

UF/IFAS EXTENSION ST. LUCIE COUNTY
**LIVING WITH NATURE ON THE
TREASURE COAST**

A GUIDE TO BEING A FLORIDA-FRIENDLY CITIZEN



WELCOME TO THE TREASURE COAST!

Some say our region gets its name from our natural treasures—our parks and preserves crisscrossed by trails and teeming with wildlife; our miles of coastal beaches, marinas and fishing piers; our rivers and estuaries that provide habitat for hundreds of marine species and a playground for boaters and boarders. You can help maintain our “treasures” by following tips for respectful interaction with these resources.

FLORIDA-FRIENDLY CITIZENSHIP

- Educate yourself about the environment around you. Visit environmental centers, attend lectures and public events, surf the web to learn about Florida's natural history, and explore volunteer opportunities.
- Take responsibility for everything you do—reduce, reuse, repurpose, and recycle. Too many birds and other wildlife become entangled in plastic six-pack holders, plastic bag handles, fishing line and other recyclables that end up in the landfill. For birds,

manatees and sea turtles, entanglement means injury and possible death. Be sure to secure such materials in your recycling bin so the wind doesn't carry them off! Composting organic matter such as vegetable peelings is great, too, and will provide you with free, organic fertilizer.

- Educate family, neighbors, visitors, business and civic leaders about the value of Florida's environment.

- Get outside and enjoy Florida's unique environment! Experience the natural values that wetlands, uplands and coastal systems provide and form a lasting, life-long bond with your Florida environment!
- Contact your elected officials—federal, state and local—ask what they are doing to protect the environment in Florida. Let them know you care about conservation and that you expect them to support conservation issues and vote accordingly.

HOME & GARDEN

- Using native plants in your Florida landscape can help improve biodiversity. Fruit and seed-eating birds, nectar feeders such as hummingbirds and butterflies, gopher tortoises and other native wildlife depend on an abundance of native plants for food.
- Florida native plants such as live oak, sabal palm, cocoplum, coontie, muhly grass and gaillardia are attractive, readily available commercially, and are nature's own bird and butterfly feeders! Ask your county's Master Gardeners for advice on low maintenance and native plant selection.
 - ❑ Never harvest native plants for your garden from public lands.
- Use low maintenance native landscape plants that require less irrigation, fertilization and chemical pest control. You can learn how to do this by attending classes offered by the UF/IFAS Cooperative Extension.

- Remove invasive plants. Identify and remove invasive plants such as melaleuca, Brazilian pepper, and Australian pine. Obtain an invasive and exotic species list to educate yourself about invasive plants in Florida.
- Plant a living shoreline. Marsh plants and mangroves protect shorelines from erosion, provide habitat for marine animals, improve water quality, and look naturally beautiful.
- Promote habitat connectivity. Work with other property owners to establish and promote the creation of wildlife corridors and greenways by leaving natural areas in setbacks, easements and other margins on properties. Grouped together, these spaces expand fragments of habitat and allow animals safer transit between parks, preserves, and neighborhood corridors.
- Preserve cypress forests. Mulch your garden inexpensively with pine straw or other natural mulches. There are many alternatives to cypress mulch. Remember, cypress forests are valuable for protection from coastal storms, water filtration, and wildlife habitat. And once they are gone, they cannot be replaced.
- Be conscious and cautious using chemicals. Cleaners, solvents, fertilizers, pesticides, and other chemicals can add up, damage your yard and harm beneficial insects.

Residue from improper use of these products can pollute groundwater and surface water. Freshwater from the land can carry pollutants into the Indian River Lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean with far-reaching impact on marine habitats.

- Use rodenticides outdoors only when needed and in a manner which complies with the label and wildlife protection laws. This will help protect non-target wildlife such as birds of prey from accidental poisoning.
- Clean up after your pet! Pet waste can pollute groundwater and inland waterways, contaminating water with disease-causing microorganisms. Be a good neighbor and environmental steward by bagging your pet's poop and disposing of it in landfills.
- Keep cats and dogs indoors or restrained and away from wildlife.
- Never release unwanted pets into the wild. If you can no longer keep an animal, contact your local county Humane Society, ASPCA organization, no-kill animal shelter, or animal rescue organization for guidance on relinquishing animals you can no longer keep.
- Let snakes live! Spiders, frogs and toads, too! These animals provide free and natural pest control around your home and garden.



(Left) The gopher tortoise is a protected "keystone" species: the survival of other species depends on this animal.

(Right) Watching the sunrise on the Treasure Coast—Priceless!

- Turn off unnecessary lighting in your home and yard. Lights can alter bird behavior and cause confusion during migration. If your home is on a beach, lights can disorient nesting sea turtles and their hatchlings.



