

# The FLORIDA YARDSTICK

Does your yard measure up? Use this guide to reach or exceed a YardStick goal of 36 inches. This will qualify your yard for a Florida Yard Certificate and a certified Florida Yard sign to place in your garden.

**Directions:** Read through the choices carefully. Select those actions that you would like to take, or have already taken, in your yard. Mark off your credits as you complete each action. For specific information on how to pursue an action, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service. Once you have reached or exceeded the 36-inch mark, call the Cooperative Extension Service to schedule a certification visit.

## Water Efficiently

Irrigate only when your lawn and landscape need water. Efficient watering is the key to a healthy Florida Yard and reducing runoff.

### ACTIONS:

- Irrigate your lawn and landscape only when they wilt. Be sure to follow local water ordinances. Apply 1/2 - 3/4-inch per application. The frequency will vary with the seasons. **Credit: 3 inches.**
- Mow high to encourage a deeper, more drought- and pest-tolerant root system. A higher cut also shades out weeds. Remove no more than 1/3 of the grass blade when you mow. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Give your irrigation system a check-up. Replace broken and mismatched sprinkler heads. Redirect sprinkler heads so that water falls only on lawn and shrub areas, not on paved surfaces. **Credit: 1 inch.**
- Calibrate your irrigation system to apply 1/2 - 3/4-inch of water. **Credit: 1 inch.**
- Install a rain shut-off device on your automatic sprinkler system. The shut-off device will override your system's timer when an adequate amount of rain has fallen. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Design or modify your irrigation system to water lawn areas separately from plant beds. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Put a rain gauge in your yard to track rainfall and avoid unnecessary irrigation. **Credit: 1 inch.**
- Use a drip- or micro-irrigation system to conserve water in plant and flower beds. **Credit: 1 1/2 inch.**
- Design and maintain a landscape that exists predominantly on rainfall once plants are established. **Credit: 6 inches.**

## Right Plant - Right Spot

Plants suited to your site will require minimal amounts of water, fertilizer and pesticides.

### ACTIONS:

- Replace problem-prone plants with low maintenance native or non-native species. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Group plants according to their water and maintenance needs. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Determine how much grass you need for children, pets and recreation. Where possible, replace the rest with low maintenance ground covers or shrubs, mulch or other porous surface. **Credit: 4 inches.**
- Save energy by using trees and shrubs to shade the eastern and western walls of your home and your air conditioner compressor. **Credit: 1 inch.**
- Use deciduous trees or low growing shrubs on southern exposures to allow the sun to passively heat your home in winter. **Credit: 1 inch.**
- Help stop the spread of invasive, exotic plants such as Brazilian Pepper, Melaleuca, Australian Pine and Chinese Tallow by removing them from your landscape. **Credit: 1 1/2 inch.**

## Mulch

Mulching retains soil moisture, moderates soil temperature and helps prevent erosion and weeds. By using mulch, you'll use less water, have healthier plants and fewer weeds.

### ACTIONS:

- Maintain a 2 - 3-inch layer of organic mulch over the roots of trees, shrubs and in plant beds. Remember to leave at least 2 inches of space between the base of the plant and the mulch. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Create self-mulching areas under trees where leaves can remain where they fall. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Use by-product or alternative mulches such as pine bark, Eucalyptus, Melaleuca or recycled mulches available from your community. **Credit: 2 inches.**

## Fertilizing

Fertilizers can be hazardous to the environment and your yard. When over-applied, fertilizers aggravate pest problems and make plants grow excessively. Excess fertilizer can run off yards into waterways or can leach into groundwater creating water quality and ecological problems.

### ACTIONS:

- Fertilize only as needed to maintain the health and quality of lawns and landscape plants. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Use natural organic or other slow release fertilizers. Buy fertilizers that contain 30% or more of the nitrogen in slow release forms. Look for key words such as water insoluble nitrogen, sulfur-coated, IBDU, ureaformaldehyde (UF) or resin-coated. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Use iron (ferrous sulfate or chelate) instead of nitrogen to make your lawn green during the summer. **Credit: 1 inch.**

## Recycle

In a Florida Yard, grass clippings, leaves and yard trimmings are recycled rather than thrown away.

