"LOW COST, LOW CARE"

by Judy Bates

The day after returning home from the FNPS conference in May, we received a typical phone call from No. 2 son, Marty Birdsey. Seems he’s planning to move in with some friends who are purchasing a house that’s in dire need of landscaping. “Do you suppose you could give us some suggestions and maybe some plants?” Since he’s used to getting a very hesitant answer to that type of question the enthusiastic response he received was quite a shock. I quickly explained that if the other people were agreeable to the idea, I’d like to use all native plants in a low-energy landscape design. We would keep the plan simple and as inexpensive as possible while making an attempt to use plants that would hopefully be obtainable and maybe familiar to the average homeowner.

It wasn’t difficult to sell the other occupants on the proposed landscape plan — “native plants” may as well have been a foreign phrase, but “low-cost, low-care maintenance” was something they all understood. (After receiving the first electric bill for their place in the sun they have become even more interested in the low-energy aspect, also.)

When we drove by to see the house, we were pleasantly surprised to discover a large slash pine in the front yard, a wax myrtle at one corner of the building and a large sabal palm in the back yard. We would need to remove a small Queen palm in the front yard, an oleander next to the front of the house, a large carissa on either side of the air conditioner on the south end of the house, rose bushes and yellow ixora on the north end, a large podocarpus at the NE corner and assorted leftover holiday plants and Euphorbias along the rear, plus a few small Brazilian peppers cropping up in odd places. We agreed to leave the rose bushes in place as the female occupants are particularly fond of roses. Our policy has been to say nothing and let nature take its course with the roses. Present score is one down, three to go. Some smilax and pokeberry plants are attempting to take over the same area so the spindly roses are barely visible.

The house is situated on a large lot (150 by 80 feet) a block north of Manatee Junior College. It backs on to an access road to the Manatee Area Vocational-Technical Center. Royce Williams, who teaches nursery operations classes at MAVTC, has helped in locating plants for this project. In the last few years, Royce and No. 3 son, Jim Birdsey, have purchased a number of seedlings from the Division of Forestry for their respective nurseries. Most of the trees that we used are described and pictured in the Division of Forestry publication, “Urban Trees for Florida”.

In the front yard, we especially wanted to use colorful trees. The southeast corner of the yard looked to be the lowest and greenest, hence, we hoped, wettest section of the property, so we planted bald cypress, red maple, and a river birch in that area. Manatee County is farther south than the normal range of the river birch but others we have planted here are doing well and this particular tree seems to be doing better than the maple and cypress, so far. In the middle of the yard towards the street we planted a loblobly bay loaded with blooms. We located a flowering dogwood tree where the red maple, birch and cypress will eventually shade it. We questioned planting this tree in what is presently full sun. Closer to the house we planted a redbud and a fringe tree. The latter three small flowering trees are usually found farther north in the state. Directly in front of the house, we placed dwarf yaupon and an East Palatka holly plant — not our first choice, but we opted for availability. Under a new wood fence fronting the entrance patio, we planted many rainbow lilies and twined a passionflower vine on the fence. We added coontie plants around the base of the slash pine.

On the north end of the house we used a row of five red cedar for an evergreen hedge-screen. On the south end of the house we used three...
dahoon holly plants with a paurotis palm at the SW corner. Along the side of the back yard we planted a row of cherry laurel seedlings. Most of these were volunteers we dug up from home. The neighbors on the south have an above-ground pool, a chain-link fence and very few plants, so this hedge should provide much-needed shade and privacy. To shade the west bedroom windows in summer we planted a coral bean plant and farther away from the house, a Florida elm.

Next to the house between the kitchen and bedroom windows we used a prickly-pear to fill in the blank space. Since the occupants plan to build a patio at a later date extending into the back yard from the kitchen door, we planted some sand pines interspersed with turkey oak (and existing lantana) to provide shade and privacy for this area. In the far NW corner of the back yard we planted a red mulberry tree along with some scarlet bush plants. In the SW corner we planted a sugarberry tree and towards the middle of the yard, a pignut hickory. This latter tree, along with the coral bean, coontie and rain lilies we had started from seed. We placed a couple of sumac next to the barbeque — the sumac and scarlet bush were transplanted from a friend’s acreage. The red mulberry was a cutting from our tree. The dwarf yaupon, East Palatka holly and paurotis palm came from the Vo-Tech nursery. The fringe tree, redbud, dogwood and sugarberry were purchased from the Turkey Oak Nursery near Archer — a side trip we took while attending the Gainesville conference. Most of the other trees — red cedar, dahoon holly, cypress, red maple, river birch, loblolly bay, sand pine and turkey oak had been purchased as seedlings from the Division of Forestry (one dollar each — minimum of 10 of a species unless they’re purchased at a special sale).

When the present plants are established and providing shade, we plan to add ferns and other ground cover. We still have to plant some spider lilies and Spanish bayonet close to the house (we’ll do some trading for these). There is a slight ditch next to the road and we planted golden canna, cat tail, pickerel weed and coreopsis (dug from our yard) alongside this. When the new mailbox is in place, we’ll put a honeysuckle plant by it. We’ve been trying to locate a chick-a-saw plum to put in the back yard but have not found one yet.