

Florida Neighborhoods and Eco-Neighborhoods

by Judith Buhrman

Imagine, if you can, a cooperative effort involving city and county representatives, the Cooperative Extension Service, the regional water management district, the local electric company, the Florida Departments of Environmental Regulation and Natural Resources, the Florida Native Plant Society, and neighborhood and homeowner associations.

When I first had the notion of turning my little piece of urban desolation into a wildlife refuge filled with native plants, I wasn't thinking about the side benefits to the environment. As I learned more, however, I realized that I would not have to depend on manufactured fertilizers, pesticides, or city water (if I ever stop adding plants, that is), and as the foundation plantings and trees gave more shade, my electricity use would decline.

What if, I asked myself, a significant percentage of the population did the same sort of thing? The second question—how to get them to do it—brought me right back to earth. Highly motivated, I had gone to considerable lengths to acquire knowledge and plant materials, and still do. Most people prefer the path of least resistance, which usually leads to the door of Frank's Nursery and Crafts, or Home Depot. I could think of no way to reach, motivate, and educate a sufficient number of people to make an actual difference within my lifetime.

Enter the Tampa Bay National Estuary Program.

Two years ago, Tampa Bay became the 17th estuary to be included in the Environmental Protection Agency's National Estuary Program. This program provides \$10 million in seed money over five years for the purpose of saving Tampa Bay from the same fate as befell Boston Harbor, with the proviso that affected and affecting communities provide matching funds, political support, and a commitment

to the basin-wide management plan that will be developed. The program demands certain structures, including a Citizens' Advisory Committee, whose mission is public education, upon which I have sat since February, 1991, at first unofficially, then as a representative of Florida Department of Environmental Regulation.

All our water bodies—the bays, the coastal waters, and that invisible river and its tributaries, the Floridan Aquifer—are subject to contamination by the activities of the millions of people who have chosen to live in Florida. All the road gunk, all the fertilizers and biocides used on landscapes, all the engine oil dumped into storm drains by thoughtless do-it-yourselfers ends up in some body of water when it rains. Non-point runoff is what it is called and it is hideously difficult to measure, much less control. It is also the toughest problem facing the architects of the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan that will be the legacy of the Estuary Program.

Water issues get people's attention. While many may be indifferent to the fate of the manatee or the scrub balm, *everybody* uses water. An important body of water can serve as a focal point for community action and involvement.

But how?

Several months ago, Mary Hoppe, public information coordinator for Tampa Bay National Estuary Program, presented the ECO-Neighborhoods concept to the Citizen's Advisory Com-

mittee for consideration. All the members present were intrigued with the idea, none more than I.

Imagine, if you can, a cooperative effort involving city and county representatives, the Cooperative Extension Service, the regional water management district, the local electric company, the Florida Departments of Environmental Regulation and Natural Resources, the Florida Native Plant Society, and neighborhood and homeowner associations. Now imagine them working together to save a body of water significant to their economic and physical health. Unlikely as it may seem, this is already happening in parts of Florida, and about to happen in the Tampa Bay area.

ECO-Neighborhoods is a program developed by the Marine Resources Council of East Florida and its Executive Director, Diane Barile. The Council, founded in 1983, is a regional non-profit organization whose focus is the Indian River lagoon. Its 700 members come from five counties and a huge diversity of interests—from power boaters to developers to commercial fishers to local elected officials.

ECO-Neighborhoods came about when Ms. Barile asked herself why, with all the legislation and regulation, the lagoon was getting worse. Her answer was that these new rules and regulations affect the future, and the problems persist because of past mistakes. She went a step further. Perhaps with that pithy bumper sticker

("Think globally, act locally") in mind, she took a look at what she and her family were doing at home. In a kind of 'we have met the enemy and they is us' realization, she recognized herself as part of the problem. "We weren't recycling," she said. "We had somebody come and spray the lawn." With the same realization that has come to most of us in FNPS—that the place where you live is where you can have the most impact—she set about making it possible for whole neighborhoods to clean up their act.

Florida Neighborhoods, the Estuary Program version of ECO-Neighborhoods, aims to reduce stormwater pollution and improve overall environmental quality in residential areas through a general systems approach. A neighborhood meeting the criteria for inclusion in the program will first complete a survey on their environmental habits. Then, an inter-organizational assessment team (members will be determined by circumstances, but will include, at minimum, representatives from the Cooperative Extension Service, the city and county, and the

Florida Native Plant Society) will perform a walk-through evaluation of the common areas and selected yards. Each team member will make recommendations for changes in landscaping practices, materials, and other environmental behavior. The Florida Neighborhoods coordinator will prepare these recommendations along with an extensive list of resources, arrange for the training of the 'local experts' (residents who have agreed to learn all about composting, or integrated pest management, or recycling, for example), and serve as a conduit of information between the neighborhood and the agencies involved. A second team walk-through eighteen months later will evaluate the efforts of the neighborhood and make long term recommendations.

Since the only sticks available are guilt (Do *you* want to be responsible for turning Tampa Bay into an ecological calamity?) and the threat of higher taxes for stormwater treatment, the carrots will have to be saving money, publicity, recognition, and pride.

A vitally important element of the program is the resources list. Ms.

Hoppe, who has put an immense amount of work into this program, says, "Florida Neighborhoods is not a welfare program, it is a partnership." The program will provide information, not money. A comprehensive list of resources will make it much easier for people to execute the plan they receive, and the easier it is, the more participation there will be.

Most important is ownership. If a neighborhood really buys into the program, cuts down some Brazilian peppers and puts some plants in the ground together, sees birds and butterflies show up to appreciate their efforts, the program will succeed.

I'm betting that most people, given good information (not scoldings!) about their personal impact, and clear directions and hands-on experience in how to be good environmental citizens, will do all they can. I hope I'm right.

For more information on Eco-Neighborhoods, call Diane Barile, Marine Resources Council of East Florida, 407/952-0102; for Florida Neighborhoods, call Mary Hoppe, Tampa Bay National Estuary Program, 813/893-2765 (Fax 813/893-2767).