



Converting Your Community to Florida Native Landscaping

A Guide for HOA Communities

Prepared by Living Spaces Gardening

Introduction

Florida's unique climate and ecosystems make it one of the most biodiverse states in the nation — and one of the most vulnerable to landscape mismanagement. HOA communities across Florida are discovering that transitioning to native landscaping is not just an environmental decision, but a smart financial and aesthetic one. This guide walks you through the why, the how, and the what to expect.

The Benefits of a Florida Native Landscape

Transitioning your community's landscape to Florida-native plants delivers measurable environmental, financial, and community-health benefits. The following sections outline each benefit alongside supporting research.



Reduce Water Consumption

Florida-native plants are adapted to local rainfall patterns and soil conditions, significantly reducing — and in established plantings, often eliminating — the need for supplemental irrigation.

- Outdoor irrigation accounts for approximately 50% of residential water use in Florida (Florida Department of Environmental Protection).
- Florida-Friendly landscaping practices can reduce outdoor water use by 30–50% compared to conventional turf-dominated landscapes (University of Florida IFAS Extension).
- Once established (typically 1–2 growing seasons), most native plantings require little to no supplemental irrigation beyond natural rainfall.
- Reduced irrigation translates directly to lower community water bills and long-term HOA operational savings.



Minimize Use of Fertilizers, Pesticides & Herbicides

Native plants thrive in Florida's soils without the chemical inputs required to sustain non-native turf and ornamentals. This reduces both cost and environmental risk.

- Conventional Florida lawns receive an estimated 3–5 pounds of nitrogen fertilizer per 1,000 square feet annually — much of which leaches into groundwater (UF IFAS).
- Native plants have co-evolved with Florida's soils and pest populations, exhibiting natural resistance to most regional insects and diseases, dramatically reducing pesticide dependency.
- Homeowners and HOAs nationwide spend over \$36 billion annually on lawn care, a significant portion of which covers preventable chemical treatments (National Wildlife Federation).
- Florida statute 373.185 (the "Florida-Friendly Landscaping Law") prevents HOAs from prohibiting Florida-Friendly and native landscaping practices, giving communities legal backing for this transition.



Sustain Wildlife & Support Pollinators

Florida is home to more than 700 native bee species and thousands of other pollinators, birds, and wildlife that depend on native plant communities. Conventional turf lawns, by contrast, function as biological deserts.

- Native plants support 35x more native bee species than exotic ornamentals (Dr. Doug Tallamy, University of Delaware — Bringing Nature Home).
- Florida has lost an estimated 9 million acres of natural habitat since the 1950s; residential landscapes are increasingly important wildlife corridors (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission).
- Caterpillars — a critical food source for nesting birds — depend almost entirely on native host plants. Non-native ornamentals support virtually none (Tallamy & Shropshire, 2009).
- Community-scale native landscaping creates interconnected habitat patches, amplifying the ecological benefit beyond any single property.



Reduce Stormwater Runoff & Protect Waterways

Florida's flat topography and sandy soils make stormwater management a critical concern. Deep-rooted native plants are one of the most effective natural tools for managing runoff and protecting local waterways.

- Many Florida native plants develop root systems reaching 6–15 feet deep — far exceeding turf grass roots of 2–6 inches — creating natural channels for water infiltration (UF IFAS).
- Deep-rooted native landscapes can reduce stormwater runoff by up to 30% compared to conventional turf (EPA Green Infrastructure Report).
- Excess fertilizer nitrogen from lawn runoff is the leading cause of algal blooms and hypoxia in Florida's coastal waters and springs (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services).
- Native landscaping in riparian buffer zones can remove up to 85% of nitrogen and 75% of phosphorus from runoff before it reaches waterways (USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service).



Reduce Use of Gas-Powered Equipment

Conventional turf maintenance demands frequent mowing, edging, and blowing — primarily with gas-powered equipment. Native landscapes, once established, dramatically reduce the need for this equipment.

- A single gas-powered lawn mower emits as much air pollution in one hour as 11 new cars driven for the same period (EPA Office of Mobile Sources).
- Gas-powered landscaping equipment accounts for approximately 5% of U.S. air pollution (California Air Resources Board).
- Native plant gardens and groundcover beds require seasonal trimming rather than weekly mowing, reducing equipment hours, fuel costs, and noise pollution for the community.
- Reduced equipment use also translates to lower maintenance labor costs for HOAs over time.



The Design Process

We design your native landscape using the foundational principles of ecological landscaping, with "Right Plant, Right Place" as our guiding philosophy. This principle ensures every plant we specify is matched to your site's specific conditions — sun exposure, soil type, drainage patterns, and microclimates — setting the foundation for a low-maintenance, thriving landscape.

Site Assessment

Every design begins with a thorough site assessment. We evaluate existing soil conditions, drainage patterns, sun and shade exposure throughout the day, existing tree canopy, and the current plant community. We identify any invasive species that need to be managed and note opportunities to enhance stormwater infiltration, shade, and habitat value.

