

Florida Native Plants



(Author's Note: This is the fifth in a series of articles by members of the City of Sanibel Vegetation Committee dealing with vegetative matters of concern to island residents. Members of the Vegetation Committee are Sanibel residents appointed by City Council for one-year terms. To be considered for appointment, contact the City Manager's Office at (239) 472-3700.)

The Florida Native Plant Society defines Florida native plants as "those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation". More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape. In the State of Florida this is generally considered to be the arrival of Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León in 1513. Since this initial Spanish contact, Florida has had many waves of immigration from other parts of the world. Each subsequent immigration group could have introduced non-native vegetation to the State of Florida altering the landscape to create more desirable living conditions. Thus prior to the earliest European contact, only "native" vegetation would have existed.

Native plants provide food and shelter to native animals, and stability to the multitude of habitats found in Florida. Because a single native plant species usually does not dominate an area, there is biodiversity. A native ecosystem is in balance because each plant and animal species is constrained by natural factors, such as competition with other native species, plant diseases, predation by insects and other animals, and climate.

Planning a native landscape or yard can be a fun, educational and creative experience. One can look at the landscape as a "canvas" and determine which plants create the desired color and texture that fit the aesthetic desires of the "artist". Plants and trees considered native to an area have grown undisturbed, and are usually in balance with their landscape. Therefore, the desired needs or favorable conditions for natives in your yard are in balance with available water, soils and light conditions, and little supplemental or supporting manipulation, such as water, fertilizer or herbicides are needed. Native vegetation supports water conservation, sensible use of fertilizer and herbicides and, planting plants appropriate to the homeowner's available landscape. The consideration of available light, water and drainage and soils characteristics is the educational part of the fun.

Planting native plants in Florida also helps to prolong the life of a garden; reducing time spent working and expensive replanting of areas. In addition to benefits for the gardener, native plants provide essential habitats for native wildlife, such as butterflies, birds and bees. Enjoy your native Florida landscape!



Native Vegetation (Photo Credits Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation)