

## Sometimes New Homeowners Are Overly Ambitious in Landscaping



*Photo to be credited to David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Leaving natural areas in the home landscape can safeguard valuable trees and shade and make the landscape easier to maintain.*

*Daniel E. Mullins, the author, is Extension Horticulture Agent in the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Santa Rosa County . For more local gardening information, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>*

A fellow gardener once made an interesting comment that has affected my attitude about gardening ever since. We were viewing a large residential landscape, a portion of which included about one half acre of large, well established native trees. The tree canopies had met, and underneath was a smooth deep layer of fallen leaves that had collected for many years.

A combination of the natural mulch and low light condition had prevented weed growth, and a few native shade tolerant shrubs were growing as under-story plants. I thought, “Perfect! This section of the landscape will require no irrigation, no mowing, and no pest control. The homeowner can let this part of the yard take care of itself and concentrate efforts in other areas.”

My partner that day had a different opinion, though, and I quote: “Someone should rake up all of those leaves and plant grass.” I was surprised by such a comment, but it provided some insight.

Major problems would have developed if the homeowner had, indeed, stripped the soil bare and planted grass underneath those large trees. First, much damage would have been done to the tree roots by the clearing process, because the feeder roots of large trees grow in abundance just beneath the mulch surface. Next, the homeowner would have soon discovered that grass would not grow there well anyway, because there was not enough sunlight. And, finally, with the protective natural leaf mulch layer gone, the loss of soil through sheet erosion would have occurred with each heavy rain. The yard would have soon looked like too many yards that we see with trees, a balding lawn beneath, and bare soil. And, no doubt the homeowner would have spent much time and money trying, unsuccessfully, to establish a lawn.

This was over ten years ago, and as it turned out, the owner of that property took the more laid-back and sensible approach and did nothing to that portion of his lot. Today that part of the yard is still doing just fine. In fact, a native groundcover has crept in, even providing some green color at ground level. The shade trees are particularly inviting in the summer, and that portion of the yard requires much less maintenance than the part

## Sometimes New Homeowners Are Overly Ambitious in Landscaping

with the lawn and shrubs that the homeowner planted.

Nothing increases the enjoyment of a home more than a well designed and established landscape. On the other hand, as homeowners and gardeners, we sometimes have a tendency toward overkill – planting areas that don't need planting. Remember that gardening in the right amount is healthy and enjoyable. However, it can be turned to drudgery if more areas are planted than can be maintained.

I realize that some residential areas include covenants and ordinances that require a certain amount of traditional landscape installation and maintenance. Even within these limitations, though, each yard usually includes areas that can be left in a natural state. This reduces the amount of maintenance required and provides much needed wildlife habitat.

If you're building a new home, try protecting and leaving some of these natural areas. If you don't like them, you can always remove them later. But removing natural areas too hastily and causing damage to trees can be irreversible.

###

**Question of the Week:** I would like to grow some flowering plants in large pots. The plants must be low growing and able to tolerate full sunlight. Any suggestions?

**Answer:** Yes, there is a long list of low growing, colorful plants, most of which prefer full sunlight all day. Following are some to consider: gaillardia, dwarf types of pentas, zinnia, blue daze, plumbago, golden shrimp plant, bush daisy and butterfly weed.