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Green-Up Our Attitudes, Not Our Yards

The latest and greatest ways to go green in our state must include a change in the public perceptions, values and attitudes toward the appearance and health of our neighborhood yards. We have some wonderful examples in new and existing developments in Florida, such as: taking advantage of natural swales for “rain gardens” and of wild areas by clustering new homes around them; taking advantage of storm water outfalls by creative reuse in the community; and providing for wildlife by incorporating native plants and wildlife corridors into neighborhoods. These examples and others, such as River Forest in Manatee County and Madera in Gainesville, are certainly wonderful, but much more is needed to change some existing neighborhoods from chemically-processed, bright-green lawns to living ecosystems. It has been said if lawns were a crop, it would be one of the five largest crops in the nation. It is estimated that 25% to 60% of all water use in the country is for landscape irrigation.

We have to stop turning our Florida yards into some example of the English landscape of rolling hills and manicured lawns, or of a northeast landscape, or of tropical islands, or of wherever one might imagine. Florida’s own natural areas from northern forests to southern tropics has beauty enough to emulate. Both the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods and the Florida Backyard Landscapes for Wildlife Programs are a good place to start, but they do not go far enough to educate the public to the beauty and preservation of natural Florida. We need to restore our yards to living ecosystems that support wildlife as well as meet our human needs for outdoor space. Outdoor beauty might be manicured or wild, but it should not be a dead environment. We must use our water resources for life not for decoration.

The problem here involves more than merely changing ideas, crucial and difficult enough; it involves an emotional commitment to follow through on the good ideas. Literature has the privilege of moving the emotions. One answer is ecopoetry. I will continue this paper, seeking to change minds through the beauty and techniques of poetry, by presenting my original Florida poems entitled: “Silent Spring/Dead Yard,” “Rain Garden,” “Frogfruit,” “Hydrologic Cycle,” “Love Grass,” and others as time permits.