



YOUR YARD MATTERS

By Janice Boda

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How you landscape and maintain your yard impacts the health of the Indian River Lagoon and the vigor of the web of life. Birds, animals, butterflies, bees, and other pollinators rely increasingly on what you grow in your yard as undeveloped areas diminish.

Even if you live a distance from the Indian River Lagoon, the ditches and drainage canals in our watershed transport excess nutrients, loose soil, and other pollutants to this estuary of national significance. Florida Today estimates that “It could cost local governments from Fort Pierce to Volusia County about \$1.4 billion over 15 years to meet new state limits on the nitrogen and phosphorus that enters the lagoon from soil erosion, fertilizers, septic tanks and other sources.”

Your yard is one of those “sources.” You can make beneficial changes to your yard that both beautify your yard and protect our natural resources.

Consider these strategies:

What you – or the professionals who you hire – do in your yard can be a blessing or a curse for the Indian River Lagoon and our natural resources.

1. Grow your grass

Grass is a great surface for pets and play areas. Let your St. Augustine or bahia grass grow to be about 6 inches tall before mowing it to a height of about 4 inches. Grass is not a carpet. It is a plant that needs plenty of green surface for photosynthesis to be healthy. Proper mowing will allow you to minimize the use of fertilizers and pesticides.

2. Reduce grass areas

Think about how much grass you really need and create other landscape features that bring you pleasure: a pervious patio, a small pond, or delightful landscape beds.

3. Create beautiful beds

Slowly expand or add planted beds that provide food and a refuge for wildlife. Plant trees and shrubs to provide shade and privacy for you and food and nesting opportunities for birds. Add native ornamental grasses to bring texture and grace. And add wildflowers because Florida means “land of flowers.”

4. Replace “problem” plants

Any plant that requires repeated pesticide applications should be re-located and replaced with a better-suited plant. Silver buttonwood, for instance, will be plagued by pests and sooty mold when planted in a shaded, wind-free location. Protect our pollinators by minimizing or, better yet, eliminating the use of pesticides by putting the right plant in the right place.

5. Mulch, mulch, mulch

Use oak or other small leaves to fortify the soil, reduce the need for irrigation, and bring texture to your yard. Avoid cypress mulch since ancient cypress forests are cut down to create it. Pine bark mulch is a by-product of pine plantations and is the longest lasting mulch. Or consider using a mulch made from invasive pest plants.

6. Remove invasive pest plants

Brazilian pepper and melaleuca are the best-known invasive exotic pest plants. They cost taxpayers millions of dollars each year when they overrun and disrupt the ecology of our natural areas. Avoid plants that escape from cultivation.

7. Buffer any water body from run-off

Establish a buffer between turf grass and the Indian River Lagoon, retention ponds, and other water bodies to filter the run-off of excess nutrients, soil, and other pollutants. Tiers of clumping grasses, wildflowers, and shrubs work well.