Visit Tallahassee’s Garden Treasure This Saturday

Photos by David W. Marshall, Leon County UF-IFAS Extension:
Cordyline australis is one of many plants you can see Saturday when you visit the Leon County Extension Garden Open House.
There are many plants, such as this buddleia, that attract butterflies, hummingbirds, and other wildlife.

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If you would like to learn more about landscaping and plants for our area, don’t miss Saturday morning’s garden tours at the Leon County Agricultural Center, 615 Paul Russell Road, across from Jack McLean Park. The guided tours are part of an open house event which starts at 9:00 a.m. and concludes at noon. The last tour starts at 11:15.

The primary purpose of the event is to teach gardeners about Florida-Friendly landscaping and help reduce the adverse effects of excess fertilizers and pesticides running off our yards and into lakes and streams. The plant tours will help you learn to select plants appropriate for our area. But you will also learn other principles such as how to water appropriately, with low-volume irrigation, and how to attract wildlife to your landscape.

Some years ago I had the privilege to serve as one of the coordinators for the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program in Leon and Wakulla Counties. Through this statewide University of Florida IFAS Extension program, volunteer Master Gardeners are trained to educate area homeowners about landscaping practices that conserve natural resources and protect the quality of our precious water bodies.

As part of this effort, a plan was developed to transform the landscape around the Leon County Agricultural Center into a model garden to demonstrate environmentally-friendly planting, mulching, irrigation, fertilizing, and mowing techniques. Prior to the initiation of this project in 1999, the landscape surrounding the office was very typical of many residential properties where the home is squeezed with a narrow band of foundation shrubs and surrounded by a large expanse of lawn with a few scattered trees.
The first order of business was to reduce the huge amount of high maintenance lawn by converting large areas into planting beds for a variety of trees, shrubs, and groundcovers that are well adapted to the north Florida environment. Teams of Master Gardeners stripped sod, turned the soil, and spread piles of wood chips provided by the City of Tallahassee Utilities Department.

Planting started with the sunnier areas at the front entrance and rear of the building where tough perennials and ornamental grasses were installed. Shade tolerant plantings went in under trees where the sod was growing poorly. In one of these shady zones a woodland garden was started with plantings of Virginia willow, needle palm, American beautyberry, oakleaf hydrangea and red buckeye. In another area, under a massive red cedar tree, ferns, gingers, cast iron plant and coontie now cover the ground. Micro-irrigation was installed in garden beds to demonstrate water-wise irrigation practices.

Mowing was terminated in the large field to the west of the office and the area was planted with seedling longleaf pine trees. Many pines now stand more than twenty feet tall within patches of native grasses and shrubs. Bluebird boxes along with purple martin and bat houses have been installed to enhance the habitat value of this beautiful natural area.

It’s been eight years since the transformation began and the results are quite impressive. The abundant plantings provide an ever-changing display of colors, forms and textures throughout the year. Butterflies and hummingbirds are frequent visitors and enliven the garden as they move from flower to flower in search of nectar. Extensive labeling provides human visitors an opportunity to learn the names of plants that they might like to grow in their own gardens.

Under the care of Master Gardener volunteers, the demonstration garden at the Leon County Agricultural Center (Extension Office) has become an important learning laboratory for the community. The public can visit anytime or attend one of the regularly scheduled Open House events such as the one coming up this Saturday. At Saturday’s event, Master Gardeners and Extension agents will share their knowledge of environmentally-friendly landscaping through guided tours, exhibits, and consultations. If you’re interested in learning more about sustainable gardening here in the Big Bend region of Florida, be sure to visit this horticultural treasure located at 615 Paul Russell Road across the street from Jack McLean Park. Saturday’s events start at 9:00 and end at noon.

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