



ECOLOGICAL Beauty

RENOWNED LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT ELLIN GOETZ EXPLAINS HOW WE'VE COME A LONG WAY IN MAKING SMARTER PLANT SELECTIONS THAT PLEASE THE EYE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Motorists headed east on Immokalee Road past Collier Boulevard are greeted by six miles of roadway medians alive with sabal palm, bald cypress, slash pine, and an array of other native trees, groundcovers, and grasses. These aren't "showy, discordant" median plants typically seen throughout Florida, says Ellin Goetz, president of Goetz+Stropes Landscape Architects in Naples. Goetz led the project after convincing Collier County officials to go in a whole new direction by planting native plants that showcase what's going on in the surrounding landscape. "We tried to demonstrate how native materials have

LEFT: A flowering queen's wreath vine (*Petrea volubilis*) festoons an arched trellis shading a pathway at the Mediterra community's Celestial Park, which Ellin Goetz designed.

BELOW: Ellin Goetz has been a registered landscape architect in Florida since 1986 and opened her Naples firm in 2001.



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enormous beauty and function,” she says. The selections were carefully chosen to meet rigorous requirements, such as height and density, as well as for their maintenance needs, color, variety, wind resilience, and sustainability. They were thoughtfully spaced in a repeating pattern. “We used native materials in a bold, new way,” says Goetz. “It’s very strong.”

Less than three years in, her selections are thriving and have become “visually significant,” as she puts it. And because they are natives, which have evolved with Southwest Florida’s natural rain patterns, the county can actually turn off irrigation so they can flourish without artificial support.

For more than 35 years, Goetz has been a visionary leader in understanding, advocating for and incorporating native plants



ABOVE: Seagrape (*Coccoloba uvifera*), native to Florida coasts, is an ideal salt- and drought-tolerant evergreen for beachfront landscapes. Goetz calls it a “champion that oozes Florida authenticity.”



LEFT AND BELOW: The design of the water garden with footpath is integrated with the swimming pool in this Aqualane Shores home. Native trees and shrubs create a privacy screen that blocks the view of neighbors across the canal and boat dock. The plants shade the koi in the pond from intense sun.



Mediterra's Celestial Park invites residents to experience the environment with ornamentation and built features such as this pergola topped with a decorative dome for night-sky viewing. Two silver Bismarck palms (*Bismarckia nobilis*) stand out among a variety of native grasses.



ABOVE: A Celestial Park pathway flanked and shaded by sabal palms (*Sabal palmetto*)



LEFT: Planters with different varieties of bromeliads bring bold, tropical drama to the pool area of this Aqualane Shores home.

into projects—private residences, institutions, communities and public spaces—long before it became a trend that is now entrenched in county and municipal ordinances across Florida mandating a certain percentage of such trees and shrubs in new commercial developments.

In the past, newly arrived homeowners favored bright, exotic plants that painted their idea of the tropics in their minds. These often require more maintenance—including watering, fertilizer, and pesticide—and can overtake the landscape and crowd out native species. Goetz notes there is a striking palette of greens in Florida’s native plants, and species that become strong accents through their seasonal show of color or shape. Today there’s heightened awareness



ABOVE: Goetz was the landscape designer for the historic Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club. She designed the entrance walls with tabby stucco, which incorporates shell, capped by coral stone to reflect the beach environment and pay homage to historic building materials.

surrounding issues such as water quality and usage, climate change, and decreasing wildlife populations, and most clients eagerly embrace native additions to their yards.

“I cannot say I’ve ever done an entirely native project, but every design has involved some form of natives just because they’re the right plants for the situation,” says Goetz. “My approach has always been, not that it’s native, but it’s perfect for this situation, and by the way, it’s the host for an endangered butterfly. You make those connections and interest the client in why it’s good for whatever purpose.” *gsnaples.com*



Goetz created a separate outdoor area for the firepit at this Old Naples residence so it wouldn’t become something you stumble over on the way to the pool. “I wanted to give this its own private setting,” she says, “almost like a real campfire situation.” The firepit walls are made of local tabby stucco, and the custom pavers incorporate Florida shell aggregate.

Five Native Favorites

For a landscape architect, naming favorite plants is akin to picking a favorite child or pet. To complicate the process, it depends on the location and usage. However, Ellin Goetz didn’t hesitate in naming five of her favorites and explaining their appeal.



COONTIE (*Zamia integrifolia* or *Zamia floridana*): A fern-like cycad (a primitive group of non-flowering plant) that reaches a height of two to three feet and doesn’t require trimming or hedging. Its color and shape “make a beautiful statement in the landscape,” Goetz says, and it’s beneficial to the atala butterfly and echo moth.

MIMOSA (*Mimosa pudica*): This groundcover—an alternative to high-maintenance turfgrass—is called “sensitive plant” because its leaves curl up when stepped upon. Goetz admires its “incredible pink powder puff of a bloom.” When planted correctly, it stays low to the ground and is fuss-free.



SILVER SAW PALMETTO (*Serenoa repens*): This is a variety of a tough native tree that’s synonymous with Florida, reaching a maximum height of eight feet. “It makes beautiful cuttings that you can put in a vase and bring inside,” says Goetz, “so it’s a double-purpose native.”



MUHLY GRASS (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*): Now ubiquitous on golf courses and in home landscapes, in late autumn this clumping grass explodes with eye-catching purplish-pink inflorescences. It is a showy accent, growing to three or four feet in height, that is drought-tolerant and requires little upkeep—a winner in multiple ways.

KEY THATCH PALM (*Leucothrinax morrisii*): Goetz describes this palm native to the Keys as “very attractive, silvery-gray fronded” plant that is costly but well worth it. Though they can reach heights of 20 feet in optimal environments, they can also be grown in containers and planters. They are slow growers that will “stay to the scale of the house and don’t become a telephone pole in your yard” when used as an accent.

