

HISTORY

The Village of Estero purchased a 10-acre plot of undeveloped land in May 2023 to protect it from development. Together with an adjacent two-acre easement, the site is home to many threatened gopher tortoises, a northern portion of the Estero River, and a variety of native Florida plants. In July 2022, Village officials granted The Coccoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society (CC-FNPS) the authority and financial means to help manage the property. Since then, CC-FNPS has supervised the removal of exotic plant species, initiated electrical service, set up solar-based irrigation systems, established retail and propagation nurseries, planted demonstration gardens, sponsored student volunteers, and welcomed visitors to the Preserve. The strategic plan for the next seven years is described below.

NATIVE PLANTS AND HABITATS

Natural habitats will be enhanced. The removal of dense stands of exotic trees, shrubs, and vines exposed beautiful live oaks, pines and saw palmettos but left relatively few understory plants. Existing native plants will be nurtured and additional wildflowers, grasses, shrubs, and understory trees will be planted throughout the site. With rising insect populations forming a base for the food chain, native plants will provide cover, nesting sites, and additional food for birds and other animals. Resident gopher tortoises will be supplied with a wider range of forage plants. Trails will be created to showcase the various ecosystems in the Preserve and shaded benches will provide the opportunity to rest, view, and “bathe” in a natural Florida setting.

Demonstration gardens near the retail nursery will be enlarged. These gardens, which include a wide variety of species, show visitors what each native plant looks like and how it can be incorporated into their landscape. This is a valuable teaching tool for homeowners, landscapers, landscape architects, homeowner associations, and government employees. Visitors often stand in awe as butterflies swoop and dance around them. A screen house will provide a shady, insect free spot for customers to consult with volunteers on plant selections and landscape goals. Demonstration gardens will also provide seeds and cuttings for the propagation nursery.

The existing retail and propagation nurseries will be enlarged to accommodate an expected rise in sales and to support the planting program within the Preserve. Village of Estero officials have also requested supplies of native plants for parks, roadways, and other public sites. Currently, 70% or more of our retail nursery inventory is purchased from out-of-town wholesalers but future availability is uncertain. It is now more profitable to sell nursery acreage to developers than to stay in business. Enlarging the propagation nursery will allow for more local plant stock and provide space for anticipated levels of plant inventory. Nursery proceeds will be reinvested or directed to other goals as needed. This operation is expected to be self-supporting by 2030.

BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES

There are currently three structures at River Oaks Preserve. Two are large metal shipping containers that are used for storage of equipment, tools, and supplies. A refrigerator provides cold water for volunteers. These containers are not up to code and are stop-gap measures. The third structure houses a composting toilet.

Three new structures are planned. Of highest priority is a three-bay garage that will replace the shipping containers and provide covered open space for meetings and workshops. Additions to the garage will include an air-conditioned small library/meeting room, a bathroom, and additional storage. The structure can be built in stages although it would be more cost effective to do it all at once.

Two other prioritized structures are a pedestrian bridge for crossing the Estero River and the screen house at the retail nursery. A new entrance gate will be constructed if funds permit as well as an open-air pavilion. Additionally, as potable and reclaimed water and sewer services are available to the site, installation of appropriate services would enhance the property even further.

THE BIG PICTURE

The relationship between The Village of Estero and CC-FNPS is not exclusive. Both parties will work to engage other entities such as Audubon, Lee County Division of Natural Resources, Florida Park Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Florida Gulf Coast University, garden clubs, and business owners. River Oaks Preserve will be a volunteer and educational hub where people will work together on common goals, share information, make friends, and have fun.

The Preserve is currently open to the public two days a week, but expansion would at least double that. Visitors will walk trails on their own or take guided tours for a more structured and educational experience. They will take classes offered by volunteers or neighborhood professionals and shop at the native plant nursery. They may even decide to become volunteers themselves! Volunteers and visitors alike will receive the well-known health benefits of time spent in a beautiful natural environment.