

## Landscape Design with Trees in Mind



*Photo by David Copps: The demonstration garden at the UF-IFAS Leon County Extension is a good example of how to incorporate trees into the landscape. There will be an open house at the garden on Saturday, October 15, from 9 a.m. until noon.*

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Most would agree that trees play a vital role in a healthy environment. They not only beautify the landscape but also provide important ecological services including oxygen production, air filtering, shading, soil protection and wildlife. Considering all of the benefits that trees provide, it is unfortunate that they're often treated as second class citizens in a society that is preoccupied with turf grass lawns. Not that there's anything wrong with turf -- it's an essential component of the urban landscape. The problem is its extensive use at the expense of the urban forest.

Continual mowing over tree root zones compacts the soil, making it hard for shallow feeder roots of trees to absorb oxygen and water. Bark damage caused by weed whackers and mowers provides opportunities for the invasion of insects and disease. When leaves are raked from the root zone, trees are denied an important source of nutrients that become available as leaves decay. Adding insult to injury, mowers destroy seedlings and saplings denying trees the ability to replace themselves. Trees would fare much better if we treated them as the forest dwellers that they are. When grown in groups and patches, rather than as isolated specimens in a sea of grass, trees can flourish. Described below are some ideas for designing the landscape to provide for healthier trees while reducing the size of high maintenance lawns.

Reduce the size of a large, open lawn by creating a forest island. Shape the bed in a way that divides the lawn into two or more comfortable garden rooms. Mulch well to smother the grass. Then plant a mix of canopy and understory trees that thrive in full sun such as longleaf pine, live oak, southern magnolia, fringe tree, yellow hawthorn, and flatwoods plum.

Where pines and hardwoods are already scattered throughout your lawn, connect them with large beds of mulch. The width of beds should extend out two to three times the width of the tree canopies for optimal root protection. Plant trees that like part sun and shade such as hickory, white oak, post oak, red bud, and sparkleberry.

Do your part to shade Tallahassee's streets by creating a canopy road planting zone adjacent to the public right-of-way. Locate all utilities and select trees accordingly.

If there is one large shade tree that dominates your yard, stop mowing under it and let leaves remain on the ground to build a layer of mulch. As birds perch on the branches above, they will deposit the seeds of their preferred fruits. In a short time, seedlings such as black cherry, southern magnolia, dogwood, blackgum and rusty blackhaw may sprout and grow. In a low spot, where water stands after a heavy rainfall, plant a small floodplain forest to help soak up the water. Choose species that can tolerate wet feet such as red maple, bald cypress, river birch and mayhaw.

Maintenance of forest habitats includes watering newly planted trees, maintaining a three- to four-inch layer of mulch, and removing invasive plants that can quickly overwhelm young saplings. Look for ways to grow trees in forest-like beds with shared rooting space. The result is happier trees, smaller lawns and a healthier urban forest.

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