

Bringing the Environment Home

The Florida House Learning Center demonstrates that it's easy being green



Sarasota's Florida House illustrates numerous ways homeowners can conserve resources, control costs, and create harmony with the environment.

by **Beth Luberecki**

At first glance, the Florida House Learning Center looks like an average Sunshine State residence. Done in the Florida “Cracker” style, it’s a modest-sized dwelling with screened porches and a trim gray and white exterior. Palms, flowering shrubs, and edible plants fill the attractively landscaped yard. Inside, the decor exudes a subtle tropical vibe, with soothing earth tones on the walls and botanical-print fabrics.

But take a closer look, and it’s clear that this is not your average house. From the recycled wood frame to the high-tech air-conditioning system, every aspect of the Florida House has been designed with the environment in mind.

“We’re not here to just entertain people,” says Betty Alpaugh, program coordinator for the Florida House Learning Center. “We’re here to educate them and foster sustainable behavior.”

Conceived of during the early 1990s in response to a severe drought and possible building moratorium, the Florida House aims to teach visitors about water conservation, energy efficiency, recycled building materials, renewable resources, and healthy living. A joint venture of the Cooperative Extension Service for Sarasota County, the Sarasota County Technical Institute, the Southwest Florida Water Management District, and the nonprofit Florida House Institute, it sits on the grounds of the Sarasota County Technical Institute (and was even built with the help of some of the school’s students). Folks have come from across the United States and as far as Egypt and Jordan to check out the tips, techniques, and products demonstrated in the house.

Environmentally friendly materials and methods can be found in almost every corner of the structure. The exterior alone boasts decking created from

recycled plastic and wood, tiles made of recycled auto glass, recycled aluminum door frames and railings, and clapboards formed from a mixture of recycled wood and cement.

Situated so that its two longer walls face north and south, the house doesn’t experience a lot of direct sunlight, which helps to keep cooling costs down. Porches with four-foot overhangs and an array of vegetation further shield the dwelling from the sun.

A number of other features also prevent overheating during Florida’s steamy summers, including tile flooring, ceiling fans, high ceilings (so heat can rise), and an air-conditioning system with a heat pipe dehumidifier that removes 15 percent more moisture from the air than just an air conditioner alone. Since drier air is more comfortable, that means the air conditioner can be set at a higher temperature and the house will still feel cool.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FLORIDA HOUSE LEARNING CENTER