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# Green, green grass and home

## A model home boasts energy efficiency and water savings.

By DAN DeWITT, Times Staff Writer  
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[Maurice Rivenbark | Times]

Drought-tolerant Ultimate Flora zoysia grass surrounds the first house in the county advertised as a "green home." The model by Ron King Homes has earned the federal "Energy Star" label.

SPRING HILL - John Reventas stuck a loafer-shod toe into the turf outside the model house in Deerfield Estates.

The grass was dark green, he pointed out, and the blades fine and soft.

"It's the kind of stuff you want to roll in," said Reventas, sales director for Ron King Homes in Spring Hill.

But the grass is not just inviting. A hybrid called Ultimate Flora zoysia grass, it also requires less water than St. Augustine, the state's dominant lawn grass.

So it is green in more ways than one, as is the house, built by Ron King Homes. Progress Energy has determined it meets the federal guidelines for an "Energy Star" home because efficient appliances and increased insulation cut energy consumption by 30 percent.

The yard, which also features drought-tolerant African irises and pink-bloomed loropetalum, has been certified by the state as Florida Friendly.

For both of those reasons, it is the first house in Hernando County to be advertised as a "green home," according to Alys Brockway, the county's water conservation coordinator.

"We're thrilled to see people interested in different types of plant materials to begin using less water in the landscape," Brockway said.

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Certainly, the timing is right, she said.

Despite recent rains, the rainfall so far this year in Hernando is still well below normal, as are groundwater levels, according to the Southwest Florida Water Management District. The Withlacoochee River has been near historically low levels for most of the past year. Global warming issues have stimulated interest in saving energy.

The house is not an answer to these problems, said Ron King, company president. But it is an example of how much water and energy homeowners can save with a few simple steps and without spending much extra money. The three-bedroom, three-bathroom house sells for \$232,000.

It is lit with compact fluorescent light bulbs, which consume about 75 percent less energy than the traditional incandescent variety. The front-loading washing machine uses only 3 gallons of water per load compared with about 20 gallons for most washers. Because clothes emerge only slightly damp, they spend less time in the dryer - one of the biggest energy hogs in most households.

The block walls have been injected with foam insulation, meaning the 2,500-square-foot house can be cooled with a 3.5-ton air conditioner, 30 percent smaller than normal for a house its size. The light tan color cuts down on the heat absorbed from the sun.

"This whole house is an experiment," King said.

But the boldest risk is planting zoysia grass. This Ultimate Flora variety, developed by the University of Florida, was released two years ago, said Stacie Zinn, president of Environmental Turf Inc. of Avon Park.

The number of Florida farms her company has contracted with to grow Ultimate Flora has increased from one to nine in the past two years, she said. The grass will also be used for all new lots in the mammoth Villages development north of here, partly because it looks and feels more appealing than St. Augustine, said Angela Maraj, a landscape education specialist with Swiftmud who helps builders and developers choose drought-tolerant plants.

"I met with John Reventas," she said. "He was extremely receptive and definitely wanted to use it."

She cannot tell builders that Ultimate Flora saves water, she said, because that has not yet been proved.

But Zinn said her growers have found it can subsist on a half-inch of water per week, compared with more than three-quarters of an inch for St. Augustine. UF researchers have also shown it can survive with no water for 13 days.

It sells for about 30 cents per square foot, slightly more than St. Augustine, but requires less fertilizer, which Swiftmud has identified as the main cause of nitrate contamination in the Weeki Wachee River. Zoysia also grows more slowly than St. Augustine or Bahia grass.

"So you will mow less often, and you won't be running that two-cycle engine so often and polluting the air," she said.

"St. Augustine is still the market leader, but we're working to change that because zoysia is so much more environmentally friendly."

That all appeals to King and Reventas, though they would like to do more, especially because customers seem interested.

In the three weeks since they opened their green model home, on Celebration Drive just south of Powell Road, it has attracted about a half-dozen visitors per day and one buyer.

They imagine solar-powered water heaters like the one King installed in his own home. They are negotiating with a customer who wants a home powered entirely by solar energy.

"This is just the beginning," King said.

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