

RULES OF GREEN-THUMB AT THE COAST

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AHHHH.....AT LAST! You finally have your place at "the coast," that nice little haven somewhere along Florida's beaches, bays, or barrier islands.

So you've worked out the details on your prized abode, whether it's humble or fancy.....now what? What about the "yard" and the usual talk of "landscaping"? Do you apply the same rules of caretaking that you learned around a home far inland?

Well, the answer, quite frankly, is **NO!** The "coast" is different. Its environmental system--the beautiful surroundings that drew you in the first place--is fragile, easily destroyed. Some things that you may be used to having plenty of, such as fresh water, solid bedrock, and topsoil, are very hard to come by at the coast.

Then, you might very well ask, what are the rules of "green-thumb" for my yard at the coast?

#1 The basic rule of thumb is "Do nothing." More precisely, that means **do not disturb any native vegetation** that still exists on your piece of heaven. These plants are well adapted to life at the coast--to growing conditions we might think of as rather harsh, such as drought and salt air. Thus, they are "easy-care ornamentals." More than that, these plants help protect your investment by stabilizing sandy soils with their often deep roots and by acting as baffles for gusty winds.

You may agree that "Do nothing" is not a bad rule anyway for a retirement or vacation home. The pace of life at the coast, after all, is usually one of relaxation. But, you may say, "I *like* yard work; it's enjoyable and relaxing." So is there puttering around that you *can* do? Things that will enhance rather than stress the natural workings of your coastal plot? Yes!

#2 This rule is, in fact, an important exception to doing nothing. **Destroy, safely, any invasive exotic plants** encroaching within your stewardship. Invasive exotics are nonnative plants that have turned out to be very aggressive. They escape easily from cultivation, and having no natural enemies here, they spread wildly, crowding out the natives and ripping apart the fabric of natural biodiversity. Often, the

qualities for which they were introduced are the very reasons they become such a problem: They grow and reproduce easily, have few or no pests, and tolerate a wide range of conditions.

If you think your coastal haven harbors one or more invasive exotics, *check the identity* with a local botanist, extension agent, nurseryperson, or state regional biologist. Learn all you can about the plant's habits and how to get rid of it, so it is not accidentally spread to another spot.

"Fine," you may say, "but what else can I do? About that bare sand, for instance!? Aren't there plants I can put in that make sense on the coast?" Yes, again.

#3 If you want to add to your heavenly setting, **plant coastal natives.** They come in all types, from lovely ground cover to sturdy tree. *But* do not dig them up from "vacant" lots--remember rule #1. And before you rush right out to your nearest nursery, take a look around your place in the sun. Get to know the local natural habitats. (Visit a state park, for example.) Are you in or near a forest, scrub, dune, or marsh zone? How might your home nestle more comfortably into the environment?

Listen and read, too. A lot of information is available about the ecosystems that grace Florida's coasts, from your library, the local native plant society, and various other local and state agencies. Just ask! And visit the Department's web site:
www.dep.state.fl.us

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