



Coccoloba CHAPTER

Florida Native Plant Landscaping Site Visit Report March 20, 2025

Vavrina Residence
Lehigh Acres, FL

Thank you for inviting The Coccoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) to visit your property. We appreciate your enthusiasm for installing more native plants in your landscape. Ellen Herr, Jan Hartman, Ken Fisher, Jaime Theobald, Ben Johnson, Jim Burch and Marlene Rodak participated in the visit and met with you and Anne. Two of your neighbors (James and Linda) also tagged along. The purpose of the visit was to recommend suitable native plants to add to your home for many different reasons. It was a pleasure to view the property and share ideas toward a more natural setting.

As we mentioned, we are happy to help you improve your landscaping. We are proponents of native plants and natural plant communities of Florida. We believe in creating functional ecosystems that support life. Dr. Doug Tallamy, professor of entomology and wildlife ecology at the University of Delaware, says it well:

“Plants are as close to biological miracles as a scientist could dare admit. After all, they allow us, and nearly every other species, to eat sunlight, by creating the nourishment that drives food webs on this planet. As if that weren’t enough, plants also produce oxygen, build topsoil and hold it in place, prevent floods, sequester carbon dioxide, buffer extreme weather and clean our water. Considering all this, you might think we gardeners would value plants for what they do. Instead, we value them for what they look like.

“When we design our home landscapes, too many of us choose beautiful plants from all over the world, without considering their ability to support life within our local ecosystems.”

Furthermore, we should be good stewards of the Earth and protect the native and natural environment so our wildlife will have healthy food sources and shelter.

Most of our waterways in Florida are impaired with excess nutrients. By planting native plants, you can eliminate the need for fertilizer, which can leach and runoff, adding excess nutrients to our water



bodies. Once the fertilizer enters water, it can cause algae to “green up” or bloom. These algae blooms can absorb the oxygen in the water resulting in fish kills and other issues. Some blooms can contribute to toxic blooms such as red tide and other serious issues. Please visit wetplan.org and [Lee County's Water Initiative](#) for more information on improving our water quality.

Summary of Visit:

Your three-acre yard is a spectacular mix of uplands and flatwoods. You have done exceptional work clearing the invasive plants from the property.

Disclaimer: *The FNPS mission is to promote the preservation, conservation and restoration of native plants and native plant communities of Florida. The Coccoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society provides this site visit at low or no charge. The volunteers visiting your location are **not landscape architects**. They are passionate native plant enthusiasts. They donate their time and service to further the mission of the Society and to help you add native plants to your piece of earth.*

Detailed Comments:

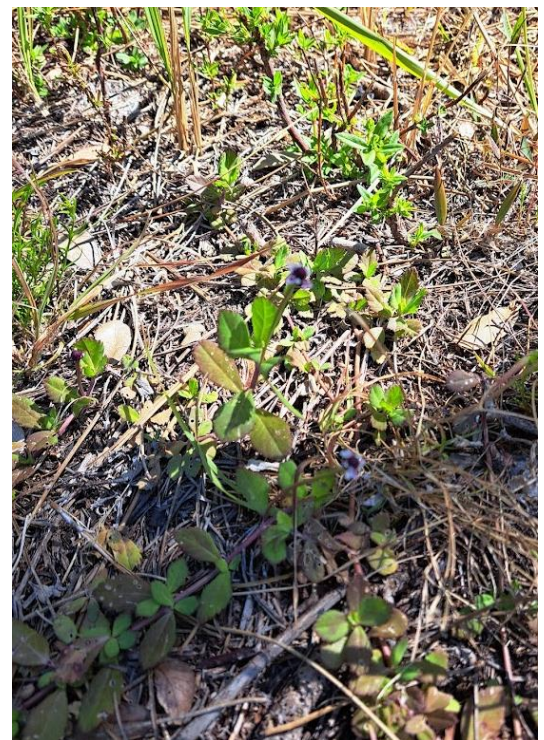
Your goal: You are looking for strong recommendations for three specific areas where the undesirable plants have been removed. You would like to increase wildlife by creating a refuge for creatures despite the increasing development all around you. You would also like to lower your maintenance.

