

#9: Protect the Waterfront

HELP PRESERVE FLORIDA'S WATERWAYS, PLANTS, AND WILDLIFE

Florida is covered with water. The state boasts over 10,000 miles of rivers and streams, about 7,800 lakes, more than 700 freshwater springs, and the second-longest coastline in the United States. Even if you do not reside on a waterfront, the land you live on is directly connected to a nearby water body. That's because no matter where you live, surface water that leaves your landscape as runoff (either due to rain or over-watering), together with any fertilizers and pesticides in that runoff, will eventually drain into a water body. The contributing drainage area is called a watershed.

All watersheds are ultimately connected to each other and to the underground aquifer that supplies most of Florida's drinking water. So what you do in your yard has further-reaching consequences than you might imagine. If you live on the waterfront, the information in this chapter can help you create a landscape that is beautiful, functional, and environmentally sound. But you should consider the waterfront wherever you live.

MAINTAINING YOUR WATERFRONT PROPERTY

Waterfront property owners have firsthand knowledge of the special value that lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, and lagoons contribute to Florida's quality of life. Florida-Friendly waterfront living also involves unique challenges and responsibilities, some of which are outlined here.

SHORELINE VEGETATION

The land along the water's edge is called the riparian zone and is often a wetland. Some cities and counties require homeowners to establish a buffer zone to protect this area.



A 10-foot-wide maintenance-free zone protects a water body from fertilizer and pesticide runoff.

If there is no buffer zone along your waterfront, add Florida-Friendly, low-maintenance plantings to help filter out pesticide and fertilizer runoff from adjacent lawns and

landscaped areas. Shoreline vegetation attracts native wildlife and reduces erosion. It can also help beautify your property, dissipate noise from passing boats and other watercraft, and protect your privacy.

For your freshwater shoreline, select native aquatic plants such as softstem bullrush, giant bullrush, common arrowhead, pickerelweed, and maidencane. Remove invasive exotic species like water hyacinth, purple loosestrife, hydrilla, and water chestnut.

SEAWALLS AND RIP RAP

While shoreline vegetation has benefits, many waterfront homes have man-made structures bordering the water instead of a riparian zone with plants. These structures can also help minimize shoreline erosion. They include seawalls (sea-facing walls on a steeply sloped shoreline exposed to high wind and waves), rip rap (loose, large stones), and gabions (rectangular metal baskets filled with rock).



Seawalls can help minimize shoreline erosion but may cause other problems.



Natural edges with native aquatic plants can help filter runoff before it enters the water body.

But these structures can cause other problems. Seawalls, for example, can cause erosion on adjoining properties. Consider inquiring into your city and county ordinances

to determine whether removal of these structures is an option. When such structures are necessary, look for ways to encourage native vegetation in and along them, especially rip rap and gabions.

YOUR MAINTENANCE-FREE ZONE

Whether you live on a natural or man-made water body, it's important to designate a "maintenance-free zone" of at least 10 feet between your landscape and the riparian zone. This area helps to protect the water from runoff. Don't mow, fertilize, or apply pesticides in the maintenance-free zone. Select plants that will do well without fertilization or irrigation after establishment. If your landscape already features a buffer zone that's larger than 10 feet, you don't need to create an additional maintenance-free zone.

OTHER MAINTENANCE CONSIDERATIONS

Don't let grass clippings get washed into the water body; their high nutrient content can cause pollution. Also, pick up all pet wastes deposited in your landscape. Pet wastes contain not only lots of nutrients, but also many harmful bacteria.

CLEARING AND CONSTRUCTION

Waterfront property is often protected by local or state regulations. A permit may be required for activities as diverse

as removing vegetation; extending a fence; building any structure; or developing walking, cycling, or vehicular paths. Before building anything on or clearing anything from your property, make sure you contact the Department of Environmental Protection or your local city or county offices or departments related to land development, building, and planning.

WETLANDS

Wetlands are transition ecosystems between land and water. Bogs, cypress domes, mangroves, swamps, wet prairies, and marshes are all types of wetlands. Some of these wetlands are enormous, like the Florida Everglades. Others may be small and contained entirely on one property.

Wetlands play a critical role in reducing flood damage by storing stormwater when it surges and releasing it slowly over time. Wetlands are invaluable in keeping water clean by acting as filters for pollutants, silt, and sediment. Fish, birds, and wildlife depend upon wetlands for food, nesting grounds, migratory stops, and shelter. Wetlands are also valuable to the Florida economy, as they support commercial fisheries and tourist-based wildlife watching.

