

## RULES FOR A GREEN THUMB AT THE COAST

by  
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**AHHHH.....AT LAST!** You finally have your place at "the coast," that nice little haven somewhere along Florida's beaches, bays, or barrier islands.

So you've worked out the details on your prized abode, whether it's humble or fancy.....now what? What about the "yard" and the usual talk of "landscaping"? Do you apply the same rules of caretaking that you learned around a home far inland?

Well, the answer, quite frankly, is NO! The "coast" is different. Its environmental system--the beautiful surroundings that drew you in the first place--is fragile, easily destroyed. Some things that you may be used to having plenty of, such as fresh water, solid bedrock, and topsoil, are very hard to come by at the coast.

Then you might very well ask, what are the rules of "green-thumb" for my yard at the coast?

**#1 The basic rule of thumb is "Mostly do nothing," or more precisely, do not disturb any native vegetation.** These plants are well adapted to life at the coast--to growing conditions we might think of as rather harsh, such as drought and salt air. Thus, they are "easy-care ornamentals." More than that, these plants help protect your investment by stabilizing sandy soils with their often deep roots and by acting as baffles for gusty winds.

You may agree that "Mostly do nothing" is not a bad rule anyway for a retirement or vacation home. The pace of life at the coast, after all, is usually one of relaxation. But, you may say, "I like yard work; it's enjoyable and relaxing." So is there puttering around that you can do--things that will enhance

rather than stress the natural workings of your coastal plot? Yes!



Native coastal vegetation

**# 2 Destroy, safely, any invasive non-native plants encroaching within your property.** This rule is, in fact, an important exception to doing nothing. A number of non-native plants have turned out to be very aggressive in coastal areas. They escape easily from cultivation, and having no natural enemies here, they spread wildly, crowding out the natives and lowering biodiversity. Often, the qualities for which they were introduced are the very reasons they become such a problem: They grow and reproduce easily, have few or no pests, and tolerate a wide range of conditions.

If you think your coastal haven harbors one or more invasive non-native plants, check the identity with a local botanist, extension agent, nurseryperson, or state regional biologist. Learn all you can about the plant's habits and how to get rid of it, so it is not accidentally spread to another spot.

"Fine," you may say, "but what else can I do? About that bare sand, for instance!?! Aren't there plants I can put in that make sense on the coast?" Yes, again.

**# 3 If you want to add to your heavenly setting, plant coastal natives.** They come in all types, from lovely ground cover to sturdy trees. But do not dig them up from "vacant" property--remember rule #1. And before you rush right out to your nearest nursery, take a look around your place in the sun. Get to know the local natural habitats. (Visit a state park, for example.) Are you in or near a forest, scrub, dune, or marsh zone? How might your home nestle more comfortably into the environment?

Listen and read, too. A lot of information is available about the ecosystems that grace Florida's coasts, from your library, the local native plant society, and various other local and state agencies. Just ask and check out the web sites listed here.

**For more information, please see these websites:**

DEP Beaches and Coastal Systems  
<http://www.dep.state.fl.us/beaches/>

DEP Bureau of Invasive Plant Management  
<http://www.dep.state.fl.us/lands/invaspec/index.htm>

Florida Shore and Beach Preservation  
<http://www.fsbpa.com/>

Florida Marine Research Institute  
<http://floridamarine.org/>

Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council  
<http://www.fleppc.org/contents.htm>

### ***Coastal Native Plants Are Important***

Native plants that live near the ocean usually survive the most severe storm events. Some dune plants, such as sea oats, are protected by law because their multi-layered roots stabilize dunes and protect soil and property from storms.

Salt spray "prunes" the tops of the shrubs and trees, which increase in height the farther one moves away from the ocean. Underneath the protective cover of the trees there is less wind, and a diversity of plants and animals lives under this shelter.



*(Illustration by The Florida Conservation Foundation).*

Even farther back from the ocean the dunes often flatten out, ending at saltwater lagoons bordered by salt marshes in North Florida or mangrove swamps in South Florida. The quiet, shallow waters contain several kinds of seagrasses that provide food, shelter, and support for marine life. The lagoons that have not been dredged or polluted are "nursery grounds" for most of our fish, shrimp, crabs, oysters, and other seafood.