

## **“FLORIDA STYLE GARDENING”—AN EDUCATIONAL SERIES FOR NEW RESIDENTS**

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**Abstract.** A large percentage (81%) of the residents in Pinellas County have moved into Florida from other states. They bring with them preconceived ideas about gardening that may not be applicable to the growing conditions in their new location. This can lead to frustration about gardening in Florida. “Florida Style Gardening” is an 18-hour educational program targeting these new residents with information about the soils, growing conditions, growing seasons, and environmental landscape considerations specific to the Tampa Bay area. This series has been offered twice, 2004 and 2005. A survey of participants reveals changes in attitudes about gardening and changes in behavior regarding water usage, fertilization, pesticide usage and the use of mulch.

Numerous phone calls to the Pinellas County Extension horticulture help line with questions regarding failures in vegetable gardening, why lilacs do not bloom, and the Japanese maples that are dying are an almost daily occurrence. These calls, coupled with an equal number of citizens who present evidence of these problems and similar others to the horticulture help desk, led to the conclusion that there was a need by a segment of Pinellas County residents for concentrated information about growing conditions in the area. It seems that the further north the new county residents comes from the more frustrated they get. They want to plant vegetable gardens in May, put lime on the lawn in the spring, and cannot understand why the flowers they had such success with in their home state will not even grow in Florida. “Florida Style Gardening” was created to fill this need for information and alternatives for this group of gardeners.

### **Materials and Methods**

A series of six three-hour classes were developed with the following subjects:

- Growing conditions - weather, hardiness zones, soils, fertility, and mulching; governmental issues - such as mangrove pruning, permits to tree removal, and current water restrictions
- Florida-friendly landscaping, and selecting, planting and establishing plants
- How to have a happy, healthy, Florida-friendly lawn, irrigation, and pruning
- Integrated pest management (IPM), insects, disease, and weeds in the landscape
- Native plants for the landscape and invasive exotic plants
- Vegetable and herb gardening along with composting

In 2004 the series was held on Tuesday evenings at the Pinellas County Extension office and cost \$60 per participant to cover the costs of advertising, materials and refreshments. Participants received a notebook containing numerous additional resources for each class that included University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) fact sheets, insect ID sheets and other reference materials including the *Florida Lawn Handbook*. In 2005 the series was held at the Dunedin Library on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. The library offered this series as part of their public outreach program and they did not allow a charge for the classes. The library provided the advertising and refreshments, but the participants did not receive the extensive notebooks. Instead, the pertinent UF/IFAS fact sheets were provided along with a UF/IFAS Bookstore catalogue so that they could order additional references, if they desired.

A maximum of 50 students per class was set for each series. The classes were three hours long with a short break about midway through the class period. The classes were taught primarily by Pam Brown with assistance from several horticulturists on the Pinellas County Extension staff.

### **Results and Discussion**

The 2004 class series was sold out with 50 participants paying the \$60 fee for the complete series. In 2005, since a charge was not allowed for the series, an average of 39 people participated in each individual class, but not the same individuals attended each class. There was a core of 27 who attended all of the classes in the series, with the others picking which classes they wanted to attend.

A total of 78 participants completed and returned the end of series evaluation. Ninety nine percent stated that the series met their expectations. Forty five percent indicated that they had none to slight knowledge and 48% had moderate knowledge prior to the classes. The survey showed that 100% of the participants had either moderate or much knowledge by the end of the series. The series met the expectations of 98.7% and 100% indicated that they would put the information to use.

A follow-up survey was sent out to the 50 participants of the 2004 series in October of 2004 to assess practice changes. Twenty-three surveys were returned. All 23 indicated that they feel more confident gardening in Pinellas County. Fifty four percent have started scouting the landscape and identifying insects before spraying pesticides and 63% have changed to using the least toxic approach first. One individual discontinued their contract with a pesticide contractor and started doing the job himself because he did not like the way the contractor used pesticides. Fifty seven percent of the participants are now following UF/IFAS guidelines for fertilizer ap-

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plication, and three individuals asked their landscape maintenance contractor to use slow release fertilizer. Twenty three percent have calibrated their irrigation system to deliver  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch of water per irrigation cycle. Fifty one percent indicated that they operate their irrigation system manually during the summer rainy season. Thirty percent have started composting yard and kitchen wastes. Ninety two percent have changed the mowing height of their lawn mowers to the proper height for their turf grass, or have requested that their

landscape maintenance contractor change the mowing height. All are leaving the grass clippings on the lawn after mowing.

The surveys indicate that this educational series meets the expectations of participants, reduces frustration with gardening in Florida, and that a significant number of the series participants have changed landscape practices so that water resources are conserved, pesticides usage and storm water pollution are reduced, and less yard waste is sent to landfills.