### ACTIONS:

- Recycle grass clippings by allowing them to remain on the lawn. Mulching lawn mowers or mulching blades are optional. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Use leaves and pine needles found in your yard as mulch under trees or shrubs rather than bagging and discarding them. They make an attractive, natural mulch and it's free. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Create and maintain a compost pile with collected clippings, leaves and kitchen scraps (no animal products, please). **Credit: 3 inches.**

## Stormwater Runoff

Rain and irrigation water carries soil, debris, fertilizer and pesticides from your yard into neighborhood storm drains that lead to bays, rivers and lakes. These substances can harm water quality, habitats and living organisms. Reducing runoff from your property minimizes these problems.

### ACTIONS:

- Direct downspouts and gutters to drain onto the lawn, plant beds or containment areas where rain will soak into the soil rather than running off. **Credit: 1 inch.**
- Decrease erosion by planting groundcovers on thinly vegetated areas under trees or on slopes. **Credit: 1 1/2 inch.**
- Use mulch, bricks, flagstones, gravel or other porous surfaces on walkways, patios and driveways. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Create a simple cistern to collect rain by placing an empty garbage can under the downspout. Use this water to irrigate plants. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Create swales (low areas) or terracing to catch and filter stormwater. **Credit: 3 inches.**

## Wildlife

With more than 1,200 kinds of animals, Florida ranks third in the nation in wildlife diversity. Providing adequate food, water and shelter can increase the number and variety of species that visit your yard.

### ACTIONS:

- Plant vines, shrubs and trees that provide cover, nesting areas or food sources for birds, butterflies and other wildlife. **Credit: 3 inches.**
- Provide a water source, such as a bird bath or a small pond, for wildlife. **Credit: 1 inch.**
- Provide wildlife shelters such as a bat house, bird house, brush pile or a dead tree. **Credit: 1 inch.**

## Yard Pests

It's unrealistic to strive for a bug- and disease-free landscape. Pesticides provide effective treatment of serious pest problems, but they should not be used routinely or indiscriminately. Unwise use of pesticides can result in pest resistance and can harm people, pets, beneficial organisms and the environment.

### ACTIONS:

- Check plants regularly. Make it a habit to walk around your yard at least every two weeks and observe your plants for signs of problems. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Avoid routine applications of pesticides. Treat only affected plants or lawn areas rather than spraying your entire lawn and landscape. (Request your maintenance company to follow these strategies). **Credit: 3 inches.**
- Learn to identify five beneficial insects that provide natural control of harmful pests. **Credit: 2 inches.**
- Use environmentally friendly pesticides such as horticultural oils, *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) and insecticidal soaps. These effective, safe materials can control most of the pests in your landscape. **Credit: 3 inches.**

## On the Waterfront

Waterfront property owners realize the special contribution our bays and waterways make to their quality of life. They also understand how fragile these natural treasures can be.

### ACTIONS:

- Protect your mangroves. Never prune them without first seeking proper guidelines and permits. **Credit: 1 inch.**
- Establish a border of low maintenance plants between your lawn and shoreline/seawall to absorb nutrients and provide wildlife habitat. **Credit: 4 inches.**
- Where feasible, plant native vegetation in front of your seawall or along your shoreline. **Credit: 4 inches.**
- Decrease wave action and increase habitat by placing clean, native limestone rock in front of your seawall. **Credit: 3 inches.**

**FLORIDA YARDS & NEIGHBORHOODS**

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The Florida YardStick is a publication of The Tampa Bay National Estuary Program, the West Coast Regional Water Supply Authority, and the Cooperative Extension Service in your county. For more information: (813) 893-2765.