

# "GO NATIVE"

Local plant experts keep their advice close to home

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Top: Recycled-paver walkways lead visitors into the gardens under a pergola that provides shade and support for plants.

Native plants are good for your yard and the local environment. They require less maintenance, such as trimming, watering and fertilizing, which cuts down on expenses as well as runoff into our stormwater system.

Native wildlife such as insects, birds and mammals rely on native plants for food, nesting and protection from predators.

And contrary to what some people think, native plants can also be as pretty as ornamentals.

With so many people moving to Florida in the past year who aren't familiar with native plants, local chapters of the Florida Native Plant Society are busy helping them at meetings, demonstration gardens and plant sales. "We are focused on education and spreading awareness of native plants in Collier County," says Andee Naccarato, president and program chair of Naples Native Plants, a chapter of the

Florida Native Plant Society. "We do that through guest speakers, field trips, plant sales and free native landscaping consultations for members, which have really increased over the last year."



Above: Signs at Cutting Horse Eco Center display native plant names, a brief description, and a QR code to scan for more information on each species.

PHOTOS BY TIM GIBBONS

The chapter has a plant sale from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. this Saturday, July 31, in the large parking lot south of Naples Zoo on Goodlette-Frank Road.

The group will also participate in the Naples Yard and Garden Show coming up in November (see box).

Ms. Naccarato says it's important to buy native plants from a native plant sale or native plant nursery to ensure the best selection and to find the right plant for the right place. She hopes the Naples chapter can eventually find a landowner willing to donate land or an existing nursery willing to share space for the group to have a native plant nursery in Collier County.

In the meantime, the chapter partners with the Coccoloba chapter in Lee County, which operates the Cutting Horse Eco-Center native nursery in Bonita Springs.

That chapter grows and sells more than 250 varieties of native plants on land the city of Bonita Springs let them plant and use beginning several years ago. The 2.5-acre site includes three demonstration gardens, a retail sales center, a learning patio for classes, and a propagation area. The center is open for shoppers from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. every Tuesday and Saturday.

The native plant nursery makes native plants accessible to the community. Some are even endangered plants. PHOTOS BY TIM GIBBONS

"We felt a strong need for a demonstration garden," says Marlene Rodak, vice president of the chapter. "There really wasn't any place where people could see native plants growing, and it's hard to promote them without people being able to see them. When you see all the butterflies and birds,

it relays the message effectively."

The group's members propagate a lot of the plants they sell.

Sale days are also an opportunity for club members from both chapters to speak with homeowners about the advantages of native plants.

"Natives can give more of an authentic

Florida look and feel to your property, as opposed to tropical plants that are more common these days," says Evan Barr, vice president and plant sales chair for Naples Native Plants. "We're not really even tropical, we're subtropical."

NACCARATO

Mr. Barr says one of his favorite native plants is Simpson's stopper, a versatile, resilient, drought-tolerant plant that works well as a hedge. He likes sea grape, too, because it casts nice shade and can also be used as a hedge.

Gumbo limbo propagates easily, he says, is wind resistant and has interesting bark. Sunshine mimosa makes a good ground cover and has pink powder puffs.

He says people shouldn't be afraid to use a lot of green plants, especially those that will attract butterflies, which will add color to a yard. He likes teabush, which flowers often

with pink and light purple flowers.

Ms. Naccarato notes that dune sunflower is easy to care for, grows in masses on the ground rather than upright, has bright yellow petals and is drought tolerant. She likes slash pine trees not only for their ease of care but because migrating warblers search the branches, needles and cones for insects to eat.

BARR

Part of having a native yard means removing invasive species, such as Brazilian pepper, melaleuca, earleaf acacia, and Caesarweed, she says.

"A lot of these can thrive in Southwest Florida because we're subtropical and don't get regular freezes," she says, noting that "other wildlife or other plants that would have kept these plants in check in their natural range do not exist in Florida. They're running wild and using up resources like water and nutrients in the soil."

She says it's best if homeowners identify invasive plants when they're smaller and easier to remove. They should also look for a plant that is flowering and remove it before it makes any seeds. †

*Euphorbia cyathophora* is also called painted leaf, or Florida poinsettia.

Evan Barr pulls laminated native plant information sheets for customers.

As believers in recycling, members of Florida Native Plant Society try to reuse all they can.

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