

Landscaping plan has native roots

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In a north Lee County citrus grove bordering the [Babcock Ranch](#), a live oak that has endured 150 years spreads its limbs 100 feet over chicken cages and a spacious dog run.

About 30,000 acorns collected from the tree one November day are sprouting at a nearby native plant nursery. In five to six years, the sprouts will become the first transplanted oaks to take root a 17,000-acre planned community, called [Babcock Ranch](#), straddling the Charlotte-Lee County line.

"The whole philosophy is, we want to grow local stock material," said Rick Joyce, the arborist hired to select, grow and buy all the vegetation for the [Babcock Ranch](#) landscape.



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A live oak in Alva provides shade for livestock and equipment under a canopy that spans over 100 feet across. Native landscaper Rick Joyce estimates the tree to be a couple hundred years old and recently decided to make it the mother tree to thousands of trees to be grown from its acorns.

Native landscaping has become a buzzword for planned communities across Florida, from Bonita Bay's Verandah in Fort Myers to Lakewood Ranch near Sarasota and Bradenton. More home buyers want attractive places to live that make them feel they are helping the environment, said Glenn Acomb, a University of Florida lecturer and expert at the school's Program for Resource Efficient Communities.

"There's been an educational process in these past decades, learning more about the value of using plants that are historically a part of that ecosystem," Acomb said.

But Joyce is taking native a couple steps further with [Babcock Ranch](#), where native plants will make up 90 percent of the landscape.

A new plant nursery, which is planned to start operating on 50 acres this summer, will be the first thing built at [Babcock Ranch](#). Once the nursery is running, native stock will be grown there.

The oaks and thousands of South Florida slash pine seeds collected from an adjacent wildlife preserve will be among the first plants. Joyce plans to also collect grasses and shrubs from the surrounding land to grow at the nursery. As the community expands to more than 19,000 homes, the nursery will increase to more than 200 acres.

UF's Acomb said Babcock has the potential to become a flagship for future developers wanting to tap the strong demand for sensitively designed landscapes and subdivisions.

"If they are going to do that for the entire property, they are making a commitment that has probably never been done before on a project that large, at least not that I'm aware of," Acomb said.

By propagating plants from the immediate area, Joyce hopes to create an attractive, trouble-free and environmentally friendly landscape.

Communities landscaped with plants acclimated to the region's environmental extremes require less

maintenance. They also demand less water, a scarce resource, and fertilizer, which pollutes waterways.

The native landscape at Lakewood Ranch, an 8,500-acre community, has broad appeal, said the development's spokeswoman, Sondra Guffey.

Lakewood Ranch began planting native shrubs and trees nearly 15 years ago, before home building started. Scott Carr, who oversees Lakewood Ranch's landscape installation, said the community has been increasing its native plant inventory as it grows.

Now, the community is about 75 to 80 percent native, he said.

Most of the plants come from native plant nurseries throughout the region and the adjacent SMR Farms, where seeds from native live oaks, myrtle and sweet gum are propagated. The farm supplies Lakewood Ranch's developer and various other firms with plants for landscaping.

Joyce said Babcock will also rely on a few other native nurseries, especially those specializing in certain species.

Danny Perkins, owner of the nursery where the oaks for Babcock are growing in LaBelle, plants 100,000 pounds of saw palmetto seeds yearly.

He sells the palmettos and other low-growing plants to developers across the Southeast, with many expressing interest in incorporating native plants in their landscapes.

Perkins said he is growing the oaks for Joyce until Babcock's own nursery is operating.

"I love the concept of going back to indigenous. There's so much to learn, but it is so important to the ecosystem," Perkins said.



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Above: Rick Joyce takes measurements of a live oak in Alva. Below: A live oak tree sprouts from an acorn at Perkins Nursery in LaBelle where thousands of acorns collected from a tree near Babcock Ranch have been propagated. It's part of Babcock Ranch's plan to be hyper-native, taking seeds from plants in and around the ranch to a soon-to-be constructed nursery for landscaping in the project.



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BY THE NUMBERS

150	Estimated minimum age, in years, of a live oak tree in Lee County that is being used as a parent of more oak trees.
30,000	Acorns collected from the tree in one day that are sprouting at a nearby nursery.
5	Number of years it will take before the sprouts from the acorns will take root as transplanted oaks.
90	Percent of the landscape in Babcock Ranch that will be native plants.
100,000	Pounds of saw palmetto seeds planted each year by Danny Perkins, owner of the LaBelle nursery where the oaks for Babcock are growing.