

Florida Keys Friendly Landscaping Principles

Kim Gabel, UF/IFAS/Monroe County Extension Services

The Florida Keys is a group of subtropical coral limestone islands with plenty of sunshine and warmth year-round. Although some think we have no seasons, weather does vary seasonally from mild, dry winters to hot humid summers filled with unpredictable tropical storms. Keys soil, what little there is of it, has a high pH due to the presence of limestone rock, creating alkaline soils.

Moving to the Keys we tend to bring our plants and planting practices with us but, some of these can be harmful to our near shore environment. Keys gardening is radically different than in any other area of the country. Since January is a month for making resolutions and changing practices, I want to introduce you the Florida Keys Friendly Landscaping Principles, developed by the University of Florida Extension Service and the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program. By following these steps you can save time and money, create and maintain attractive landscapes to enhance our community and protect our Florida Keys environment.

Reduce Pollution in Stormwater Runoff. Water running off from your yard can carry soil, debris, fertilizer and pesticides that can harm near shore water quality. Caring for our waterways starts with caring for your yard. Direct downspouts and gutters to drain onto the lawn, plant beds or container areas where rain will soak into the soil rather than run off the yard.

Consider Wildlife. Provide native flowering and fruiting plants that will attract birds and butterflies into your yard. The Keys are a vital stopover for many migrating and wintering butterflies and birds. Plant vines, shrubs and trees that provide cover, nesting areas, or food for birds, butterflies and other wildlife.

Control Yard Pests Responsibly. Unwise use of pesticides can harm people, pets, beneficial organisms and the environment. Adopt the least toxic pest control and learn the difference between beneficial and harmful insects. Check plants regularly. Walk around your yard every week and observe your plants and lawn for signs of problems.

Right Plant, Right Place. Reduce the need for water, fertilizer, pesticides and pruning by using plants suited to the site conditions (natives, salt tolerant, drought tolerant). Group plants according to their needs.

Protect The Waterfront. Waterfront property, whether on the Bayside or Oceanside, is very fragile. Mangrove plant communities should be treated as a natural treasure. Protect your native shoreline plants. Never prune mangroves or remove other vegetation without first seeking proper guidelines and permits.

Mulch. Maintaining a 2"-3" layer of mulch will help retain soil moisture, prevent erosion, and suppress weeds. It can also replace turf or ground covers in rocky areas where nothing seems to grow.

Water Efficiently. Irrigate only when your lawn and landscape needs water. Use micro-irrigation systems and direct down spouts into landscape, cisterns, or rain barrels. Do not water during sunny daylight times.

Compost. Recycle kitchen and yard waste. Using compost will enrich our fill soils and reduce the solid waste treatment cost.

Fertilize Appropriately. Use slow-release fertilizers. Over- utilization of chemicals can be hazardous to your yard and the environment. Fertilize only as needed to maintain the health of lawn and landscape plants. If plants show signs of stress, such as yellow leaves or stunted growth, identify the problem before applying fertilizer.