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In the not-too-distant past, and certainly in a more pastoral time, Farmer Brown relied on the Extension Service for information and Ma Brown could use the same for questions about canning or baking or other home economics-related activities. All states with land grant colleges or universities have these satellite agencies in each county. Here in Florida, the Institute of Food and Agricultural Services (IFAS) is a department of the University of Florida and is the umbrella for all the extension offices.

Over the years, as agriculture has waned and continues to do so (a fact that strikes a sad note in this writer's heart), and communities are becoming increasingly urbanized, the extension service has shifted its focus. While still offering agricultural and home economic support, a large amount of activity is focused on homeowners and their yards.

Questions such as what type of sod is recommended for an area or how to care for a wide variety of landscape plants can be answered by the local agent. A comprehensive array of brochures and other literature is also available at no charge. Our local
extension service is located in the old library or, for more recent residents, at 1028 20th Place. While the office is staffed and a wide variety of printed material is available, we have lost our agent of many years, Dan Culbert, to a neighboring county. However, there are other options.

Not surprising, one of these is a web site, www.ifas.ufl.edu, where an amazing array of information is available. Other options are the extension offices in Brevard and St. Lucie counties. In addition to the extension service in Ft. Pierce, there is another unique opportunity available to area gardeners.

Besides overseeing the extension services in each Florida county, IFAS has 14 research and education centers throughout the state. Originally known as the Indian River Field Laboratory, the Indian River Research and Education Center (IRREC) was founded in 1947. Consisting of 80 acres and a frame
house, the facility was located off Kings Highway, west of Ft. Pierce. It remains in the same location today, but the 80 acres have grown to 800.

The original focus of the laboratory was research on citrus production. The 35-acre bearing citrus grove on the property served this purpose. As time passed, research on vegetable and pasture crops was developed and, soon after, a plant pathology position was added so that crop diseases could also have the attention of the growing research staff. In the 1950's, an entomologist (bug man, for you neophytes) was appointed.

In 1986, the University of Florida constructed a 9,375-square-foot building housing state-of-the-art laboratories. This enabled the facility to expand and meet the growing needs of both research and education in the Indian River area. Since 1997, in addition to research faculty, educational faculty have become a part of the center and they have initiated a baccalaureate program for the first time in IRREC history. Area students can now attend Indian River Community College for two years and then move to IRREC to obtain a degree from the University of Florida in Horticultural Management, Environmental Science or Food and Resource Economics with a specialization in Agribusiness Management. To augment the program, a teaching wing was built in 2002. Plans are underway to construct a dormitory which will house the growing student body.

So, how does all this benefit the homeowner? In a large part, these particular benefits began when Dr. Sandra Wilson arrived in the late 1990s. Armed with a degree in
Environmental Horticulture, her position is split into 60 percent teaching and 40 percent research. Her major project at IRREC has been the implementation of a teaching garden.

Following basic landscape design principles, a two-acre piece of land on the IRREC campus was converted into an outdoor horticultural laboratory. The north half of the garden was developed into a subtropical fruit orchard consisting of a number of citrus varieties, mangoes, lychee, avocados and other tropical fruit. The south half of the garden was designed as an ornamental display garden.

Site preparation involved elevating the plot, installing underground French drains and establishing berms. An irrigation system was also installed. The length of the garden is oriented on an east/west axis.

As one enters the east end of the garden through a wooden arch flanked by pygmy date palms, the first area consists of the annual and perennial beds. This area was designed and installed by students at IRREC. A water garden, featuring as stonewalled pond, contains native

The pond contains aquatic species.

A Gumbo Limbo tree on the campus.
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The southern edge of the garden consists of native grasses and a wildflower border. The northern border, which flanks the subtropical fruit grove, is planted with ornamental grasses and groundcovers. Proof that the garden is to be used extensively is found in a statement in the Fact Sheet prepared at the garden's inception: “Hopefully, the garden will be disease-free, but if disease must visit the garden, then professors will use it to teach plant pathology.”

The teaching garden is open to the public and is an excellent resource for the home gardener. All specimens are clearly labeled and provide both the novice and the more experienced with information about plants that will do well in our area. The garden will also showcase the Florida Nurserymen and Growers Association Plants of the Year (see “Know It and Grow It” in the January, 2004 issue).

The teaching garden is also used more formally as a hands-on laboratory for graduate and undergraduate courses. Courses offered include Florida Native Landscaping, Annual and Perennial Gardening, Plant Propagation, General Horticulture, Fundamentals of Plant Pathology, Environmental Plant Identification, Citrus Culture and Production, Tropical and Subtropical Fruits and Principles of Entomology. Some of these classes are open to non-degree-seeking students.

To garner more information about the educational opportunities at IRREC, contact Kim Wilson at (772) 468-3922.