BEACHES & WATERWAYS

- Obey all fishing and boating regulations and guidelines regarding wildlife protection. Laws and policies are crafted to protect and conserve marine habitat and wildlife.
 - ❑ Follow boating speed limits and wear polarized sunglasses to reduce collisions with manatees, sea turtles, dolphins and submerged habitat.
 - ❑ Dispose of bait fish, offal, fishing line and hooks responsibly.
- Be cautious while refueling your boat and changing oil. Avoid contaminating the ground or waterways by putting waste oil into sealed containers and dispose of the oil properly under established state guidelines. Refuse companies such as Waste Management offer free information and tips as well.
- Respect local reefs! Help reefs flourish by recycling oyster shells and participate in reef restoration programs by volunteering to bag shells donated by restaurants. Volunteers place shells in permitted areas throughout the Indian River lagoon to restore habitat for oyster larvae, fish and other marine life. The reefs filter water for a cleaner lagoon. Find out about reef restoration efforts in your community today!
- Wash your boat, trailer, jet skis, and other equipment before you leave the launch area to prevent transporting organisms from one waterway to another. Using biodegradable soap will help protect water quality.
- Exotic fresh and saltwater species can proliferate and upset the ecology of waterways. Unwanted fish, frogs, turtles, snails and other aquatic animals should never be released into the wild. Aquarium water may contain live eggs or larvae and should never be disposed of into yards, canals, rivers or storm drains. Contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to find out the best way to handle disposal of aquarium animals and how to relinquish animals of special concern, such as non-native snakes. Drain aquarium water into a toilet so it will be processed at a treatment center before entering the watershed (unless you are a septic tank user).
- Don't disturb sea turtles, their nests or hatchlings. Sea turtle nesting can occur March through November.
 - ❑ Keep beaches free of obstacles such as umbrellas, chairs, sandcastles, holes and litter that impede movement of, or trap, adults and hatchlings.
 - ❑ During sea turtle nesting season, keep lights off at night if you live near or visit

(Left) Sea turtles are threatened by collisions with boats and by human disturbance in their nesting areas.

(Right) Many animals have lost their fear of humans or are crowded out of their homes by encroaching development, exposing them to dangerous conditions. Always watch for animals in roadways and stop until they have passed out of harm's way.

the beach. Hatchlings and mothers can become confused and move toward artificial lights instead of toward the ocean. Florida law requires special lighting for all structures visible from beaches to prevent confusing nesting mothers and their hatchlings.

- ❑ Avoid digging in the sand above the high tide line where nests will be hidden. Observe marked sea turtle nesting areas above the high tide line and do not disturb nests—it's against state law to do so.
- ❑ Nests might be marked with stakes. Please leave those stakes alone.

WILDLIFE & YOU

- Be a good neighbor to wildlife! Observe, photograph, and make discoveries as a citizen scientist. Do not feed, handle or harass wildlife. Remember, any creature with a mouth can bite, so handling animals, cornering them, getting too close, chasing or feeding them is not safe for people or animals.
- Feeding birds and other wildlife teaches animals to seek out humans for food instead of finding natural food sources to provide the nutrients they need to stay healthy. Why not plant to attract wildlife instead?
- Teach children to respect all wildlife by watching from a safe distance. Their experience will be enhanced by learning to use binoculars, cameras with zoom lenses, and field guides or apps.
- Gopher tortoises, sandhill cranes, Florida scrub jays and eastern indigo snakes are species of particular concern here. Their numbers are declining and they are protected by law. It is illegal to capture, keep, transport, relocate or feed these and other species. Gopher tortoises need to be near

their burrows that provide them with protection from weather, fire and predators. The one exception to touching tortoises is to move them off roadways toward the direction in which they are traveling. Do not feed scrub jays or sandhill cranes. They will become habituated to humans feeding them putting their survival at greater risk.

- Be aware that local plants and wildlife can present danger to people. Alligators, fire ants, certain snakes, jellyfish, feral hogs and poison ivy can pose danger to people who do not take precautions. Educate yourself and family members how to avoid unpleasant or dangerous experiences without causing harm to animals and the environment.
- Orphaned animals may not be orphaned! Before removing young animals to a shelter

facility, observe them from a distance until evening. Often adult animals will hide their offspring while they are out foraging for the day. If the parent does not return, contact a rehab facility for advice.

- Report injured or dead wildlife. Report injured, incapacitated or dead whales, manatees, dolphins, sea turtles, birds, panthers and bears to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). (myfwc.com; 850-488-4676 / South Region 561-625-5122)



(Top) Butterfly gardens are an example of supporting wildlife by landscaping with native plants. The zebra longwing is Florida's state butterfly.

(Bottom) The bright pink color of the roseate spoonbill leads many to mistake it for a flamingo.

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