



Green Gazette

What's In the Yard?

A Northerner's guide to a typical new home lot in Golden Gates Estates, Naples, FL from the ground up, with some guidance on property care.

by Dorine de Mena

To help other new owners learn about their land, this is an overview of what is living on a one year old builder-altered 2+ acre lot of mostly undisturbed pine flatwood.

The soil is fine sand with minimal organic matter and is fairly acid from the thick layer of pine needles. The ground covers include ferns, grasses, low-growing vines, wild flowers, and weeds. Common understory plants are saw palmetto, vines, small trees, and bushes. Slash pine, cabbage palm, holly, and air plants make up the canopy.

The house is built on compacted fill with a neutral pH under the turf, with foundation plantings of Bougainvillea and accent palms. A Clusia hedge was planted along the property line.

Insects and animals need food sources, water, and shelter to survive. The existing plants are supporting butterflies, moths, spiders, grass hoppers, dragonflies, palmetto bugs, mosquitoes, bees, wasps, ants, centipedes, millipedes, lizards, frogs, snakes, foxes, rabbits, squirrels, gopher tortoises, armadillos, skunks, and birds.

The gopher tortoise is a keystone species (without it, many other animals won't survive). It is illegal to interfere with the tortoise or its eggs in any way.

Property care: The grass, a St. Augustine turf, grows quickly in the spring and summer. It needs $\frac{3}{4}$ - 1 inch of water per week, should be mowed high at 3.5 – 4 inches, and be fertilized with no more than 6 lbs nitrogen/1000 sq feet per year with a slow-release nitrogen blend. In the summer it may yellow because of iron deficiency so apply iron, not fertilizer to “green it up”. Fertilizing in the summer can stress the turf. Palms have far-reaching roots and stricter fertilizer needs than turf. If the turf is within 50 feet of a palm, use palm, not grass, fertilizer on the turf. Recommended palm fertilizer is 8-2-12+4Mg, all slow release.

See EDIS [ENH1009 Fertilization of Field-grown and Landscape Palms in Florida](#)

See EDIS [ENH979 Homeowner Best Management Practices for the Home Lawn](#)

To reduce time and resources spent on turf maintenance, consider enlarging mulched areas and replacing some turf with Florida-friendly plants. Choose Melaleuca mulch (FloriMulch is one brand), especially in place of cypress mulch. Melaleuca is a quick-growing invasive tree of the wetlands. Purchasing Melaleuca mulch encourages eradication of the tree and promotes wetlands restoration. The native cypress trees are slow-growing and support wildlife.

Florida-friendly landscaping information can be found at fyn.ifas.ufl.edu, regionalconservation.org,



and the *Florida Native Plant Society* website fnps.org.

The South Florida Water Management District website sfwmd.gov has the regulations for irrigation in Collier County. For a no-charge irrigation system evaluation contact *Collier Soil and Water Conservation District* at 239-455-4100.

Vegetables can be grown year-round. See edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021 *Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide*.

Some cautions: fire ants hold on with mandibles and sting repeatedly so wear socks, closed shoes, long clothing, and gloves if sensitive to bites.

The Cuban tree frog is invasive. They populate quickly, eat native frogs, and can enter homes through vent pipes. To humanely euthanize them, see edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw259 *The Cuban Tree Frog in Florida*.

In closing, living in the sub-tropics of SW Florida is quite different from the more northern zones. The soil is sand, there are 2 seasons (wet and dry), and much of the flora and fauna may be unfamiliar initially. By learning “what’s in the yard”, you can appreciate and help the natives thrive.

These are some things commonly found in the yard:

Native plants:

Palms: *Saw Palmetto, Cabbage Palm*

Ferns, wild flowers/weeds, grasses: *Bracken Fern, Florida Pusley, Wild Pennyroyal, Beggar’s Tick, Fleabane, Chalky Bluestem*

Small trees and bushes: *Rusty Lyonia, Dwarf Live Oak, Inkberry, Beautyberry, Shining Sumac, Gopher Apple, Myrsine*

Trees: *Slash Pine, Dahoon Holly*

Vines: *Muscadine Grape, Virginia Creeper, Greenbrier, Corky Stem Passion Vine, Poison Ivy*

Tillandsias: *Spanish Moss, Cardinal Air Plant*

Non-native plants added by builder: *St Augustine turf, Bougainvillea, Japanese Holly, Clusia hedge, European Fan Palm, and Senegal Date Palm*

Animals: *brown anole (non-native), Cuban tree frog (non-native), southern black racer, eastern corn snake, gopher tortoise, red fox, 9 banded armadillo, skunk*

Birds: *blue jays, cardinals, mockingbirds, catbirds, downy woodpeckers, red bellied woodpeckers, pileated woodpeckers, northern flickers, buzzards, bald eagles, swallowtail kites*