

Website takes guess work out of native plant species



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South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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Planting native Florida plants help environment

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It's no secret that some plants thrive in South Florida's humid climate while others do not. To help residents plan their residential landscaping around native plants, The Institute for Regional

ur Neighborhood, a free online tool at
or search by county to get a list of the cultivated
ative plantings for the state's east and west coasts

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and the Keys.

Created by the nonprofit dedicated to the protection, restoration and long-term management of biodiversity on a regional basis, and to the prevention of regional extinctions of rare plants, animals and ecosystems, the website is an important step toward conservation and restoration of South Florida's environment, according to the IRC.

"What people choose to plant in their own backyard really does make a difference," said the institute's education and outreach coordinator and administrative assistant Cara Abbott. "We have lost so much of our original green space in South Florida. This website will help people do a little research ahead of time to learn which trees would naturally be where they live and not blindly show up to a garden center."

According to IRC's chief conservation strategist George Gann, native species are adapted to the precise climate, soils and other growing conditions unique to a given area.

"The benefits to the homeowner include saving money by using fewer pesticides and fertilizers and conserving water," he said in a statement. "Native plants generally require less maintenance, increase wildlife viewing and are more resilient to hurricanes, drought and other environmental disturbances."

Gann said with rising sea levels and climate change, planting native landscaping contributes to migration success of wildlife while reducing demands on natural resources.

"Making smart choices in your yard helps our local pollinator population, our migrating bird population," Abbott said. "Having the right plants in your yard really does make a difference. Birds will stop by in the same yard year after year. You providing the same plant makes a difference to Florida's wildlife in general."

Delray Beach resident William Coleman plans to reference the free list of native planting advice that is now a click away.

"I think it's great a website like this exists and it's something all of us can benefit from checking out," he said. "I have wasted enough money planting flowers and trees around my home that not only can't survive in this climate, but are harming the native species of plants already here."

With Florida's richly diverse native species population, there are multiple categories as to how harmful non-native plantings are to the environment. Category two plants are often on track for being harmful while category one plants immediately need to go, Abbott said, who has done restoration work removing harmful plantings at Atlantic Dunes Park.

She said Brazilian pepper trees, Australian pines and Lantana camara, which is a flowering shrub often found

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da and never get through it, so this website is a

fun and easy way to pick out the best plants for your property," Abbott said. "The plants are at the base of Florida's food web and it's amazing how different plants will be if you live closer to the ocean."

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