rainfall occurring in an area or region. Many have adapted by developing deeper or more extensive root systems that are very efficient in taking in water. This will reduce the water bill and help preserve the yard if water restrictions are put in place.

Native plants are considered water-use efficient because they have become accustomed to the

region’s precipitation patterns. They survive on the area’s typical rainfall. This does not mean that they will not need occasional applications of water. Droughts and periods of unusually low rainfall can necessitate the use of supplemental irrigation.



Native plants such as this Southern pinxter azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*) add beauty and color to the Florida landscape. Photo credit: E. Duke

### • Native Plants Need Less Fertilization

Native plants are adapted to a region’s soil and the levels of essential plant nutrients that the soil contains. In practical terms, this means that less fertilizer will have to be applied to the plants and, importantly, less money will be spent. It also means that by applying less fertilizer, there will be a reduced chance of fertilizer runoff contaminating surface water like lakes and rivers and less fertilizer making its way into the groundwater.

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In recent years Floridians have become increasingly aware of the environmental damage done by the indiscriminate overuse of fertilizers. Today, the state requires all commercial applicators of fertilizers to have a certificate issued by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. This Green Industries Best Management Practices (GI-BMP) certificate is acquired by attending a program run by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF-IFAS). Classes are available throughout the state.

Unfortunately, the soil in many urban gardens has been altered. Top soil often is removed during construction and is replaced by fill dirt brought in from other locations. It is in a gardener's best interest to have the garden soil tested. A good gardener is an informed gardener.

● **Native Plants are Resistant to Damage from Pests**

Native plants typically show a high degree of resistance to pests and diseases because they have developed with constant exposure and contact to these organisms. Reduced pest pressures can reduce or even eliminate the use of pesticides, thereby reducing the potential negative impact on the environment. This is beneficial to local wildlife and beneficial insect populations. A healthy ecosystem is dependent on pollinators and beneficial insects.

Unfortunately, Florida is host to numerous exotic, non-native pests, and more are introduced into the state all the time. Florida's native plants often do not have the immunity or resistance to these new pests.

In addition, insects and pathogens such as fungi, bacteria and viruses are constantly changing. They are developing new ways to attack plants. Just because native plants are currently resistant to a pest does not mean that they will stay that way in the future.

● **Native Plants Provide Shelter & Food for Wildlife**

Native plants attract wildlife by providing diverse food sources – including nuts, fruits, and seeds – and habitats. Many gardeners express the desire for wildlife in their gardens. Native plants provide the right conditions to promote and support healthy wildlife habitats. Flowering native plants also will support local pollinators. The entire ecosystem will benefit.



Florida has 7 native palm trees including the Needle Palm (*Rhapidophllum hystrix*) to had character to the landscape.

**Conclusion**

The use of native plants in a landscape saves time, effort and money and protects the environment. By promoting biodiversity, the use of native plants in the landscape helps preserve Florida's unique ecosystems and leaves a legacy for future generations.