

WHAT IS MITIGATION

Many wonder about the purpose of wetland or terrestrial plantings within their communities. Recreated natural or “mitigation” areas are an integral part of many urban developments in South Florida.

When developers build communities, they often include lakes as a way to collect and retain stormwater. Waterway systems help to alleviate flooding, create a source of water for irrigation and add aesthetic appeal. However, created lakes disrupt the structure and function of existing native ecosystems.

In addition to enhancing the quality of the surrounding ecosystem, preserves and wetlands act as natural sponges, helping to reduce flooding and filtering water that feeds into the drinking water supply. Plantings around lake perimeters filter fertilizer runoff from surrounding lawns and landscaping that would normally induce the growth of algae and aquatic weeds. Wooded preserves offer privacy buffers and reduce noise from nearby roads. Furthermore, wildlife species drawn to these created areas act as natural predators for pest species such as insects and rodents.

Problems can arise if attention is not given to the care of natural areas. Various government agencies may require a builder to set aside a certain amount of space for the re-creation of a natural area, called “mitigation”. Mitigation zones help to ease the impact on lands being developed. Plants introduced in these areas are species native to Florida. A site plan or layout in which the mitigation is to be planted must be approved by the appropriate jurisdictional agency. The area must then be maintained to predetermine standards and monitored to ensure compliance with regulations.

Maintenance of mitigation sites goes far beyond typical landscaping and groundskeeping. Preserve are meant to mimic natural Florida ecosystems, and in order to maintain them, a constant effort must be made to inhibit the introduction and growth of invasive and exotic plants. Many of these unwanted species have been introduced from other countries and lack the natural controls found in their place of origin. This allows these plants to spread at a faster rate than common weeds. The terrain found in mitigation areas frequently does not allow for the use of regular landscaping equipment, making maintenance more challenging and time-consuming. The density and overall health of the beneficial plant is also crucial. Trimming, pruning, mulching, or removing these plants is not allowed, which makes it more difficult to prevent invasive plants from growing amongst the native flora. If the mitigation areas are to be successful, maintenance crews must be specially-trained, meticulous, patient, and attentive to detail.

Although often misunderstood, these natural areas are vital and beneficial components of residential communities throughout South Florida.