Aesthetic Goals & Community Standards

Native landscaping does not mean wild or unkempt. We work closely with HOA boards and landscape committees to understand your community's aesthetic vision — whether that is a manicured, formal appearance or a more naturalistic style — and design accordingly using native species that achieve that look. Florida's native palette is remarkably diverse, offering options from elegant grasses and flowering perennials to sculptural shrubs and canopy trees.



Plant Selection

We select from Florida's rich native plant palette — plants indigenous to your specific region of the state wherever possible — to maximize ecological benefit and plant performance. Our designs incorporate layered plantings, from groundcovers and perennials to shrubs and canopy trees, creating visual interest across all seasons while maximizing habitat value.

HOA Compliance & Documentation

We provide complete design documentation including plant lists with botanical and common names, a phased implementation plan, and maintenance specifications — everything needed for HOA board approval or ARC review. We are also well-versed in Florida statute 373.185, which protects the right of homeowners and communities to implement Florida-Friendly and native landscaping.



The Installation Experience

A successful transition to native landscaping begins long before the first plant goes in the ground. Thorough site preparation is the most important investment you can make for long-term, low-maintenance success.

Site Preparation & Seed Bank Management

When transitioning areas previously covered by conventional turf — particularly aggressive species like St. Augustine or Bahia grass — managing the existing seed bank is critical. Florida's warm, humid climate means that dormant seeds and root fragments in the soil can generate persistent weed pressure for months to years if not properly addressed.

Depending on the site and the preferences of the HOA, we employ one or more of the following preparation methods: physical sod removal and disposal, solarization (covering the soil with clear plastic during Florida's hottest months to kill seeds and pathogens through heat), smothering with thick layers of cardboard and mulch, or targeted treatment of the area prior to replanting. We always discuss these options transparently with our clients and help determine the best approach for each area.

Sourcing Plant Material

We source all of our plant material from reputable, family-owned Florida native plant nurseries that specialize exclusively in Florida-native species. This is a commitment we take seriously. Plants grown locally from regionally appropriate seed sources are better adapted to your specific conditions, better for local wildlife, and more likely to thrive than plants grown out of state and shipped in. We maintain long-standing relationships with our growers and are proud to support Florida's native plant nursery community.

Installation & Establishment Support

Our installation teams are trained in ecological landscaping practices. We install each plant at the correct depth and spacing, apply appropriate mulch depths (typically 2–3 inches, pulled back from stems) to conserve moisture and suppress weeds, and set up temporary irrigation where needed to support establishment. We walk HOA representatives and maintenance staff through the newly installed landscape, explaining what to expect during the establishment phase.

The Maintenance Plan

One of the most common misconceptions about native landscaping is that it is "no maintenance." A more accurate description is "low maintenance after establishment." The transition period requires attentive care — and we are here to provide it.

Establishment Phase Maintenance

During the establishment phase — typically the first 6–18 months depending on plant species and season of installation — we recommend bi-weekly site visits. These visits allow us to monitor plant health, address irrigation needs, identify any establishment failures early, and stay ahead of weed pressure from the residual seed bank. Consistent attention during this phase is the most important factor in long-term success and is far more cost-effective than reactive remediation.



Weeding

We want to be transparent with HOA boards: weeding will be a component of the transition, just as it is in any landscape. The difference with native plantings is that, as native groundcovers and perennials fill in and the canopy closes, weed pressure naturally decreases over time. A well-designed native landscape is ultimately more weed-resistant than a conventional one, because it leaves no open soil for opportunistic species to colonize. We work methodically to get ahead of weed pressure rather than react to it.

Seasonal Trimming & Pruning

Unlike conventional ornamentals that often require frequent shearing, most Florida native plants are designed to grow to their natural form with minimal pruning. We schedule seasonal trimming and light pruning visits — typically in early fall and again in early spring — timed to the natural growth cycles of each species. Pruning is purposeful and species-specific: we do not simply "cut everything back" on a schedule, but assess each plant individually and cut only what serves the plant's health and the landscape's aesthetic.

Long-Term Trajectory

As your native landscape matures and establishes, maintenance requirements decrease substantially. Most of our long-term native landscape clients find that after 2–3 years, their overall maintenance costs are significantly lower than those of their previous conventional landscapes — while community satisfaction with the appearance and character of the landscape has increased. This is the promise of native landscaping done right.



Image: Dune restoration in Redington Beach

Ready to Get Started?

We welcome the opportunity to walk your community's grounds, learn your goals, and present a customized transition plan. Contact Living Spaces Gardening to schedule a site consultation.

References: Florida Department of Environmental Protection • University of Florida IFAS Extension • U.S. Environmental Protection Agency • National Wildlife Federation • Dr. Doug Tallamy, Bringing Nature Home • Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission • USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service • California Air Resources Board • Florida Statute 373.185