Native Plants:

Generally, the native plants present on your property included [smilax \(*Smilax spp.*\)](#), [cabbage palm \(*Sabal palmetto*\)](#), [Virginia creeper \(*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*\)](#), [Spanish needles \(*Bidens alba*\)](#), [grapes \(*Vitis spp.*\)](#), [south Florida slash pine \(*Pinus elliotii* var. *densa*\)](#), [groundcherry, Walter's \(*Physalis walteri*\)](#), [corkystem \(*Passiflora suberosa*\)](#), [live oak \(*Quercus virginiana*\)](#), [beautyberry \(*Callicarpa Americana*\)](#), [saw palmetto \(*Serenoa repens*\)](#), and [golden polypody fern \(*Phlebodium aureum*\)](#).

We also saw [wild coffee \(shiny leaf\) *Psychotria nervosa*](#), [rouge plant \(*Rivina humilis*\)](#), [peperomia \(*Peperomia obtusifolia*\)](#), [goldenrod \(*Solidago sempervirens*\)](#), [senna \(privet\) \(*Senna ligustrina*\)](#), [Simpson's stopper \(*Myrcianthes fragrans*\)](#), [forked bluecurls \(*Trichostema dichotomum*\)](#), and [frogfruit/matchweed \(*Phyla nodiflora*\)](#).

Finally, we found some [wax myrtle \(*Morella cerifera*\)](#), [blackroot or rabbit tobacco \(*Pterocaulon pycnostachyum*\)](#) and plenty of various air plants. We believe there was [purple lovegrass \(*Eragrostis spectabilis*\)](#) and [silkgrass \(*Pityopsis graminifolia*\)](#),



but it was too small to identify confidently. There were likely more native plants, but those are the ones we noted.

While you certainly have more than your share of smilax and muscadine, they are native and are of great benefit to wildlife. So, keeping a good dose of those, along with Spanish needles is a great idea.

Invasive Exotics and Cautions:

You have done a spectacular job attacking the undesirable plants on the property. However, the seed and roots remain in some cases. Ken discussed the salt method for killing the treated [Brazilian pepper \(*Schinus terebinthifolius*\)](#). We also saw [rosary pea \(*Abrus precatorius*\)](#) and suggested collecting any seeds and throwing them in the trash, not landscape waste. As a note, often, we tie off garbage bags of removed invasive plants when they include seeds and bake them in the Florida sun for several days before tossing them in the trash. This can help prevent the seeds from circulating back into yards.

We saw [Caesar's weed \(*Urena lobate*\)](#), [carrotwood \(*Cupaniopsis anacardioides*\)](#), [Chamber bitter \(*Phyllanthus urinaria*\)](#), [earleaf acacia \(*Acacia auriculiformis*\)](#), [balsam apple \(*Momordica balsamina*\)](#), [green shrimp plant \(*Ruellia blechum*\)](#), [Mexican clover \(*Richardia grandiflora*\)](#), [nettle leaf porterweed \(*Stachytarpheta cayennensis*\)](#), [commelina or dayflower \(*Commelina benghalensis*\)](#), [pothos \(*Epipremnum pinnatum cv Aureum*\)](#), and [creeping indigo \(*Indigofera hendecaphylla*\)](#).

By recognizing these when they are small, you can easily pull them before they become costly to remove. We mentioned using an uprooting tool to easily handle ones too big for a manual yank, but too small for a chainsaw. We suggest this brand or a similar type: <https://www.theuprooter.com/>.

Finally, we saw [commelina or dayflower \(*Commelina benghalensis*\)](#), and [Asiatic hawksbeard \(*Youngia japonica*\)](#)

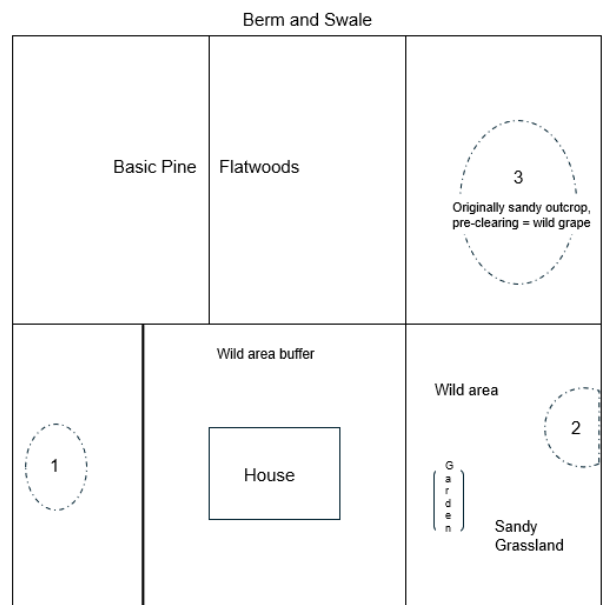
Area 1:

