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'Florida-Friendly' Yard Getting Little Love

PARRISH | After chinch bugs ate up her grass, Cynthia Zanella decided she was done with lawns.

Instead, she built a version of a Florida-friendly yard, one that conserves water and needs almost no fertilizers or pesticides.

Dead grass was replaced with shell and stepping stones. Zanella planted hibiscus and palm trees, and shrubs that do not need watering.

But her new yard is not sitting well with her homeowners association, which says it violates the deed restrictions in the River Walk subdivision in Parrish, north of Bradenton. She has been warned she will likely be fined if she does not rip out the \$15,000 yard and re-lay sod.

Zanella and her husband, Jim Copas, want to keep the shell and are pinning their hopes on a 2001 state law that prohibits homeowners associations from banning Florida-friendly, or xeriscaped, yards.

in grip of drought

At a time when severe drought is gripping the American Southeast and water wars are pitting state against state, the Zanellas' battle could be an important test case for the Florida law that aims to replace more of the state's water-thirsty lawns with eco-friendly yards.

With the state's population predicted to double to 36 million by 2060, Florida-friendly yards will have to become the norm to reduce water use, many officials say.

"There's not going to be adequate supplies for people to water their lawns; it's either going to be too expensive or not available," said Lou Kavouras, deputy executive director of outreach planning for the Southwest Florida Water Management District. "I think we're realizing that the days of 2.5-acre lots with wall-to-wall irrigation are over."

More than four million people live in the 16 counties - ranging from Levy down to Charlotte - covered by the water district. Each person uses an average of 115 gallons of water per day.

Almost half of that is used on watering yards, making irrigation restrictions the greatest opportunity to save water and eco-friendly lawns one quick way to do it, said Wendy Graham, director of the Water Institute at the University of Florida.

"If we can change the culture of what homeowners want and developers provide, there is a lot of water savings to be had," Graham said.

This year, water managers stepped up efforts to get developers to change the way they landscape developments.

One of its targets is the St. Augustine lawn, for decades a staple of Florida landscaping.

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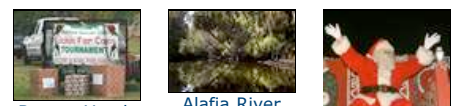
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The lush look it provides, however, cannot be maintained without at least twice-weekly watering in the summer, according to research by the University of Florida. Current restrictions permit one watering per week.

Instead, water managers are encouraging developers to replace the St. Augustine with drought-tolerant grasses like Bermuda, zoysia and bahia.

"If we're looking for a grass that we can really turn our water off, bahia is our choice, but it will not stay green," said Laurie Trenham, associate professor of environmental horticulture at UF.

Builders that use those grasses also score higher green ratings on standards set by the Florida Green Building Coalition, which can be used as a selling point for homebuyers who seek a lifestyle that protects the environment.

"The builders know they have to reduce the use of St. Augustine grass," said Angela Tolo-Maraj, a landscape specialist with SWFWMD. "It's coming to the point, are we going to be able to build new homes? If we don't have the resources to sustain them, (developers) won't be able to get building permits."

The reaction from developers has been positive, Tolo-Maraj said, with many saying that they foresee buyers demanding more eco-friendly landscaping in the same way they now scrutinize energy ratings on washers and driers.

That news is welcome relief for county water conservation staffers like Marcia Brown, who has spent the summer investigating homeowners for ignoring watering restrictions in Manatee County.

"If we keep putting thousands and thousands of gallons of drinking water on lawns that are not native or drought resistant, we are pouring future generations' drinking water on our lawns," Brown said.

Interest in Florida-friendly yards has grown in recent years, according to county extension agents across the state.

More than 1,300 yards in the eight counties where the water district pays for the "Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program" have been certified as Florida-friendly yards.

The approach, originally known as xeriscaping, not only conserves water but improves water quality in rivers and lakes by reducing the need for and eventual runoff of pesticides and fertilizers, advocates say.

misconceptions

But officials have had to work hard to overcome homeowner misconceptions that they have to sacrifice their lawn for a yard of rocks and cactus to be eco-friendly.

Florida-friendly yards can include lawns and they can be compatible with deed-restricted communities, said Tom Dabney, a member of the SWFWMD governing board.

"Most people don't feel that that xeriscape look enhances the value of their property," Dabney said "They moved to Florida, not Arizona - that's why homeowner association documents demand that lush green look."

Since she ripped out her dead lawn in August, Zanella has turned her sprinklers off. Around the yard she has planted palms, magnolias, oleanders and crepe myrtles. She plans to add more.

Her yard has not yet been officially certified as Florida-friendly but Brown, the Manatee water official, inspected the yard and said it meets Florida-friendly criteria.

Many Florida-friendly yards use mulch or gravel instead of grass, and shell is also an approved product, according to the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program run by the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

But with the shell laid right up to the front curb, Zanella's yard no longer matches the uniformly

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lush green, meticulously trimmed lawns of her neighborhood. Homeowner association president Donna Wolski said she has received e-mails and telephone calls from some residents worried that the shell yard could reduce property values or drag down the neighborhood.

"I think that there would be other more attractive alternatives than shell," Wolski said.

But Zanella said she has support from nearby neighbors.

[Christopher O'Donnell writes for the Sarasota Herald-Tribune.]

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