



Home Grown Tropics

Landscaping in Southwest Florida is a mix of tradition and innovation with native plants, ornamental shrubs, and water-conservation techniques

by Norm Zeigler

When it comes to residential landscaping and garden plantings, it is a good idea to turn to a professional. This is especially true for new residents who generally are unfamiliar with Southwest Florida's trees, plants, and gardening traditions.

"Most of the people we go and talk to have no idea what they want," says Steven Sumner, owner of Sumner and Sons landscaping on Sanibel and Captiva. It is the job of Sumner and other companies to help suggest and design yards and landscaping features. Sumner's advice includes equal parts traditions and trends. In recent years, he says, there has been a shift to more environmentally friendly landscape planning.

Sumner tries to steer people toward more native "foundation" plants, such as silver buttonwood, sabal palms, and royal

palms. Naples landscape architect W. Christian Busk also favors more indigenous plantings. "I like to use them [native plants] as a backdrop... We try to talk our clients into planting more green areas," he says. In addition to the Naples area, Busk has a number of clients on Sanibel and Captiva.

However, a major challenge for the native-plant approach, Sumner says, is color variety. "There are a limited number of native plants that are very showy with their flowers." Some of the showier native plants include dwarf and full-size firebush, with reddish-orange blossoms, and cassia, with yellow blooms. Still, "Sometimes if you need a really bright color you have to go to the ornamentals," Sumner concludes.

Busk concurs. "My clients want to see color. They want to see a color change based on the texture [of the landscape],"

he says. He uses a lot of annuals, especially lilies, and changes them with the seasons to achieve various effects.

Near the top of most people's ornamental shrub popularity lists, both men say, is the ubiquitous hibiscus. "Everybody loves to see the hibiscus," Busk says, because of its large, brilliantly colored blossoms and showy tropical nature. Especially popular are the pink and red varieties. Ixora is another popular ornamental. It produces blossoms year round and comes in colors from yellow to brilliant red. Ixora's other names—flame of the woods, jungle flame, and jungle geranium—reflect its bright hues.

In addition to the increase in native plantings, Sumner says, another "hot" landscaping element is the use of water such as ponds, fountains, and waterfalls. "My foreman has actually been to what they call 'pond college,'" Sumner says,



At a residential project in progress by Sumner and Sons, Steve Sumner makes final adjustments (left photo) and watches as Jason Moorehead strategically places plants and several bronze fountains. Moorehead has been with the company for 12 years and is a graduate of “pond college.”

referring to a series of training seminars about the use of small aquatic landscaping components.

Busk concurs, saying that over the past twenty years he has seen substantial growth in the use of pools and water gardens. Some of the larger, more upscale residential properties even include bridges and islands in small lakes.

Especially in the Naples area, Busk says, “We use all kinds of stone in accent materials... That’s becoming very popular.” These include areas of paving stones that can be lifted and reinstalled, unlike the concrete features used more commonly in the past, which must be destroyed to alter them.

In addition to native plantings, another element in the turn to more ecologically sound landscape methods, Sumner says, is the use of berms to take advantage of Southwest Florida’s rainfall and decrease reliance on irrigation systems. These small dams reduce runoff and promote downward percolation, helping to recharge soil moisture and ground water.

Another common water-saving practice is putting in a minimum of four inches of mulch around trees and shrubs. Most of his company’s plantings, Sumner says, require watering only “about once a week” in the dry season. “In the summertime when the rains come, we turn the irrigation systems off,” he says. Improperly installed irrigation systems, he says, can be “terrible water users.” He advises his clients that initial installation cost should not be the overriding consideration when choosing an irrigation con-

tractor. Sometimes it is better to pay extra for a top-notch sprinkler network, Sumner says. Though the one-time cost may be higher, over time it will save the owner money.

Another important piece of advice Sumner gives to his clients is to put more palm trees and shade trees in their yards. “That will cut down on the amount of water that’s required in the yard because it will reduce the evaporation,” he says. Palms also produce an attractive “canopy” and are relatively low maintenance. Some of the more common palm varieties that both he and Busk utilize are royal palms, foxtail palms, pygmy date palms, areca palms, and coconut palms.

A significant advantage to palms is the fact that, because they evolved over eons with tropical storms, they are more likely than other tree species to survive the devastating forces of hurricanes. In hurricanes Charley and Wilma, Sumner says, the properties he maintains “probably lost only about four palm trees,” while “dozens and dozens” of other tree varieties fell victim to the fierce winds. “The palm trees got beat up,” he says, “but they came back.”

Sumner tries to discourage his clients from installing huge grassy areas. “Sod is high maintenance,” he says. “It may be a little cheaper to plant it in the beginning, but over time it takes more maintenance, more fertilizer, and more insecticides.” Instead, he encourages people to use lawns as accent features “to enhance the planting beds.” Sanibel has a regulation that limits the square footage of sod that

can be installed on a lot.

Busk takes a similar approach. “We try to talk our clients into developing more green areas, as far as planted areas,” he says. “They require five times less water. And we design irrigation systems for that.” For some residences, he says, “We’ll actually detail just a small area near the house as grass.”

Busk enjoys working on large properties where the natural vegetation is intact, integrating enhancements that are compatible with the native plants and trees, and planning for the long term. “The challenge is creating landscapes that don’t flood and landscapes that are retainable and sustainable... It’s not the first year that’s important, it is years three, five, and beyond,” he says.

When asked the most popular planting in Southwest Florida, Busk does not hesitate. “I think people’s favorite is the coconut,” he says. The tree’s association with the tropics—nearly every television commercial about a tropical vacation includes one—gives it special symbolic significance because it can survive only well below the so-called “Frost Belt,” where the climate is consistently warm or hot. A homeowner sitting under his coconut palm knows he is in a special, tropical paradise.

Both men speak of their profession with enthusiasm and pride. “I wouldn’t do anything else,” Busk says. 🌴

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