In this area, you mentioned wanting a buffer to screen the neighbor's house and fence now that the invasives are gone. The discussion included adding stoppers such as [Simpson's stopper](#)

Vavrina/Wells Property – 3 acres of pine flat woods, Lehigh Acres, FL

Areas of Concern:

1. Cleared area that previously screened neighboring house
2. Cleared area adjacent to neighboring house
3. Area "invaded" by *V. sylvestris* over the past 22 years



[\(Myrcianthes fragrans\)](#), [white stopper \(Eugenia axillaris\)](#), [Spanish stopper \(Eugenia foetida\)](#), and [varnish leaf \(Dodonaea viscosa\)](#). We also suggested staggering the planting of the shrubs to allow room for them to grow while creating a screen as quickly as possible.

Consider, too, [Florida privet \(Forestiera segregata\)](#), [firebush \(Hamelia patens var. patens\)](#), [paradise tree \(Simarouba glauca\)](#), [dune sunflower \(Helianthis debilis\)](#).

The options are wide open in this space because it is somewhat sunny but benefits from the shade of the large trees around it.

Area 2:

For the shadier locations, [marlberry \(Ardisia escallonioides\)](#) and [wild coffee \(shiny leaf\) Psychotria nervosa](#) are great considerations.

In the sunny areas near the garden and on the perimeter of the property, you could use [tea bush \(Melochia tomentosa\)](#), and [sweet acacia \(Vachellia farnesiana\)](#),

Grasses such as [muhly grass \(Muhlenbergia capillaris\)](#), [Fakahatchee grass \(Tripsacum dactyloides\)](#), and [dwarf Fakahatchee grass \(Tripsacum floridanum\)](#) are great options for a variety of texture and heights.

Perhaps you can use a [paradise tree \(Simarouba glauca\)](#) or [fiddlewood \(Citharexylum spinosum\)](#) in this space. [Jamaica caper \(Quadrella jamaicensis\)](#) is a great choice, but it tends to be slower growing. It is worth the wait though.

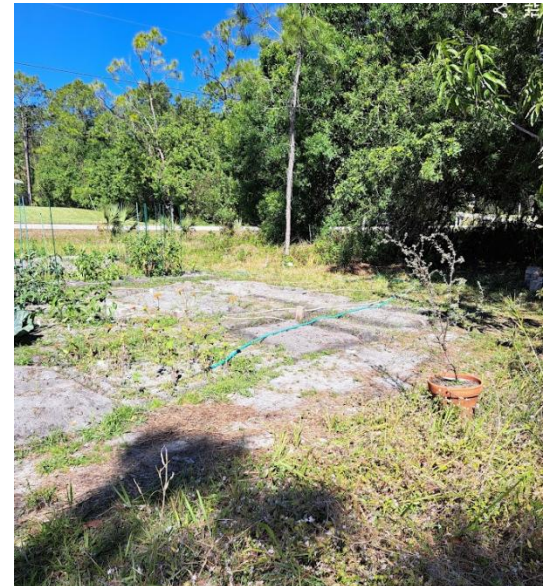
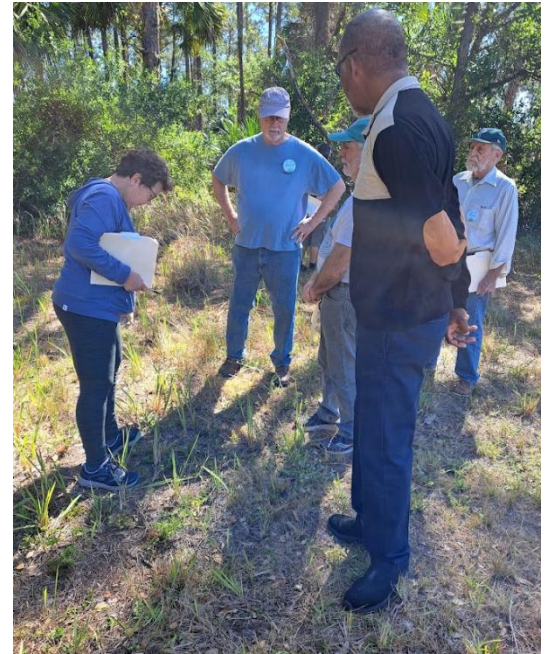
Area 3:

We loved the area with snags or dead trees. These are so productive for birds and nesting activities.

