

Your Landscape is the First Line of Defense

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It may surprise you to know that your yard is the first line of defense for the fragile environment of the Florida Keys. The health of the nearshore waters and the coral reefs depends in part on how you landscape and maintain your yard. You don't have to live on the water to make a difference.

Storm-water runoff is the reason. Rain falls on yards, roads, and parking lots, then washes into the nearshore waters, carrying pollutants like fertilizers, pesticides, soil, and petroleum products. Scientists have discovered that fertilizers and pesticides from residential areas are serious threats to the health of Florida's waters. When runoff contains nitrogen from fertilizers, algae can become so abundant that sea grasses are smothered, oxygen is depleted, and fish kills may result. Toxic substances, such as common landscape and household pesticides, can damage reproduction in marine life.

The first step is to do a landscape inspection around the perimeter of your property that abuts the roadways, canals, the ocean, or bay. Determine if fertilizers and other lawn chemicals come into direct contact with the water or with any impervious surface bordering the water. Lawn chemicals on side walks, brick borders or streets can easily be washed into storm drains and carried to the nearshore waters. Try to leave a "Ring of Responsibility" around or along shorelines by not fertilizing close to the water. When a deflector shield is used on the fertilizer spreader, apply product no closer than three feet from the water's edge or roadway. If no deflector shield is used, it is recommended to fertilize no closer than ten feet to the water or roadway.

A great addition to your landscape in the "Ring of Responsibility" are native plants that are adapted to the harsh coastal conditions of salt water intrusion, salt spray, winds, minimal irrigation, and fertilization. Two possibilities are Bay Cedar, *Suriana maritima*, and Beach Creeper, *Ernodea littoralis*.

The Bay Cedar is endemic to South Florida, the Caribbean, Central America, and the Bahamas. It was commonly found growing in thickets, on sand dunes and rocky shores, often just back of the high tide line, but is now on the endangered plants list. This 5- to 20-foot-tall plant has a sturdy, branched trunk that has beautiful, dark brown, rough, flaky bark; the wood of this tree is very hard and heavy. Branches arch gracefully and hold the evergreen leaves on short upturned twigs. The tiny, gray-green leaves are fleshy and minutely downy; the new leaves and twigs are particularly downy. Yellow cup-shaped flowers may occur singly or in clusters that are inconspicuously set among the leaves. These small flowers occur consistently throughout the year. The seeds of the Bay Cedar are held in a small, brown, five-pointed calyx.

The Beach Creeper is a 1- to 3-foot-tall, prostrate ground cover that is native to South Florida beaches. This plant has small, light green, succulent leaves borne on bright red stems that help it to survive in dry conditions. Inconspicuous, pinkish white, tubular flowers occur throughout the year and are followed by attractive golden berries. These golden berries, in part, give this plant its common name.