

Consider native plants

It is interesting to look at the origin of the plants we commonly use in our landscapes.

Sometimes knowing if plants are or are not native can be confusing. There are many different types of hollies; some are native others are not. Most of the azaleas found in our landscapes are not native. However, some deciduous azaleas, such as Pinxter and Flame are native.

Florida has the greatest wealth of native plants for use in the home landscape as compared to other states. Nearly half of the tree species that are native to the United States are found in Florida. Native plants such as dogwood, oakleaf hydrangea and redbud have remained popular through the years.

But, a misplaced native plant may not perform well despite the fact that it is native.

Our native wax myrtle may live a short life when planted on a well-drained, dry sandy site. Certain native shade-loving plants, such as the sword fern, suffer when planted in full sun. Knowing the preferences of the plant and planting the right plant in the right place are critical factors in having success with native plants. Some native plants with low salt tolerance might be a poor choice along the coast.

There are examples of exotic plants that have proven themselves over the years. The Southeast would not be the same aesthetically or economically in the absence of certain foreign plants. Eliminating those plants that are not indigenous results in the elimination of the citrus industry in Florida (a multi-million dollar industry). It does away with most vegetables. Tomato production alone brings in close to \$600 million to Florida's economy per year. There would be no golf courses, football fields, baseball fields or home lawns. Who would give up camellias, evergreen azaleas or crape myrtles?

Sure, there are exotic plants that have become invasive. Plants such as Chinese tallow (popcorn tree), kudzu and even some types of wisteria have become major weeds in parts of the Gulf Coast. There are laws that prohibit the use of certain exotic, invasive plant species.

I do encourage the preservation of native plants. Ecological preservation is an outstanding reason to consider using native plants. With the increasing destruction of natural environments for urban and agricultural use, many plant species have declined in numbers and range.

As the Gulf Coast area continues to grow in population, we need to put careful thought into the way we are developing our landscapes. We need to consider the great wealth of native plants with which we are naturally blessed. But we also need to recognize and appreciate the contributions of many of the non-native plants to our landscapes and gardens.

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