**Make Landscaping Plans Now; Be Prepared for Work Later**

Since November through February are the prime months for planting hardy trees, shrubs and ground covers in north Florida, now is an excellent time to assess your landscape situation and begin to make plans.

Landscaping is a great way to give your home a beautiful appearance as well as make outdoor spaces function usefully for the family.

The benefits of a well-planned landscape are many - from providing shade, privacy and color to correcting drainage problems and creating outdoor living areas. Of course, beautiful landscaping also increases the value of your home.

Most gardeners should have no trouble dealing with small projects themselves. Planting a tree, designing a flower garden or planting beds around a deck are good do-it-yourself projects.

Designing an overall landscape, including drainage, traffic patterns, use areas, outdoor living areas and major plantings, requires careful study, planning and a good sense of design. But although it is more complicated, it is not necessarily beyond the ability of many home gardeners. After all, most of us do a decent job designing a home interior that is attractive and comfortable.

**Help Is Available**

Help is available. Books on home landscaping provide excellent sources of information. Carefully studying one or two of these books will either convince you that you can do it yourself or that you may need to consult with a professional.

To do the right job when designing a landscape yourself, make sure you determine your needs first.

For example, do you want a free-flowing natural garden or something more formal? Is a play area for the kids important? Do you enjoy tinkering in your garden, trimming and planning next year's flower beds, or would you prefer a lower-maintenance garden that minimizes general care?

Study your site carefully so you can match plants to the growing conditions they need. And make sure you choose plants that are the right size for their location and will thrive in your area.

Your county IFAS Extension office has excellent publications and other information available to help you select appropriate plants. You can obtain copies from those offices or by visiting the publications section of our Web site at edis.ifas.ufl.edu
Professional Assistance

If you decide you need to seek professional help, there are several options.

One option involves talking to horticulturists at your local nurseries or garden centers. They can answer questions you have on choosing the right plants, how big they grow and what growing conditions they prefer. Some nurseries have individuals on staff who can even help you develop a design or give you feedback on some of your ideas.

If you have a good idea of what you want to do but need some help refining the details, a landscape architect often can be hired as a consultant for an hourly fee.

Landscape architects also can be hired to draw up a complete design for an agreed fee. Then you can either hire the architects' firm to install the landscaping, hire a landscape contractor to install it or install it yourself.

A landscape contractor basically is licensed to install landscapes. They can, however, also help you develop a landscape design - but only in a package deal that includes the cost of the plants and installation.

Interview several individuals before making your decision. And remember the best way to establish a productive working relationship is to find an experienced professional you trust and who understands what you want to accomplish.

Get a mutually acceptable written agreement, including a firm price, details about everything the price includes, a work schedule and a completion date. Be specific about what you expect and when you expect it.

Remember, the landscape plan and the installation are two different parts of the process. You could pay a professional landscape architect to create the plan and then install the design yourself in sections. This will spread the cost of plant materials and construction over time - making it easier to budget. The advantage is that even if the installation is done in sections, it is guided by a comprehensive plan that creates a unified, attractive and functional landscape.

So if you've been thinking about adding a shade tree, planting privacy hedge, landscaping around the patio, dressing up the front of your house or even doing extensive landscaping, the time to start planning is now. Have your decisions and plans in place for November, and you will be ready to plant during the best time of the year.