



TO SOD OR NOT TO SOD

(Author's Note: This is the eighth 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.)

Water conservation is one of the most critical issues facing Florida today. Best Management Practices (BMPs) promote the most efficient use of water by addressing the establishment and care of grass and landscape plants in a way that reduces fertilizer and pesticide use and conserves water.

Grass can be useful for erosion control or in a play area for children and may remind you of your Northern lawn. However, to keep grass healthy and green here in South Florida, lawns need endless maintenance, additional nutrients, regular pesticide applications to control weeds and insects, and frequent irrigation.

In a place as lovely as Sanibel, why would we choose to spend so much time and money to maintain sod?

Native groundcovers or mulched landscaping beds, which require little or no additional water, could be used to serve the same purpose! Mulch releases moisture slowly, unlike bare soil or grass and provides free weed control, fertilizer, and acts as a soil amendment.



Coontie (Zamia floridana)

Photo Credit: Ruth Brooks, Vegetation Committee Member



Mimosa (Mimosa strigillosa)

Photo Credit: SCCF

Native plants have adapted to the wet and dry periods of Florida. They have developed defenses to most diseases and insects found here. Well placed native plants will remain healthy with minimum care. Groundcovers that are appropriate for South Florida gardeners include, but are not limited to, Ambrosia (*Ambrosia hispida*), Dune Sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*), Golden Creeper (*Ernodea littoralis*), Coontie (*Zamia floridana*), and Mimosa (*Mimosa strigillosa*). All have low nutritional requirements and medium to fast growth rates. They also have a high tolerance to salt and drought.



Dune Sunflower (Helianthus debilis)

Photo Credit: Ruth Brooks, Vegetation Committee Member



Golden Creeper (Ernodea littoralis)

Photo Credit: Ruth Brooks, Vegetation Committee Member

Native plants, when used properly, planting the right plant in the right place, are also the best choice for attracting and nourishing wildlife. Native plants bloom and fruit when native species need them, providing food and shelter for birds and butterflies as well as beneficial insects.



Ground Cover

Photo Credit: City of Sanibel



Ground Cover

Photo Credit: SCCF

Although grass and sod seem to be the standard of nearly every southwest Florida landscape, it is never too late to make a better choice for water conservation, for water quality, and for wildlife. If you're not ready to give up sod altogether, consider beginning with a small section of your landscape. Visit a local native plant nursery, consult with the City's Natural Resources Department or join the City Vegetation Committee on a 'Native Plant Walk' at City Hall to see plants, including ground covers, grown without fertilizer or additional water.

GO NATIVE!