SPRINGS

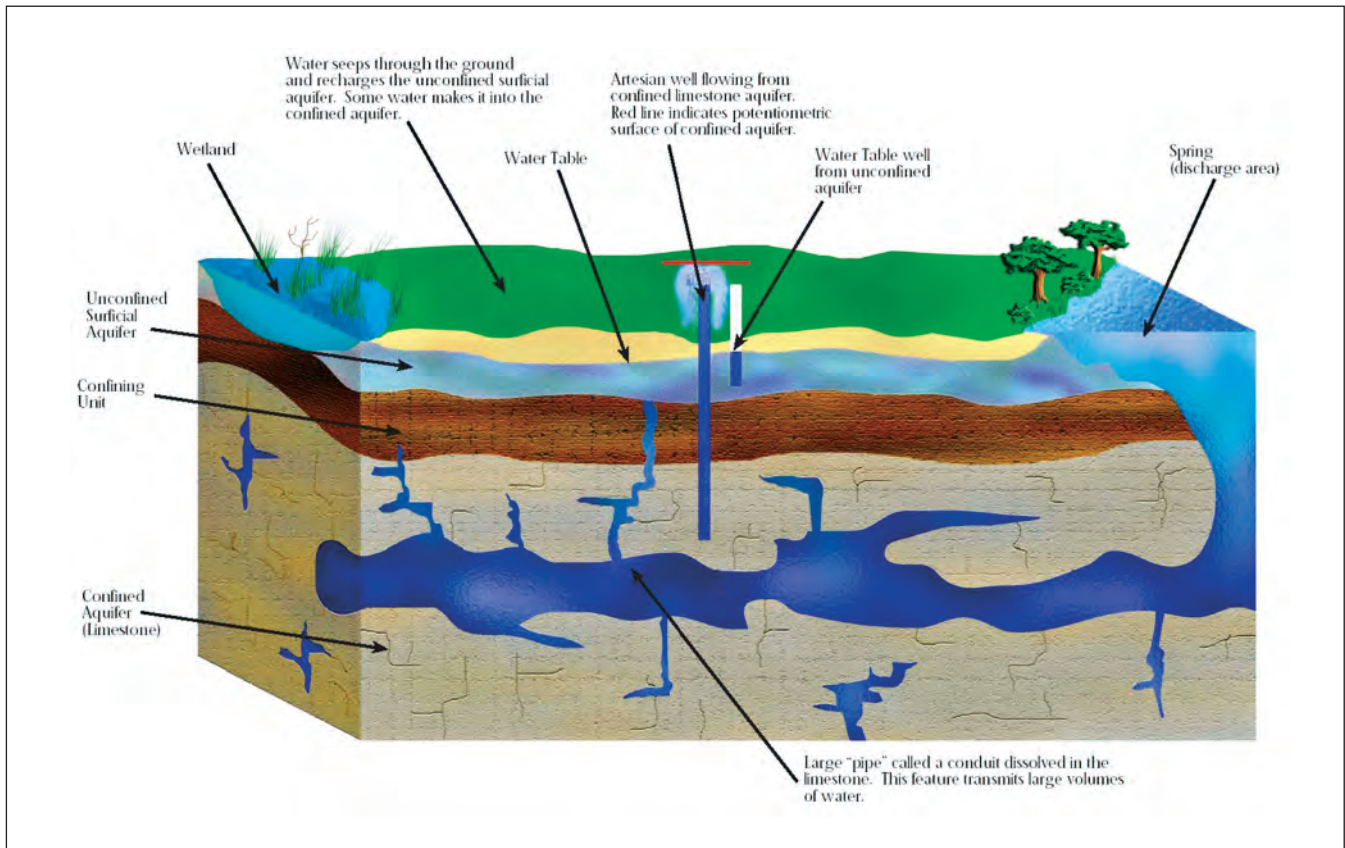
Florida has the largest concentration of freshwater springs in the world. Floridians and visitors enjoy the recreational opportunities afforded by many springs, including diving, snorkeling, tubing, and canoeing. Springs also serve as important habitats for many fragile plant and wildlife species, and are considered "windows into the aquifer," because the water they pump out comes from the underground source of most of Florida's drinking water. But like other water bodies, Florida springs are threatened by population growth, urban sprawl, groundwater withdrawals, and the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and other potential pollutants.



Excess nutrients cause algae and vegetation blooms in Florida springs.



Unpolluted springs offer wildlife habitat and recreational opportunity.



Keeping stormwater onsite allows it to soak into the ground and recharge aquifers.

STORMWATER PONDS AND CANALS

Many Floridians live near man-made water bodies called stormwater ponds and canals. These structures are created to prevent flooding, manage stormwater, and improve water quality in urbanized areas. Stormwater ponds and canals are just as important to protect as our natural water bodies because all of Florida's waterways are connected,



Stormwater management ponds can be beautiful and educational amenities.

and anything that enters a man-made water body could eventually enter our natural water system.

Stormwater ponds and canals can be more than functional. With a little help from you, they can serve as a home for birds, fish, plants, and frogs and become a neighborhood amenity. Work with your neighborhood association or your neighbors to create an area that not only improves the environment, but also contributes to your quality of life. Just make sure you talk to your water management district before making any modifications, because you'll probably need to get a permit change. Consider these strategies to enhance stormwater ponds and canals:

- Plant flood-tolerant species that are known to help reduce contaminants in water.
- Plant a wide variety of plants to increase biodiversity and attract a wider range of wildlife and insects.
- Add landscaping to make it look like a natural wetland.
- Build boardwalks and trails so neighbors can enjoy plants and wildlife.
- Add varied water depths to an existing pond to create diverse habitats.

WATER AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD LEVEL

Whether you want to improve water quality in your neighborhood or just make the waterways in your area more attractive, if you're interested in doing more with waterfronts in your community, ask your neighborhood association about some of these things.

- Are Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ practices being used in neighborhood common areas?
- Have neighborhood canals, stormwater ponds, or other artificial water bodies been enhanced with aquatic plants? Are the plants appropriate for the site?
- Are swales and berms being used to help clean and filter runoff before it reaches water bodies?
- Are there dry basins in our neighborhood? If so, how are they being maintained? Can Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ practices be implemented?
- Can stormwater ponds be improved to provide wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities?