



## A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats Analysis of the Marion County Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Program

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AMarion County is located in the heart of the state between Alachua and Sumter counties. Although the soil, climate and topography provide excellent forage for the thoroughbred industry, it poses unique challenges for landscapes. Landscaping in Marion County proves to be exceedingly difficult for many retirees from other states who are unfamiliar with the local growing conditions and sensitive water resources. Marion County is Florida's 17th most populous county and growing. There were an estimated 345,000 people living in the county in 2016 with a projected increase to 392,000 in 2025. With the increase in population, there is an increased demand for landscaping education that promotes good cultural landscaping practices, particularly to conserve water and protect water quality.

The UF/IFAS Extension Marion County Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ (FFL) program educates private homeowners and public landowners on the nine FFL cultural landscaping principles. These nine principles educate the public on selecting the right plants for the right place, watering efficiently, fertilizing appropriately, attracting wildlife, and reducing pesticide usage to protect and conserve water resources. The FFL principles are taught in four 2-hour sessions to homeowners and homeowner associations (HOAs) across the county, usually on four consecutive Tuesdays in the spring and fall months. Participants are given a pre-test, post-test and class evaluation, and are asked to have their soil pH tested. Upon completion of the course, participants receive a yard evaluation by the FFL agent and volunteers (Fig. 1). Six months after attending the Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Challenge, participants are sent a behavior change survey by the state FFL office. The objectives of this program are that 85% of participants will increase their knowledge of the FFL principles, 70% will report a change in one or more cultural landscape practices six months after participating in the program, and 50% of participants will report a reduction in water use for irrigation after one year.

In 2017, 65 people participated in the Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Challenges in Marion County. Post-test scores improved by 13% and 100% of participants indicated on their evaluations that they increased their knowledge of the FFL principles. Of those that responded to the FFL Behavior Change Survey, 90% of participants said that they have or plan to make changes to



Fig. 1. FFL Master Gardener volunteers conducting a yard evaluation for a homeowner.

their landscaping practices as a result of the FFL program and yard evaluation, and 57% reported a reduction in their water use for irrigation. Based on these responses, the estimated water savings from FFL activities in Marion County was 210,993 gallons annually. The FFL program participants will save an estimated \$698 in water cost savings per year from the landscaping practices they adopted.

The Marion County FFL program is unique from other county FFL programs in its format and implementation. To increase the impact of the Marion County FFL program, larger audiences will need to be reached, particularly those in newly established or expanding developments. In this poster, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the Marion County FFL program are discussed and recommendations for how it might be adopted in other counties will be made.

### Strengths:

- Dedicated group of about 26 volunteers.
- Partnerships with City of Ocala, Marion County, Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD), and St. Johns Water Management District (SJWMD) (Fig. 2, Fig. 3).
- Collaboration with other Marion County Extension Agents.
- Support from and proximity to FFL state office on campus.
- Excellent feedback from program participants.
- Funding provided by mulch sales.

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Fig. 2. Plants about to be planted in the new City of Ocala Water treatment Plant FFL Demonstration Garden.



Fig. 3 Florida-Friendly plants at a FFL demo garden in Ocala, FL.

**Weaknesses:**

- Parity among Hispanic, black and white populations was not reached in 2017.
- Struggle to reach younger audiences.
- FFL has been poorly received by the highest water consuming developments.
- Difficult to reach all areas of the county.
- Few volunteers are confident with irrigation systems.
- Presentations are geared toward homeowners with irrigation systems.

**Opportunities**

- Build partnerships with Marion County Builders Association and Realtors Association.

- Work more with commercial developments and landscape contractors.
- Develop FFL videos to post online.
- Provide FFL welcome packet to new HOA residents.

**Threats:**

- Marion County BOCC has its own water conservation and fertilizer campaign.
- Misunderstanding of what makes a yard FFL.
- HOA's rules against the use of some FFL practices and recommendations.