Evaluate Trees Carefully Before Clearing a New Homesite

*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Trees can frame the home. Take time to appreciate their value before clearing the new homesite.*

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Trees and the diversity of life they shelter are essential. Leafy canopies cool and refresh the air. Below, roots prevent soil erosion and allow rain to penetrate, recharging the life-giving aquifer. Trees express the distinctive climate, culture and history of each place.

Despite this, Florida loses an estimated 40,000 acres of forest each year to development. An informed, proactive approach to selectively clearing and managing land supports the preservation of our natural heritage in the face of such change.

Consider first that not all trees are equal in terms of longevity, structural strength, wildlife value and other matters of suitability. In a natural forest, unlike a typical clear-cut, there are gaps in the canopy caused by mature trees which have fallen. This natural thinning, supporting both ground level diversity, and the spatial needs of longer lived trees, can be adapted to the stewardship of local sites.

Careful examination of undeveloped land typically reveals invasive exotic transplants such as the Chinese tallow tree (*Sapium sebiferum*) or camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*). Though planted enthusiastically by birds and people alike, these plants, among others, are considered a menace to habitat diversity across the South. University of Florida IFAS has a working group of faculty that assesses the status of non-native plants in Florida’s natural areas, [http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/assessment/](http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/assessment/). Let their conclusions be your guide to the first thinning of the ranks.
Size can be deceptive. Very often the largest trees on a given piece of land live fast, only to die young. This is especially true of laurel oaks in the sandy soils of Wakulla County. Other oaks of similar habitat such as live oaks, turkey and red oaks, though smaller at the outset, will eventually grow, trouble free, to majestic proportions. Shrubby Vaccinium species such as sparkleberry can serve as graceful character plants, perfectly scaled to residential sites.

Land clearing methods have an enormous effect on the viability of trees. The roots of most plants extend well beyond their drip line and even large trees have a majority of roots located in the upper eighteen inches of soil. For best results the entire under-canopy area should be protected from bulldozing, changes in grade, and mechanical practices that cause soil compaction.

A landowner’s tree options will be limited by the need for access, trenching for underground utilities and often, drain field considerations. These may dictate all clearing decisions on a small plot. On larger sites, it may be possible to coordinate these placements with root zones in mind. Whenever a tree’s roots are severed, its ability to stand up to storms is diminished, sometimes catastrophically.

Trees may be further distinguished by their structure and health. Co-dominant (twin) trunks, bark inclusions, and narrow V-shaped branch angles are often signs of structural weakness. Bad pruning cuts can compromise a tree’s ability to heal. It may save money in the long run to hire the services of a consulting arborist rather than risk tree hazards once construction is complete.

To overcome construction obstacles and fully realize the enhanced residential and commercial value of trees in the landscape, it is essential to start early in the design process. Ideally, structures can be designed and placed with sensitivity to the natural features of the land.

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