Again, in the large sunny areas, we would love to see a [paradise tree \(Simarouba glauca\)](#). Otherwise, mimicking what was and is and still there is a great idea. That would include the grasses listed above along with [wax myrtle \(Morella cerifera\)](#), [beautyberry \(Callicarpa Americana\)](#) and the other plants that we saw and noted.

Open spaces are important for wildlife, too. That includes sandy areas.

We love using [dune sunflower \(Helianthis debilis\)](#) to add pops of color and to shade out weeds as the shrubs and trees are growing in. They are inexpensive and they spread and reseed very well.



You have a great start toward a spectacular space for wildlife. As you add more species, you will continue to increase the diversity and number of creatures using your yard for food and shelter.

Some guidelines to remember:

1. Make sure you leave enough space between your new native plants for mature height and width. Add native wildflowers to take up the space between them as they grow in. The wildflowers will reseed reappearing where they are happy.
2. Be very careful about planting too close to structures. Do not plant under the eaves or overhangs or too close to the fence. Plants should be outside the dripline and far enough away to perform maintenance.
3. Use a wide variety of native plants to invite nature to the area. While this generally contradicts landscape architects' recommendations to mass plants, mimicking nature provides the much-needed assortment of food for wildlife. Dr. Doug Tallamy states this best in [articles like this](#) and in his book, Bringing Nature Home. Adding a diverse assortment of native plants will increase the "carrying capacity" of your parcel of Earth. Plants efficiently convert the sun's energy into plant material. Different plants have different chemical makeups and tastes. Our native creatures have evolved to eat different native plants. Therefore, plant communities rich in diverse native species are important for a wide variety of birds, insects and mammals. Dr. Craig Huegel and others recommend a balance by planting groupings of three of each species.
4. Since some people value neat and orderly landscapes, The Coccoloba Chapter recommends adding "[cues to care](#)" indicating the area is maintained. This includes small fences or hedges around diverse planting areas. Research "cues to care" or "Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames" by Joan Nassauer for more information.
5. Use our summer rains to help get your new plantings established. As your native plants get established in the ground, turn off the sprinkler system to or stop manually watering those areas and use it only as needed.
6. Lee County's fertilizer ordinance forbids your use of fertilizer between June 1 and September 30, except for organic fertilizer such as compost. You are NEVER allowed to fertilize within 10 feet of any water body.
7. Share this information with your neighborhood. As more people plant yards for nature, we will create an even healthier environment and bigger corridors for songbirds and migrating birds and other wildlife.
8. Finally, nurture your soil. A single teaspoon of productive soil generally contains between 100 million and 1 billion bacteria. Inorganic fertilizer can deactivate or kill these and other important microbes that are helping your plants take up nutrients. Use mulch and compost.

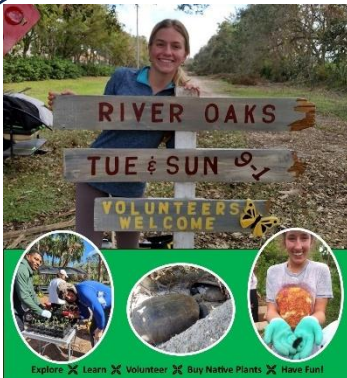


For additional pictures and information on any of these plants, the websites and books below are great references.

Websites & books for reference:

1. Florida Native Plant Society: www.FNPS.org
2. Coccoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society: www.FNPSCoccoloba.org
3. [Lee County Water Initiative](#)
4. Florida Invasive Species Council (FISC): the best resource for identifying and understanding invasive exotic plants <https://floridainvasivespecies.org/index.cfm>
5. Institute for Regional Conservation: great information and pictures about natives www.regionalconservation.org
6. Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants: great pictures and information about natural range of native plants <https://florida.plantatlas.usf.edu/>
7. [WetPlan](#)
8. Osorio, Rufino. *A Gardener's Guide to Florida's Native Plants*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001.
9. Haehle, Robert G. and Brookwell, Joan. *Native Florida Plants: Low-Maintenance Landscaping and Gardening*. Lanham: Taylor Trade, 2004.
10. Nelson, Gil. *Florida's Best Native Landscape Plants: 200 Readily Available Species for Homeowners and Professionals*. University Press of Florida, 2003.
11. Taylor, Walter Kingsley. *The Guide to Florida Wildflowers*. Taylor Publishing Company, 1992.

Thank you again for allowing us to visit.



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from 9-1



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Respectfully submitted on behalf of The Coccoloba Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society.