

Wilderness earning its name in an environment-conscious way

BY MIKE MALLOY, Collier County Extension Service
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The brilliant orange of the Florida flame vine has become an anticipated show each January along Goodlette-Frank Road. Submitted photo



Turfgrass on this curb had been removed to make way for the installation of a butterfly garden. Submitted photo



These shrubs use less water and require less maintenance than turf. Submitted photo



This newly planted ruby red penta already has a queen butterfly visiting it. Submitted photo

There is a stretch of road in Naples, known to most people you talk to, especially people who are plant enthusiasts, those who appreciate beautiful flowers, and people just looking out the car window, that is bordered by a spectacular flowering vine. The area is just north of Golden Gate Parkway, on Goodlette-Frank Road. The vine is visible for about a mile, trailing and cascading over a fence that encloses one of Naples' best-kept secrets.

People may not know the vine by name, but most have seen and admired it. The vine is called Florida flame vine (*Pyrostegia venusta*). It has brilliant orange flowers, blooming from late November into February. The Latin name means "fire on the roof" and Florida flame vine is very hard to miss or ignore when it's blooming. It is also one of the favorite nectar plants for butterflies and hummingbirds.

So, is the vine Naples' best-kept secret? Certainly not, because it would be difficult to keep a mile-long stretch of flaming orange flowers much of a secret. The secret, and the point of this story, is what's behind this wall of fiery beauty: Wilderness Country Club.

When you enter Wilderness Country Club you are met with the natural beauty of Florida: naturally trimmed shrubs, flowers and mature trees, all blending together, giving you an idea of what Florida used to look like before folks decided to turn the landscape into a re-creation of Disneyland. When I say Disneyland, I mean reality has been checked at the door: every living green thing is trimmed within an inch of its life, shaped into lollipops, mushrooms and boxes.

Some of the shrubs gracing the entrance of the WCC are lantana (*Lantana camera*), firebush (*Hamelia patens*), golden dew drop (*Duranta repens*), jatropha (*Jatropha integerrima*), coontie (*Zamia floridana*) and cassia (*Cassia surentensis*).

Also worth mentioning are the beautiful mature trees. The housing area is surrounded by preserve areas, all lending to the natural appearance and mystique of this community. But, maybe the best part is the golf course. Jim Torba, golf-course superintendent for the club, spoke about his ideas and plans to install butterfly gardens at several holes where people wait to tee off, enhancing the already wildlife-friendly complex. Just recently they have removed grass from an area on the golf course.

Yes, you read that correctly. They have removed grass from a golf course to plant an extensive butterfly garden to add to the two smaller gardens they have already established. (Shades of things to come? Whatever, it's a great step in the right direction.) Jim also advised me they have changed their irrigation techniques and are limiting irrigation to turf areas exhibiting signs of stress and are not watering turf areas that are green and doing fine.

As a member of the Golf Course Audubon Society, the Wilderness Country Club has actually left a dead tree (called a "snag") in the middle of one of the fairways and built a platform for osprey nest-building, which the birds have obligingly done for the past few years. This year, the resident pair of ospreys returned and rebuilt the nest, and at this moment in time, everyone is waiting for the fledglings to appear.

If that wildlife experience is not enough, Torba also told me there have recently been several sightings of a large cat; at first some thought it might be a bobcat, but it has a tail, leading folks to believe it's a Florida panther that has taken up residence at the Wilderness. Motion cameras have recently been installed in the area where the sightings have occurred, in hopes of obtaining positive identification.

In addition to being wildlife-friendly, the Wilderness Country Club is conscious of recycling. All horticulture debris is stockpiled and run through a shredder once a month to be used as mulch and compost on the grounds, so no waste goes to the already overcrowded landfill.

Unfortunately, the Wilderness Country Club is not available for public viewing, because, like most Naples communities, it is gated.

Personally, I applaud the efforts of the Wilderness Country Club. They are definitely going in the right direction, practicing good stewardship and perhaps will be mirrored by others. Since water restrictions have been enacted and the new term "green" has entered our everyday language, single-family homes and communities of all sizes have shown an interest in becoming more environmentally friendly, protecting wildlife, saving money and simultaneously saving our most limited natural resource: water.

Urban Horticulture Agent Cathy Feser contributed to this article. Mike Malloy is Florida Yards & Neighborhoods coordinator for the Collier County Extension Service. For more information on home gardening, call the Collier County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at 353-2872 or visit the Web site: collier.ifas.ufl.edu. For specimen identification, the Extension Plant Clinic at 14700 Immokalee Road is open 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday.